



# e-quilibrium

- *“electronic briefs on behavior and health”*

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## Bad versus Good

Political campaigns are in full swing as the November elections are just around the corner. One common complaint about campaign ads is that they tend to be very negative... the focus frequently is more on the bad qualities of the opponent than the good qualities of the candidate who is sponsoring the ad. Why does it have to be so negative? The simple answer is it works. You likely can easily think of campaigns derailed by negative information. Extensive research in social psychology has repeatedly confirmed that negative information about a person carries more weight than does positive information with respect to the overall impression about that person.

This “negativity bias” isn’t limited to the impressions we form about other people. Negative stimuli tend to get more attention than positive stimuli in many realms. Our brains respond more quickly to threats than to opportunities. Consider how quickly your sympathetic nervous system increases your heart rate upon seeing a sudden horrifying scene in a motion picture; there is no corresponding instantaneous physical response to a sudden pleasant scene. Negative events in our lives tend to have a more sustained emotional impact on us than do positive events. The news is dominated by negative events because they capture more viewer/reader attention. Losses usually are viewed as more negative than are corresponding gains; the impact of losing \$20 is commonly perceived to be greater than the impact of finding \$20. One weak link in a chain produces more harm than one strong link generates benefit. Although we might prefer to believe that learning is more strongly influenced by praise or positive consequences, research

indicates that negative consequences or punishment have the stronger effect.

We respond quickly to pain, but typically we have no response to painlessness. Symptoms of illness get our attention but routinely we pay no attention to indicators of wellness (other than when we've been sick or injured and notice the change to feeling better). Psychologists widely believe that our brains work this way because there is an evolutionary advantage for bad to be stronger than good... attending to and quickly responding to threats has survival advantages that typically don't come with immediate response to opportunities.

Interestingly, it may stand to reason that fear messages about one's health should lead us to have more positive health behavior (e.g., the risk of melanoma from tanning should lead us to minimize sun exposure), and sometimes such information has the desired effect. However, although fear messages do immediately capture our attention, frequently they create more fear/anxiety than we desire to experience so we cope by using ways of thinking about the situation to allay the fear... "but it won't happen to me."

Bad is stronger and faster than good. We can't eliminate this negativity bias, nor would we want to for many reasons. There are times, however, when we desire or need to override the bias. It can be done, but it requires much effort to prevail over this automatic tendency. Awareness of the bias is the first step in moderating its influence on us in certain situations. During an election season, this involves keeping negative information about candidates in a larger perspective. In relationships, keeping annoyances about a loved one from contaminating the overall perspective about the person is necessary for long term vitality of the relationship. With regard to health, intentionally paying attention to how good wellness feels and the quality of life that can come with it may further motivate us toward health-promoting behavior, without needing symptoms or pain to remind us of its importance.

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