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## Why You Are Negative

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IT'S NOT JUST you. Unless you've been sound asleep for the last quarter century, I'm sure you've noticed that most people are negative, grouchy, angry, and occasionally violent. Maybe you, like me, remember being more positive a few decades back. But it seems everyone around us is a lot more cynical and skeptical. Some people are even mad as hell. What happened?

Some of it is historical. The 21st century started with a terrorist attack on the United States, sparking a 20-year war in Afghanistan, which rolled right into the dot-com bubble, the Great Recession, sharper political divisiveness, a pandemic, supply-chain issues, a hot war in Europe, record inflation, and worst of all, reality television. And you wonder why everyone is a bit crabby.

To understand why we are negative and what to do about it, we must look to science to learn about the biology and psychology behind negativity. We'll also look through the eyes of a 20th-century futurist whose predictions about rapid social change are coming true. But if negativity wasn't helpful in some way, it wouldn't exist.

## **What Science Teaches Us About Negativity**

I hesitate to talk about “the science” after the recent debates on masks, vaccines, lockdowns, and the like. But you need to know why you and I are wired for negativity. We'll start by exploring what psychologists label negativity bias. There are four components of negativity bias that you should know—but don't worry, I promise there won't be a quiz at the end of the chapter.

1. **Negative Potency:** Our negative emotions are stronger than our positive ones. If you've ever wondered why your negative emotional states seem to last longer than your positive ones, this may be part of the reason.
2. **Steeper Negative Gradients:** This intimidating term simply means that the closer a negative event, the faster your negativity about it grows. If you are anxious, it's likely you are focusing on some potentially negative future event. The odd thing is that this gradient is not nearly as steep for positive events.
3. **Negative Dominance:** Combining negative and positive events results in evaluations that are more negative than is logical or even justified. Guess what? You lost \$100! Guess what else? You won \$150. You sigh, more upset about the loss than happy about the \$50 profit.
4. **Negative Differentiation:** In the real world, negative events are more varied and complex than positive events. Your brain uses more resources to think about, reflect, and process negative events. This leads to differences in the language we use to describe them and how we attend to, learn from, and remember them.

Because these elements work together, all humans have a negativity bias, even if some wallow in that negativity more than others. But psychologist Robert L. Leahy believes that evolution would not favor a trait that wouldn't help us survive: negativity is a feature, not a bug.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, we also have a bias towards optimism—a version of yin and yang. Yin and yang are chaos and order, light and dark, cold and hot, and up and down. Even though negativity is dominant, our optimism causes us to persist in pursuing our goals.

## The Evolutionary Value of Negativity

Say you and I are cave people living tens of thousands of years ago. As we are walking around one day, you tell me you want to make a list of all the things that may cause serious problems. I like it: the reason you are my best friend is because you are always inventing new games like this one. “Okay,” you say, “first question: Will this kill me?” I argue that the category is too broad since almost everything in our primitive environment is likely to kill us. Heck, half the things we eat would eat us if they had the chance.

Still, it’s an important—and serious—question. How can we stay alive by avoiding things that might cause us to expire prematurely? So I propose a more specific test: “If I eat this, will I die?” You agree that food is difficult to come by, even if we aren’t counting prehistoric carbs. I remind you that nine of our tribe members died after eating those enticing and delicious-looking red berries that grow near the waterline.

Since we know those berries are trouble, you suggest painting pictures of poisonous plants on the cave wall, as a warning to our friends and families. I remind you that five of our friends still ate the berries *after* the first group died. We agree that our tribe might think the drawings are a menu, so we decide not to publicize the berries any further. But we do need to be concerned about what we eat.

Next, you ask, “Will this person or persons try to dominate us?” Most of the cave dwellers close to us are real savages. Some of them don’t bother to wear the fur from the animals they kill and eat, or even to follow Adam and Eve’s cue and cover themselves with leaves. You and I are more civilized than these barbarians, and we also have a greater sense of fashion. We’ve been eating meat and our brains are expanding, even though the effects are not evenly distributed across the tribe.

