

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Negativity Bias: Why Humans Are Born To Say No

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome everybody. I hope you're having a good day.

We're going to be talking about the Negativity Bias. This is a fascinating phenomenon. When I was researching *Ethical Wisdom*, I learned that there's something that evolutionary biologists call the negativity bias, which points to why the human brain is hardwired to not only anticipate why bad things happening, but also to make negative experience impact us more forcefully than positive experience.

Most of you have had awareness of this in your life anecdotally, without necessarily knowing that it comes from your ancient wiring. In fact, our brains are predisposed to threat and mistrust. We place greater value on negative acts than positive ones.

There was an interesting study done of married couples where spouses estimated that it takes five good deeds to make up for one mistake. In another test, the subjects reported that it would take twenty-five acts of life-saving heroism to make up for one single murder. Isn't that interesting? And yet, of course, there's a saying that it takes twelve good men to build a house and one man to destroy it.

That's how powerful the negativity bias is.

Speaking personally, I've been aware of this tendency for my whole life, but I never realized it was connected to our evolutionary past. I had always seen the negativity bias as a function of neurosis, as a proof of weakness or even failure, rather than what it is, an artifact of biological inheritance.

Just imagine early man sitting around a fire at night and hearing something rustle in the undergrowth. It was a lot more advantageous to imagine that it was a saber-toothed tiger than to think that it was a squirrel if you didn't want to be eaten alive. The same thing went with meeting strangers. It was far more advantageous to assume that they were enemies than to risk optimism and end up with your head on a platter.

For early man it made no sense at all to think positive thoughts or anticipate good treatment or take a chance that an unknown thing was harmless. There was no payoff to what we call positive thinking in our evolutionary past. In the law of the jungle it was smart not to forgive or forget. It was best to always remember harms that were done or perceived harms and be cautious that they not repeat themselves. It made sense to hold onto fear, dread, apprehension, and memories of a thousand things that could go wrong or to anticipate the thousand things that could go wrong in the environment as safety measures against the unknown.

When I learned that this negativity bias was part of what kept us alive as a species, suddenly a whole array of personal tendencies and impulses started to make a lot more sense.

Why, for example, if you walk into a roomful of friendly people, do you focus on the one unfriendly person, someone who may have said something that slighted you in a sea of

compliments? You get yourself thinking about them afterwards, rather usually than the happy or the uplifting or the inspiring things that happen to you. Why, for instance, in a situation that you have every reason to believe is safe, does a part of the mind fixate on what might be dangerous?

This is really important stuff. It's not a rational process. This is the first thing to understand.

We can know the odds against harm coming and yet an ancient part of the brain, the reptile brain, the limbic brain, that preceded our powers of reason by hundreds of thousands of years, paints a different picture.

This is our human dilemma.

We're dealing with twenty-first century life with a brain that's leftover from the Paleolithic. Just let a frightening image or a thought pass through the mind, and the brain will seize on it and turn it into obsession or paranoia.

As one psychologist put it, the mind is Velcro for negative thoughts and Teflon for positive ones. Isn't it true? It takes no effort for negative thoughts to take root, proliferate, and overcome one if we're not careful. But positive thoughts and habits are very hard to develop. If you've ever tried to break a bad habit or cultivate a good one, you know this inverse ratio of power.

And one reason for this is that emotions and reason speak different languages. If you've ever tried talking yourself out of a feeling, you know that that's true.

Jonathan Haidt, a great moral psychologist, has a good analogy for this. He compares the rational mind to a little man riding an elephant, which represents the emotions and trying to steer it this way or that. The little man is our reasoning self. The emotions are the elephant. And most of the time, as you know, we end up letting the elephant have its way. The emotions end up taking us where they want to take us, whether or not we express them outwardly.

And that's why when negative thought arises and evokes a feeling in us, we can't dial it back, because the truth is that our feelings have us. We don't have our feelings. And the more we suppress them, the stronger they grow. Once a fearful thought or feeling is planted, it behaves in a kind of parasitic, cancer-like way, destroying positive thoughts and feelings and spreading a dark sense of negativity and foreboding.

The reason for your negative thinking is not that you're weak or broken or hopelessly neurotic. The reason for your negative thinking is that you are a human being. Millions of years of evolution have gone into making you a negative thinker. The impulse to fight or flight or freeze comes from that same era.

There's a giant NO in our species itself, this nay-saying self that protects us and wants us to play it safe and stay scared. Regardless of the nature of the threat or uncertainty, whether it's serious

or trivial, whether it's something that could happen or completely absurd, this same over-reactive mechanism comes into play.

