Positively Legal: Positive Emotions Open the Mind

Career Development

Social psychologist Dr. Barbara Fredrickson says "through experiences of positive emotions people transform themselves, becoming more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated and healthy individuals." Fredrickson developed the "broaden and build theory," which is based on the idea that happiness has a critical evolutionary purpose.

Whereas negative emotions narrow our actions down to fight or flight, positive emotions broaden the number of possibilities we process. Fredrickson describes the 10 most positive emotions — joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love — as sharing the ability to broaden people's momentary thought action repertoires (widening the array of thoughts and actions that come to mind). For example, joy sparks the urge to play and be creative, and interest sparks the urge to explore and learn. These emotions then build people's personal resources including:

- Cognitive/intellectual resources (help concentration, creativity, and focus);
- Psychological resources (help ward off exhaustion, depression, and anxiety);
- Social resources (help build and maintain relationships and give/ receive emotional support); and
- Physical resources (increased immune systems so we are healthier and have more energy).

The broaden and build theory is based on what Fredrickson calls the two core truths of positive emotions. Opening our hearts and minds makes us (1) more receptive and more creative and (2) allows us to discover and build new skills, new connections, new knowledge, and new ways of being.

By broadening thinking and building enduring psychological resources such as resilience, positive emotions "trigger upward spirals toward enhanced emotional well-being … any positive emotion you experience today not only feels good now, but also increases the likelihood you will feel good in the

future." These broadened mindsets build enduring personal resources, which function as reserves to manage future threats.

Research shows the "broadening effect" of increasing positive emotions floods our brains with dopamine and serotonin, both feel-good chemicals, which happiness expert Shawn Achor says help to dial up the learning centers of our brains to higher levels. The chemicals help us to arrange new information, keep it in the brain longer, and retrieve it faster. He says that positive emotions "enable us to make and sustain more neural connections, which allows us to think more quickly and creatively, becoming more skilled at complex analysis and problem solving."

When we feel "safe" and no longer feel "threatened," we feel soothed, quiet, and content and "become confident enough to look beyond the immediate needs of survival." We begin to look outwards through idle curiosity; scanning the world for interesting new ideas, weaving together patterns, and coming up with new concepts. Fredrickson found a practical consequence of positivity's mind-broadening powers is enhanced creativity. She writes:

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Increasing positive emotions has several consequences:

- Expands our peripheral vision – people primed for either positivity or negativity were shown a series of photos. Those in a good mood saw everything, while those in a negative mood missed substantial parts of the background;
- Opens our minds and promotes creativity – two groups of students were asked to help a cartoon mouse escape a maze. For one group, there was a piece of cheese at the maze's exit (a positive outcome), while the other exit showed an intimidating owl poised to kill the mouse (a negative outcome). All the students completed the simple mazes in minutes and then took creativity tests. The group who avoided the owl did 50 percent worse than those who had helped the mouse find the cheese. The owl had triggered the avoidance systems of the students, closed down their minds, diminished their creativity, and left them with a lingering fear of failure. In contrast, the students who helped the mouse were "open to new experiences and far less cautious. The experience had opened their minds."

Our brains are wired towards negativity. Rick Hanson, a neuropsychologist, describes the brain as having "Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for good ones." Fredrickson suggests that we need to aim for a ratio of positive to negative emotions of at least three to one. She found the individuals and workgroups demonstrating growth and resilience all showed ratios of more than three to one.

Ways to increase your positive emotions (and incidentally your well-being) include:

- Observing mindfulness, which boosts working memory, clarity of thought, resilience, courage, and happiness;
- Meditating, including "Metta" meditation, which Fredrickson and her colleagues found increases the pleasure and intensity of feelings including curiosity, hope, and joy;
- Introducing small positive practices into your weekly team meetings;
- Following any of the 12 happiness boosting activities identified by Sonia Lyubomirsky, e.g., expressing gratitude, cultivating optimism, avoiding overthinking and social comparison,

providing acts of kindness, nurturing social relationships, developing strategies for coping, learning to forgive, increasing “flow” experiences, enjoying life’s happy moments, committing to your goals, observing religion and spirituality and taking care of your body (e.g., meditation);

- Identifying what restores and what depletes you and developing positive actions to reduce negativity;
- Journaling about positive experiences and reminding yourself of your daily progress (e.g., completing a report) rather than just checking your “to do” list;
- Expressing gratitude;
- Reviewing Fredrickson’s list of 10 positive emotions and creating ways for yourself or your employees to experience these more frequently.

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Caterina Cavallaro is deputy general counsel at VGW.

She combines technical legal skills with practical business understanding and a love of innovation, project management, and legal technology to improve ways of working within the legal industry. She is a member of the ACC's In-House In-Health and Legal Technology and Innovation Special Interest

Groups.

In addition to her legal skills she has a Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellness and is a freelance writer. Her “Positively Legal” column for the *ACC Docket* focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, and in-house practice by interviewing experts and fellow lawyers and curating up to date quality research, podcasts and books to help lawyers learn to take control of their own wellness and support their careers.

Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.