As you are talking about the savages next door, I interrupt to suggest that whenever these neighboring brutes visit us, the first thing we should do is offer them those red berries. You object to taking their lives, as murder is wrong, perhaps even beneath us. I suggest keeping the berries around, just in case. Even if some of our neighbors are actually more friendly than violent, odds are that a bad egg will turn up eventually.

That point leads us to our next test: “Will this person copulate with me?” I think it’s a crucial addition. As far as I can tell, this is our number-one priority, particularly since we enjoy spending more time with friends and less time with brutes. Our tribe tends to grow larger over time, but no one, even us, knows why half the tribe keeps finding crabby, loud, lazy, and squeaky people. It’s a mystery, we decide, and chances are that no one will ever be able to explain it.

Before we head back to the cave, though, you make one final observation: Our optimistic peers don’t seem to live very long. The ones who survived their impetuous actions have a lot of scars and broken bones. They often have trouble finding food, especially since they can’t outrun anyone or anything. The few of us with gray hair tend to avoid rushing into things. We seem to be more pessimistic, skeptical, and cautious than the rest of our clan. Well, what’s left of them anyway.

## **The ACDC Environment: Stress Under Constant Change**

When I was a young kid playing rock ‘n’ roll, I was a dead ringer for Bon Scott, the legendary voice of AC/DC. Perhaps

the future shock that Toffler predicted won't necessarily put us on the proverbial highway to hell, but it's worth thinking about another kind of ACDC: "Accelerating, Constant, Disruptive Change."

One reason that this change skyrockets our stress levels is that we weren't designed for this kind of environment. In the distant past, most of our immediate threats were high-grade stressors, like a saber-tooth tiger attack. Either you escaped or you became the tiger's dinner date. We didn't have the low-grade stressors of a boss, taxes, or car insurance payments for teenagers. Currently, however, most of our lives entail low-grade stressors, which we're ill-adapted to deal with.

At the time of this writing, for instance, our ACDC environment includes the following:

- The highest inflation numbers in more than 50 years
- High gas prices due to production and capacity issues
- Russia's war in Ukraine
- An increasing number of countries, led by China, choosing autocracy over democracy, making the world more dangerous
- An unchecked political divisiveness some suggest could lead to a US civil war
- The boomer generation retiring without enough workers to replace them, which is why you have bad service almost everywhere
- A low birth rate, just 54 births for every 1000 women in 2021
- Constant staffing challenges in health care (including nursing), despite having more than two jobs available (in the United States) for every person not presently working

- Speaking of work, technology's promise to help with work-life balance has instead exacerbated the problem, with people working day and night to keep up with their work
- Some in the sandwich generation who must take care of their children and their aging parents at the same time
- Increasing income disparity that may threaten our way of life.
- A decreasing life-span, largely due to suicide and drug overdoses

These major stressors often affect us directly, and they form the backdrop to our daily lives. While it may be possible to ignore at least a few of these, it's virtually impossible to forget them all completely. On top of these social and geopolitical issues, personal stressors add even more pressure. Even though these events may happen on a smaller scale, they loom larger in our lives because they are direct threats to what is most important to us. Here are a few examples:

- You are up for a promotion at work, and you're counting on the extra income, but your boss is considering promoting his current favorite ahead of you.
- Your seventh-grade daughter is being ostracized by the mean girls in her class, simply because she is a sweet, thoughtful, adorable, and bookish girl. She doesn't want you to intervene, but you can't stand to see her suffer.
- You feel an uncomfortable tickle at the back of your throat. Is it a cold? The flu? The latest pandemic? You can't afford to miss work now, but you can barely get out of bed.

- Three of your neighbors have reported break-ins this month. You wish you had the extra funds to upgrade your security system.
- Your 11-year-old wants a cell phone because all of his friends have one. You notice that his friends and your older kids are addicted to their phones. Even you have trouble putting your phone down. You want to do what is best but can't decide whether it's better to give him the phone so he can fit in or hold out until he's older and listen to him complain until then.
- The neighbor's kid with the long hair and the loud stereo drives too fast, and you're sure that one of these days he's going to hit one of the kids in the cul-de-sac. When you asked his parents to make him slow down, their "boys will be boys" defense didn't do your blood pressure any favors.
- Your car needs major repairs, but you can't afford a rental and the mechanic is fresh out of loaners.
- Your accountant called to say that the tax refund you were expecting was a miscalculation, and instead you owe money that you don't have.