When we come to realize what we're up against, in terms of our own evolution, our own fears of change, uncertainty, and the unknown begin to make a lot more sense. And so does the difficulty we face as seekers, who are trying to live awakened lives, awakening lives that are geared toward evolution and getting free. The same principle that has us looking out for saber-toothed, the same mechanism in the brain, also blocks us from changing negative thinking, cultivating positive behavior, and looking fear in the face instead of running away. That mechanism in the brain runs counter to us moving past us versus them and learning to leave the past behind.

To weaken the negativity bias means countering this great NO, countering the what if's, the bad-things --waiting -to -happen vigilance with an open heart and an open mind, with empathy and compassion, and with a willingness to change. That's how we confront the negativity bias and begin to turn it around, to weaken its hold on us.

It's what the Buddhists call practicing against the grain. Practicing against the grain means reversing our "natural" tendencies and replacing them with spiritual ones, resisting the urge to shut out the other, letting go of safety, and the comfort zone and the status quo for the risk of awakening and personal evolution.

As all of you know who are on this call or listening to this podcast, it's two steps forward and one step back if you're lucky on the spiritual path. I always like to say that spiritual practice is one insult after another and it really is. We're constantly being pushed up against our own limitations.

But there's no evolution without failure. There's no growth without repeating mistakes and beginning again and again and again, because there will always be these adversaries within, the demons and the contrarians in the mind that want to block our freedom, these sabotaging voices that undo our best laid plans and tear down our budding works of faith. This will not end.

But where pessimists stop at this point, this ongoing challenge, and since they never get rid of negative thinking, just give up the effort itself and call it worthless, optimists say YES to evolution.

Pessimists will tell you that we should stick with our tribal ways, that we should build higher walls, that we should demonize the other, that we should move toward fundamentalism and polarity and stick with negative addictions in the name of keeping us safe. But optimists say YES to evolution.

I define an optimist as someone who refuses to be controlled by the past, someone who acknowledges that life is always changing, full of surprises and possibilities and who believe in the essential goodness of human beings. That's what I call an optimist.

Optimists remind us that positive change is possible, even though it's much harder than negative, and that it's a terrible waste of human potential to resign ourselves to the mandates of the Reptilian brain. Without the ability to imagine ourselves differently, to envision new solutions, to transcend the bestial parts of our nature, there can be no creativity.

Remember that nature hasn't hardwired us for happiness nor for spiritual evolution. Nature has programmed us for survival. And the two are not always compatible, that clinging to survival against threat and allowing ourselves to be happy. Those can be opposing forces in our lives.

And many seekers begin a spiritual path when they realize that they've been surviving, not living. They've been boxed in, not free. We realize we've been living as nature intended rather than as what we are capable of, and justifying it as natural, as if imitating nature was such a good thing.

This is an important point and I imagine some of you are wondering what do I mean by nature not being a good thing? This goes against all of our ecological, environmental, liberal views. But, in fact, nature is not always a good thing.

In our post-industrial age, when so many man-made things are destroying the planet and we feel so cut off from the natural world, it's easy to idealize nature and fall into the false belief that because things come naturally or are hardwired in us, they're necessarily wise, helpful, or good. This notion that because things happen in nature makes them right, is known in philosophical ethics as the naturalistic fallacy.

The naturalistic fallacy is the overly romanticized version of nature that has actually led to many horrors in our human history, from the condoning of dominance and the abuse of women (because after all, men are stronger, just look at the orangutans), to something equally extreme like slavery where nature was used to justify white supremacy and blacks were seen as less than human, to other kinds of the worst human behavior, such as the holocaust and racial purification.

Ethnic cleansing the world over and tribal turf wars and also the suppression of difference, such as physical disability, sexuality and so on, all take their inspiration from a misguided deification of nature as the last word in human affairs. We can use nature to terrible ends or the naturalistic fallacy to terrible ends.

Of course, we only worship nature or call on her authority when it suits our needs, such as making one group inferior to another. In matters of ecology, for instance, it doesn't affect us nearly as much. Still, it's really important that we examine our own attitudes towards nature as our moral and spiritual compass.

It may be advantageous, for instance, short term to throw the needy and the old and the difficult out of the group, to maximize the chances of survival. But, is it right? Of course not.

An ethics that put survival at the center, which means making fear the basis of our decision making, is primitive and barbaric. There are very widely varying opinions on this and cultures, of course, differ according to their needs. In Inuit culture, Eskimos think it's okay to put a baby on an ice flow to die to protect the food source when there's not enough to go around. But for most of us, we can agree I think that for the vast majority living in the modern world, this is not the direction that we hope to go in.

