

# THE NEGATIVITY BIAS *and your brain*



## WHAT IS THE NEGATIVITY BIAS?

The negativity bias is our brain's tendency to pay more attention to the negative stimuli in our lives than the positive. It also plays a role in our tendency to remember or dwell on negative experiences more readily.

For example, imagine you give a presentation at work. You receive 9 great pieces of feedback and one critical piece. Which one will you be thinking about for the rest of the day? Most likely, the negative one. Or perhaps you've had a great day, but then you get stuck in traffic on the way home and now the day takes on a "negative" tone. This bias causes us to place more emphasis on the bad things that happen, and make them seem much more significant than they really are.



## EVOLUTIONARILY, THREATS HAD MORE IMPACT ON SURVIVAL THAN OPPORTUNITIES

You can think of "sticks" as threats (negatives) and "carrots" as opportunities (positives). As our ancestors went about their environment, they sought out carrots and avoided sticks in order to survive. The sticks, however, took precedence - if they didn't get a carrot one day, there would always be tomorrow. If they missed one stick (say, a tiger), they're done for and there would be no tomorrow. In this way, the brain developed a bias that placed more emphasis on threats (or negative stimuli).

## THE BRAIN IS LIKE VELCRO FOR THE NEGATIVE AND TEFLON FOR THE POSITIVE

- The brain continuously scans for bad news (out in the world and inside the body/mind)
- The brain reacts more strongly to negative events than positive ones
- Our experiences are fast-tracked into our emotional memory (we remember criticism more than praise, pain more than pleasure)

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## **CONSEQUENTLY, THE NEGATIVE OUTWEIGHS THE POSITIVE.**

- People will do more to avoid a loss than pursue a gain
- It takes five positive interactions to counterbalance a negative one

## **WHILE THE NEGATIVITY BIAS MAY HAVE HELPED OUR ANCESTORS SURVIVE, IT CREATES A LOT OF UNNECESSARY SUFFERING AND CONFLICT FOR MOST PEOPLE TODAY.**

Even though our lives, in general, are way better than our ancestors, we still tend to be consumed by our negative experiences. This often leaves us feeling like something is missing – a sort of emptiness inside, and we race around our day trying to fill the void, but rarely feel renewed or replenished.

### **The good news is, you can begin to even out the negativity bias through mindfulness practice.**

One way to do this is by learning to pay more attention to the beneficial, pleasant, useful, healing, and loving experiences in your life. It's very important to look for and savor these moments to fill yourself up – at work and at home – and **doing so helps you develop resiliency.**

We can also become more aware of how the negativity bias plays a role in our tendency to judge and criticize ourselves – pointing out our faults and shortcomings. Through mindfulness and meditation, we cultivate kindness and compassion towards ourselves and begin to level out this bias as we learn to recognize and celebrate our innate positive qualities. This, too, is a practice that nurtures resiliency.

*Source: Dr. Rick Hanson, [www.rickhanson.net/](http://www.rickhanson.net/)*