Some of these smaller stressors stem from larger events, like inflation increasing a household's financial strain or political disagreements damaging personal relationships. Other stressors can simply be bad luck or part of a wider pattern of human behavior. Regardless of how stress enters our lives, we are all paying a price for the accelerating, constant, disruptive change. We feel the chronic stress and the toll it takes—not just in mental health outcomes like anxiety and depression, but in physical challenges like insomnia and heart disease. Couple that with ongoing psychological damage from technology and social media. We are bombarded

daily with constant information, disinformation, and misinformation. A single “check out my vacation” picture can cause unhealthy social comparisons and ratchet up our fear of missing out.<sup>2</sup> It’s even worse for young people, who often live on social media at a time when they are most developmentally vulnerable to comparison.<sup>3,4</sup>

Stress can cause problems with cognitive functions, like memory, attention, and decision-making. It can lead to a lack of productivity and efficiency in different aspects of our life. People with higher levels of neuroticism, including from genetic features, can be extra vulnerable to the negative effects of stress.<sup>5,6</sup>

One way to combat stress is to build resilience, so we can better cope with the challenges of living in an ACDC environment. Mindfulness can help, and so can building a strong social support system, to develop effective problem-solving skills. Later, we’ll look at cognitive-behavioral therapy, along with tips for exercise, relaxation strategies, and finding work-life balance. It’s also worth knowing that there are positive effects of stress, a concept called eustress (positive stress). Eustress can cause growth, greater creativity, and stronger performance, even in everyday people like you and me.

## Negativity Is Biological

Your biology is sometimes the source of your negativity. Let’s get real. You stay busy, often because you’re taking care of everyone else. But failing to take care of yourself can multiply your stress and negativity. Our most basic animal needs are food, water, sleep, and movement. When we neglect those needs, we cannot effectively make decisions or use our

higher-level cognitive skills. When our body is stressed, we aren't able to work on other important aspects of our lives.

Waiting too long to eat can send your body into a “hangry” state, inviting the three-pound, grayish-pink meatloaf that is your brain to unleash your inner Mr. or Ms. Hyde. Or perhaps you settled for an Oreo lunch because you were too busy to find a healthy meal. The sugar rush, you figured, was just what you needed to power through an afternoon of meetings. But just about the time John and Susan are rehashing the same argument they've had at every meeting for the past three months, your sugar high ends and you crash. For next time, I prescribe a small salad with some protein—and perhaps an urgent matter that requires you to miss the meeting. There are studies that suggest that a salad and protein for lunch can ward off negativity. They also suggest that a healthy food can cause a positive mood.<sup>7</sup>

My favorite way to ruin my biology (and mood) is to avoid drinking water. Your body is made up of around 30 trillion cells, and we carry around 36 trillion bacteria every day (gross, I know). All those cells and bacteria are thirsty. Recently, I stopped drinking coffee and sugar, replacing it mainly with water. It was terrible for two days, and then it was easy. You know those headaches you get in the afternoon? You might solve them by hydrating yourself and the colonies of bacteria depending on you. They're thirsty too!<sup>8</sup>

Of all the biological sources of negativity, poor sleep is at the top of the stack, whether it comes from insomnia, the crying baby, or the two glasses of wine that shut down your liver for the night. Soon you'll wake up feeling not just groggy, but all set to be an extra on *The Walking Dead*—no makeup required. Getting more sleep can make you less irritable and more resilient, so you'll be better prepared to

overcome negativity and stress.<sup>9</sup> Aim for at least seven hours per night, and more if you need it.

