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Broaden and Build

Have you ever wondered why we have emotions? The value of the so-called negative emotions (fear, anger, disgust, etc.) is relatively easy to recognize... they signal danger and thereby can aid survival. Negative emotions affect thinking by narrowing one's attention onto the problem or threat that needs to be managed, which increases the likelihood of successful resolution of the problem.

But what about the positive emotions (joy, happiness, contentment, etc.)? Do they have value, other than it feels good to experience positive emotion? Barbara Fredrickson, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, suggests that positive emotions carry numerous benefits, which she summarizes as "broaden and build."

Whereas negative emotions narrow attention, positive emotions broaden attention. That is, when people feel good (i.e., happy, enthusiastic, content, relaxed, etc.), their thinking becomes more creative, integrative, flexible, and open-minded. Learning new information is enhanced. Furthermore, people experiencing positive emotion tend to be willing to consider a broader range of behaviors.

Moreover, positive emotions enable us to build resources for future resilience. For example, experiencing joy can augment the development of friendships which increases our network of social support... an important asset in times of stress or difficulty. Positive emotions help us get over negative emotions more quickly. A physical benefit of this is less physiological

damage from negative emotions such as anger. Additionally, persons in good moods tend to be more physically active.

The benefits are not limited to the individual. Positive emotions tend to be contagious, in part because the behavior engendered by positive emotions frequently is intended to benefit others. Therefore, the positive emotions bolster the building of healthy relationships and harmonious communities.

Indeed, it feels good to be happy and it enhances the quality of life. However, the positive emotions do much more than that for us. They broaden our perspectives and behavioral options in the short term, and build resources for resilience in the longer term... all of which make us, and our communities, healthier!

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