



e-quilibrium

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Counterfactual Thinking

Consider a positive circumstance or event in your life. It might be some achievement, a relationship, your health, a possession, or being the recipient of a kind act. Now give some thought to how this circumstance or event might not have occurred and how surprising it is that this situation is present for you. If you spent a few minutes writing about the absence of this good thing in your life, how do you suppose your current mood would be affected? In other words, would your current mood be better or worse if you thought about the absence of this circumstance/event?

Minkyung Koo and several associates conducted a few experiments at the University of Virginia to examine how such an exercise affected the moods of research participants. Before discussing the results, let's review the role of counterfactual thinking in coping with negative circumstances, and how the process of adaptation affects the evaluation of circumstances.

When a person experiences a negative event, one of the strategies used to feel better is to imagine how things could have been worse. For example, "I could have been killed in the car accident so getting a broken leg isn't so bad." This is an example of what behavioral scientists refer to as downward counterfactual thinking. Because we tend to evaluate current circumstances using a point of comparison, one of the ways to improve one's mood in the face of a negative event is to compare it to something even worse. The point of comparison is not factual, but imagined. But in comparison to the imagined worse case (counterfactual), the factual circumstance looks better and consequently one may feel better.

Another process that contributes to coping with negative circumstances is adaptation. Amazingly, human beings tend to get accustomed to their circumstances, so that as today looks much the same as yesterday, it may not look so bad. This process doesn't change the state of affairs nor does it make them better, but over time, the point to which current circumstances are compared becomes increasingly similar.

Adaptation also occurs with positive events or circumstances. Eventually the "new job" becomes "my job," the "raise" becomes my "current income," or "my leaner body" becomes "my body." This isn't to suggest that we don't appreciate or enjoy positive circumstances in our lives, but that as the circumstances become the usual, there is no longer a perceived difference between the new and the usual. Therefore over time we tend to derive less positive emotion from enduring good circumstances because they are usual, not new or different.

There is research evidence that thinking about things in our lives for which we are grateful can improve mood, and perhaps ease depression. Interestingly, there is also evidence that doing this periodically may be more beneficial than doing it regularly. The explanation for this is that periodically paying attention to good things in our lives involves doing something different rather than usual. Similarly, being thanked for something periodically may be both more noticeable and more pleasant than to be thanked for that thing every day.

Let's return now to the activity I proposed at the beginning of this article. Would thinking (and writing) about the absence of some good thing in your life lead to a better or worse mood? Contrary to what most people initially think, the activity can actually improve mood. The reason for this is that when a person momentarily imagines life without a good circumstance, that "counterfactual" becomes the point to which we compare actually having the good thing. The result is a positive comparison, a comparison that can promote good feelings.

This may sound like playing "mind games" and perhaps it is. However, for many people, "mind games" occur that fuel anxiety, depression, and even physical symptoms. Asking

incessant “what ifs,” thinking “I can’t do anything right,” or drawing conclusions that are way beyond the known facts in a situation are a few examples. So if the mind is going to play games anyway, why not play games that are helpful?

A seasonal application of this beneficial mind game would be to preface thoughts of thanksgiving with some counterfactual thinking, that is, consideration of what life would be like if certain positive conditions weren’t present. Then, by comparison, to factually have these positive circumstances may lead to feeling even more grateful.

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