Avoiding exercise is another excellent way to turn off positivity while turning on negativity. You don't have to lift heavy weights like Arnold, or dive full-tilt into CrossFit in your late 40s (unless, of course, you enjoy rotator cuff surgery). Unless you are young, strong, and expect to be in a street fight, there is no reason to train for the UFC. Try walking or running for 30 minutes each day and lifting moderate weights. Science suggests that exercise can improve your attitude and cognitive functioning, not to mention the physical benefits.<sup>10</sup>

## Negativity Is Psychological

Alvin Toffler may have been the first person to recognize the effects of rapid societal change in the modern era. In his popular book *Future Shock* (1970), Toffler wrote, "The acceleration of change in our time is, itself, an elemental force. The accelerative thrust has personal and psychological, as well as sociological consequences. . . . Unless man quickly learns to control the rate of change in his personal affairs as well as in society at large, we are doomed to a massive adaptational breakdown." Later, Toffler defined "future shock" as "the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short of time." Sound familiar?

Like Toffler, I believe that the speed of change partly explains why we are more negative, pessimistic, cynical, skeptical, and perpetually outraged. Thanks to technology, globalization, and blurred lines between work and home, the nonstop world around us is partially responsible for the

huge increase in mental health issues. We are more fearful about the future—anxious, worried, dislocated. And in the same way that fish do not know they live in water, we are unaware that our environment is constantly changing faster than we can adapt.

In *Future Shock*, Toffler predicted that we would have a tough time dealing with the rapid change he saw coming our way. He said we would have sociological and psychological challenges adapting to our environment. And he was right—just look around.

We look up to entrepreneurs who believe they should “move fast and break things,” not recognizing who and what they are breaking, or even whether breaking it is a good idea. We are products of (and in) surveillance capitalism, where our data is the product. We’re fed by our feeds, typically a steady diet of anger, body image problems, and even socially induced trauma like cyberbullying. Crisis after crisis plays out on the television news catwalk, and we mustn’t miss Tuesday’s fashion. And then there are the constant low-grade stressors that stack up on top of one another, until you can’t even decide which one to worry about.

Fear is poison even in small amounts, and it can ruin your outlook on your life and your future. In a paper titled “Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion,” Paul Rozin and Edward B. Royzman note that “pollution always overtakes purity.”<sup>11</sup> If a cockroach crawls onto your dinner plate, there’s zero chance you’ll dig in. When you read and watch poisonous media content every day, it’s difficult to remove. It becomes a pattern of thought.<sup>12</sup>

In the last couple of years, our average life expectancy has dropped by several years, largely driven by fentanyl and suicide. Opioid abuse and suicide are both attempts to escape

pain, mostly psychological pain. Along similar lines, homelessness is reaching record numbers—drive through any large city, like Los Angeles, San Francisco, or even Austin, and you will be struck by how many people call the underpass home.

If you feel negative, part of the reason is the stress of living in this complex world that has been burning and turning for over four billion years. Despite Musk's desire to "travel to Mars," I am certain we are indigenous to this water-covered planet, moving through the universe at 600,000 mph while circling a giant ball of burning gas.

Before we go any further, I want to remind you that it is more than okay to feel and experience negative states. All our emotions exist because they are critical to our ability to live, survive, and thrive. Yes, we can be negative, but we can also show real compassion for others. So here's your first assignment: next time you feel negative, find someone who needs your help and see how fast your state changes to positive. You picked up this book, so I have to believe that you want more out of life than a constant stream of stress.

## **Negativity Is Sociological**

Another source of negativity is the people you encounter as you live your life—and yes, you're probably someone's source of negativity. When it comes to being difficult, for example, I am gifted in several areas. When someone tries to take advantage of me or bully someone weaker than they are, I can go from Mr. Rogers to Mr. T in two seconds flat. I try to avoid being a source of negativity, but sometimes I feel like a magnet for difficult people. It's like I have a sign on my forehead that says, "Come bring your drama to me!"

That's how I ended up fighting Steve Buckley—a 15-year-old neighbor kid who had at least 40 pounds on me—when I was barely 12. I'm still not sure what caused Steve to punch me in the first place, but I did learn that sometimes you end up in fights you didn't start. That was only one of many encounters with savages.