It's this thinking that causes us to close our borders to refugees who might have a terrorist element to use one current disaster. In a world where we can land on the moon and map the human genome, there are surely kinder and more skillful means of dealing with refugees and the threats of outsiders rather than keeping them in permanent camps or letting them drown at sea.

And yet these horrors continue precisely because we fall back on nature, first, the negativity bias and then nature, the naturalistic fallacy, to excuse inhumanity. We fall back on the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest, to excuse our own lack of empathy and failure of the imagination. In fact, we defer and default to the negativity bias, combined with the naturalistic fallacy, to condone all kinds of cruelty and using danger and fear to justify ourselves. And that's how the circle of suffering continues to turn. And we wonder why so little changes in our world and in ourselves.

When it comes to social change, the negativity bias is a complete disaster. Cultural shifts, with the faintest glimmer of innovation or envelope pushing, will be rejected out of hand as bound for failure. It can make us very stubborn and refuse to consider alternative views, because gripped by the negativity bias, we risk becoming ethically horrible and inflexible and disconnected from the actual demands of the world. We bypass opportunities for change and open-mindedness. We become convinced that our way is the right way – full stop.

Children go through this stage. Of course, they call it the terrible twos, when everything you say to a child will be met with a no. That's because kids at that age are going through a phase that is known as immaculate justice. I love that. Immaculate justice is the terrible twos when kids want it their way and it's yes and it's no and it's all very black and white. It's the budding elephant that's stomping its foot.

But, it's also what keeps us stuck, emotionally speaking, in a Stone Age past, in a barbaric past. We are like kids stuck in the terrible twos and looking for some kind of immaculate justice that doesn't exist and that brings up all kinds of divisiveness and resistance to harmony and to lowering the borders that we put up between ourselves and other people.

Take a look at your own life.

Are you aware how the negativity bias limits your ability to choose freely?

Are you conscious of a tendency to paint devils on the wall as the Finns say – to create threats that don't actually exist - and spending your life in anticipation of danger that isn't real?

Ask yourself, do you tend to hold onto negative experience longer than you need to and to make negative predictions about the future that are based on evidence from the past?

Ask yourself, how do you betray your own positive efforts with negative thinking?

Have you noticed how much easier it is to destroy than to build desired new outcomes?

Once you move through these questions, which I highly recommend writing about, ask yourself something a little bit more challenging.

Ask yourself, what are the upsides of expecting the worst in life?

How does this protect you from the need to make changes, to take risks, or to learn new things?

How much easier is it to hang out in NO, than it is to consider the frightening, but vitalizing YES?

These are such important questions.

Do you use nature to excuse your own bad habits toward destructive tendencies?

Do you believe that because something is natural that makes it desirable or good?

Where does nature betray you in life and lead you toward unhelpful outcomes?

In the tug of war between body, mind, and spirit, what tends to win in your life?

Do you consider yourself to be an optimist in general or a pessimist and where does this orientation come from?

When we explore these questions for ourselves, it's amazing what we discover about our own assumptions, our motivations, and the stories that continue to dominate us until we start to question them.

In closing I'd like to talk about a few things that have worked for me in working against the negativity bias as well as for a few experts who are a lot smarter than I am.

The first may seem cliché, simplistic, but you cannot underestimate the power of a smile. One teacher told me that a smile is the bridge between man and God, which I thought was so beautiful. There an entire field of positive psychology that focuses on something called the happy face advantage, which we're going to be talking about in another session later this year.

When we smile, we do all kinds of excellent things with our brain chemistry, as well as the energy that we share with others. So, don't underestimate the power of a smile.

The second point is to surround ourselves with positive people, which is connected, of course, to the first.

Dan Goleman told me that people either are our biological allies or our biological foes because emotions and energy are so contagious. So, look at the people you surround yourself by. Ask yourself how their negativity bias biases you? Ask yourself if they truly have your best interest at heart or are there subtle ways that they oppose and undermine and block you because of their own fears?

These are very important things to look at (sound on audio breaks up) regarding the people we surround ourselves with, because they have so much to do with how we frame the world, how we see ourselves, what we consider is possible, how safe we feel.

The third tool to use in countering the negativity bias is to help somebody. When we reach out and help another human being, it stimulates a part of the brain that leads to an emotion called elevation.

Elevation comes when oxytocin is released. I'm not a doctor, I can't give you the exact chemistry, but I know that it's oxytocin, which is called the love molecule, that is released when we help other people. We connect. It affirms our own goodness. It just feels good. It feels good to help. Do that whenever you can and notice how the help comes back to you in other forms.

The fourth tool – and this is a big one – is to look at where victimhood stands in your life.

How often do you think of yourself as a victim?

Where does it show up in your life?

When did this victimization story start?

