

Do Negatives Outweigh Positives?

Negative qualities often command more attention and seem more important than positive qualities:

- As people think over upcoming decisions, potential losses are often given greater weight than potential gains.
- In the social sphere, one negative personal characteristic influences people's feelings about an individual more than a host of positive characteristics.
- Negative experiences color marital satisfaction; they have more impact than do positive experiences.
- People are more likely to find an unusual face in a crowd and quickly if the face looks angry than if it looks happy.
- Subjects who examine a description of a person that uses equal numbers of positive and negative adjectives are likely to subsequently recall more negative adjectives than positive ones.
- Humans are "prepared" to learn to react with negative emotions and to quickly learn to avoid certain stimuli, such as snakes, spiders, and angry faces, that may have posed a threat to early ancestors. Although people are able to learn to avoid other stimuli, such as flowers or happy faces, that did not threaten their ancestors, they do so with greater difficulty.

Being particularly attuned to objects that could potentially be dangerous makes evolutionary sense; in past epochs, such stimuli probably threatened survival. In the contemporary world, this bias to fear such possibly dangerous stimuli can be the source of phobias. Moreover, these negative biases can erode the quality of life, the wisdom of choices, and the longevity of relationships. Knowing that these biases exist may stimulate the development of methods to counteract their potentially destructive effects on social and emotional life.

SOURCE: DO NEGATIVES OUTWEIGH POSITIVES? FROM NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, "A NATIONAL INVESTMENT." A REPORT OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY. MENTAL HEALTH COUNCIL, 1995, NIH PUBLICATION NO. 96-3682.