Sociological negativity may start at home, often with your siblings. I have two brothers and three sisters, and believe me when I say that my sisters were the toughest of any of us. Even after everyone is theoretically grown up, ostracism (or self-exile) can fuel familial negativity. Add in divorce, money problems, and the stress of work and raising children, and it's easy to understand why some families are a nest of negativity.

And then there's work. You knew we'd get here eventually, didn't you? Sure, you have some great coworkers. They're some of your best friends. But then there's Jimmy, that guy with a . . . difficult personality, let's say. He's always stirring the pot, sowing controversy, and creating conflict. He and a couple of his minions are clearly responsible for the negativity and the increasingly toxic culture in the office. No one knows why Jimmy gets away with his antics, but more than one coworker has noted a passing genetic resemblance between Jimmy and the boss.

Or maybe it's your boss who's the problem. As far as I can tell, bosses can be good or bad, but they're pretty much all grouchy. That's because they have significant responsibilities, including taking care of your paycheck. But you're still trying to read a hundred and forty emails a day (and that's not counting the texts, Slack messages, and casual questions from coworkers) and you send about four dozen

emails yourself. Overwhelm is practically automatic. And it doesn't end at five. After you spend an hour or two in rush-hour traffic, you gulp down your dinner and spend at least part of your night "catching up," as if that were possible.

I've already given up watching the news on television. It's all negative, all the time, with practically nothing positive. If that changes, I might start watching again, but for now I'll stick to the funny cat videos my wife sends me on Instagram. Here's why: There really are compassionate and caring people in this world, but their stories rarely meet the standard of "If it bleeds, it leads."

If you live in the United States, you are one of the richest people on Earth. Most global citizens would happily trade places with you—especially if their daily experience includes subjugation, cruelty, famine, and war. Yet we perceive the negative because of negativity bias. Yes, our own society is a source of negativity, especially when it comes to the polarizing politics that divide us into two warring tribes. We'll come back to that later, but let's cool down a bit here for a minute. Today, many new human babies were born. Yay! People got married. Hooray! Someone landed a job they had dreamed of for years. Woot! And you, my friend, finally sat down to do something about your negativity.

## **Permission to Be Negative**

Before we wrap up this chapter, I want to clarify one thing: You are allowed to be negative while you are working your way through this book—even during your negativity fast. You are a human being, and these states are natural. Feel free to experience, in whatever order you like, our common

human emotions of anxiety, sadness, anger, frustration, guilt, shame, envy, jealousy, disappointment, and regret. For that matter, you might even stray into the negative states you like the best, like despair, inadequacy, embarrassment, alienation, hostility, hopelessness, or (some favorites) pessimism and cynicism.

You may have every reason to be anxious, which usually means you are worried about the future. If you are depressed, it often means you are focusing on the past; thank you, Lao Tzu, for that wisdom. Don't judge yourself by your negative states, especially when events around you might make negativity a perfectly appropriate response.

I am also claiming my right to experience negative states. I come from a family tree of practical stoics who had little if any interest in consoling anyone who felt sorry for themselves. My mother raised four children by herself. Her mother raised five children. Neither of these two strong women had any patience for sulking teenagers. I was never allowed to be depressed. It just wasn't on the menu. But I do have an easy time manifesting anger, irritation, hostility, and mistrust.

When I am in a particularly foul mood, I accept that I am in a negative state. Sometimes I just sit and enjoy noticing how unhappy I am. I normally do that away from my wife, Cher, because she doesn't tolerate my negative states. Eventually the state passes, and I can get back to being myself. It's okay to experience the moods and emotions, good or bad.

These states we all experience come and go like the seasons. You have good times where everything is going your way and you are mostly positive much of the time. Let's call

them spring and summer. Other times, it gets dark early, the leaves fall off the trees, and things get cold and dry. Let's call them fall and winter. We've certainly had more fall and winter in the 21st century, but most of that is outside our control. Our job instead is to adopt a set of practical strategies so we can be more positive more of the time. Let's get to work on removing negativity.