You may well have been victimized in your life. When you were helpless, you may have been taken advantage of, had harm done to you. There are real examples of victimization. But what we do after that is up to us.

Do we take that on as an identity?

Do we become poster children for victimhood?

Do we only connect with other people around our victimization? They call that woundology – do you only connect at the wound with others?

There's something to be learned and there's a lot of beauty and intimacy that can come from sharing our wounds, of course. But when it becomes our primary identity, we set up an "us versus them" dynamic in the world and in our lives.

So notice, where are you a victim?

You might also ask yourself, where you are a perpetrator?

Where is the bully in you?

Because where there's a victim, there's always a bully. And what we end up doing often is introjecting the perpetrator, the person who did what they did or people who perpetrated a crime against us or some kind of harm, we introject that persona and we keep doing it to ourselves. That's what Byron Katie means when she says – when somebody slaps you, it's over, that's grace. But we miss the grace part. And we keep slapping ourselves over and over and over ad infinitum, and wonder why we feel so beaten up.

The fifth tool is to learn to reframe.

This is very important. When negative things happen to us, for example, when someone says something mean to you, try visualizing as a drop of black ink that's falling into a big container of clear water – so that although the ink itself is very black, it mixes quickly with the rest of the water until it's gone and all you can see is the clear water again. That's one way of reframing negativity.

We give it less power over us. We realize that, in fact, it's not nearly as strong as we make it through repetition and through the negativity bias.

So learn to reframe experience in such a way that it accentuates possibility, openness, and another side to even painful experience where growth is possible, where deepening is possible, where wisdom is possible. By opening up this other side, we bring balance to the negativity bias.

And that brings us to the next tool which is rumination. We need to be aware and beware of rumination in our lives, because when the mind wanders, it's a lot more likely to recall something that made you angry or upset instead of recalling something that made you happy and proud.

In one study that was done, folks reported that something like forty-seven percent of the time their minds were somewhere other than where they were, not paying attention to what was going on with them. And what they found is that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind, even if it's wandering in so-called pleasant thoughts. Isn't that interesting?

Anything that takes us out of the present, anything that distracts our attention from the moment we're in, actually makes us unhappy even when we are fantasizing or thinking about positive things. So, a human mind is a wandering mind and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind.

Be aware of how much you ruminate, why you ruminate, when it gets kicked off, and how you can counter that with other thoughts, other kinds of behaviors. How can you replace, how can you reframe when you catch yourself spinning out into obsession? We all do it. How can you catch yourself before you tumble headlong into this vortex of repetition in your mind?

The next comes from a guy named Rick Hanson, a researcher, and he suggests keeping a ratio of five to one in our dealings with other people. Because of the negativity bias, other people will be more affected by the negative things that you say or do than they will by the positive ones. So if you scold your child or you criticize an employee or a friend or you argue with your spouse, Hanson recommends saying or doing five positive things to maintain a healthy relationship with that person. It's an interesting thing to consider.

He also recommends that you start to link the negative and the positive and this goes back to reframing. We do this by holding both a positive and a negative emotion in our awareness, while keeping the positive emotion more prominent, for example, feeling joy while you participate in an activity which is fun for you while also feeling some apprehension in the background over some presentation that you have to give at work. Hanson says that by holding a positive and a negative emotion at once, it helps to remind us that the two are not mutually exclusive. That's because negativity, that black ink, tends to color everything else.

But, in fact, we are always moving between positive and negative experience and energy and thought. They can both oppose us at the same time – they are not mutually exclusive.

The last point comes from Tony Schwartz, who wrote a terrific book years ago that you made have heard of called *What Really Matters* and now he is chief executive officer of something called The Energy Project in New York.

What Tony recommends doing to overcome the negativity bias is to practice what he calls realistic optimism. Realistic optimism. This means telling yourself the most hopeful and empowering story possible about any given circumstance without denying or minimizing the facts.

Isn't that great? Telling ourselves the most hopeful and empowering story possible about any situation that we're in without denying or minimizing the facts.

That's what he calls realistic optimism, which feels like a balanced and wise way to hold this bag of contradictory experiences with all these negative thoughts going on in the midst of uncertainty and a changeable world.

Think about these tools.

Think about practicing a realistic optimism, what that would mean for you in your life and notice when this negativity bias comes up, when you find yourself just automatically going to the worst, realize that this is the brain that you were born with. It's not something that is wrong with you. It's a powerful foe. It's something that needs to be worked with, but it doesn't mean you're damaged, it doesn't mean you're broken, and it doesn't mean that you are beyond repair. This means that you are a human being with a human brain and we're working on this arc of evolution

toward awakening, toward not being as imprisoned by our fearful thoughts and our reptilian conditioning.