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24 KARAT SUCCESS



GOLDEN RULES FOR A
FULFILLED AND SUCCESSFUL
LIFE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Karat 6: Minimize the minus

How to deal with negative emotions

Deirdre Blomfield-Brown, born in New York in 1936 and also called Pema Chödrön, which means 'Lotus Lamp of Truth', is the most famous Buddhist nun in the West. She spends most of her time in contemplation.

However, there was a point in her life when she was filled with deep fear, when she felt “vulnerable, very fearful and raw.” Despite intensive meditation she was not able to deal with that feeling. Finally, she asked her teacher Dzigar Kongtrül for help. He asked: “What exactly do you feel? Does it hurt? Is it hot or cold?” The more she explained, the more his face brightened, and finally he said with a smile: “Ani Pema, this is Dakini's bliss. A high degree of spiritual bliss.”¹³⁰ Pema almost fell off her chair, she was so delighted, and eagerly anticipated the next time she would feel that way again, now that she knew it was nothing to be afraid of.

But when she started to meditate again to rediscover this 'bliss', nothing happened. No happiness, no rapture, no intense glow, nothing of what she had hoped for. Was it naming the emotion that had destroyed it?

What do names mean to us? As William Shakespeare's Juliet put it: “What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet...”

She would have loved her Romeo just as well were he called John, Klaus or Murat.

But what about things or feelings that have *no* names? Take a deafening bang, for example. If we hear it without knowing what it is, we are frightened – could it be an explosion? But if we know that it is an unusually loud thunder clap, we may be briefly shocked but immediately recover.

The 'nameless' makes us feel insecure. The culprit is the amygdala region in the brain, which responds with a strong stress reaction.¹³¹ The almond-shaped amygdala is responsible for processing emotions, especially fear. If the fear is named, however, the reaction is reduced

and brain activity shifts from the 'very emotional' amygdala into the prefrontal cortex.¹³² The prefrontal cortex is often referred to as the 'board of management' or 'executive director'¹³³ because of its ability to view things in the bigger context as well as more rationally. One instrument it uses to do this is 'reassessment' – in essence, a clever, cognitive and conscious control that enables us to look at things from different angles. It names the current situation, re-evaluates it and thereby reduces the stressful activity in the amygdala.¹³⁴ The philosopher Baruch Spinoza recognized this 350 years ago without the aid of brain scans: “An emotion that is a suffering ceases to be a suffering as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it.”¹³⁵

Here is an example to illustrate this. A glance at your current account shows an unexpected deficit. Stress shoots through your body. Then you re-evaluate: “Oh, I didn't realize that the bills for the holiday would come so early. Never mind; in a week's time my salary will have gone in – and the wine on the terrace overlooking the sea will be well worth the overdraft charges.” The amygdala calms down and its human host feels better.

Or take the sudden anger when a favorite vase slips out of your partner's hand and shatters on the tiles. Allow the shock chemicals to run through the body quickly. Then re-evaluate: “Gone is gone; it's only a vase. But maybe I could ask for an even nicer one for my birthday – filled to the brim with chocolates.” It's surprising how quickly you can vanquish the initial negative feeling.

Another way of dealing with negative feelings is to suppress them. Might this be even better than re-evaluation, because it may be faster? Definitely not, says the research. People who regularly suppress their feelings are more likely to be depressed, suffer from lower self-esteem, have worse relationships and be generally more dissatisfied with their lives than people who acknowledge their feelings.¹³⁶

This is because suppressed feelings and thoughts do not go away – in fact they become stronger over time. In one famous experiment, participants were asked not to think of white bears. Of course, they thought about them far more than the people in the control group did.¹³⁷ This helps to explain why people who try not to think about food tend to gain weight more readily than those for whom food is as much

a part of life as meeting friends or reading a good book – that is, they keep food in perspective.¹³⁸

Suppressing your feelings and needs is futile – though it is some meat and drink to psychotherapists! Re-evaluating those feelings, on the other hand, demonstrably leads to more positive emotions, higher self-esteem and greater life satisfaction.

But it is not possible to immediately re-evaluate every negative feeling. If a close relative dies, you lose your job, your house is burgled or if only you mother is in a bad mood when you ring her, recognizing how you feel and accepting that emotion is healthy. However, you should not wallow in this feeling or seek to over-analyze the presumed causes. It is better to say to yourself: “There is sadness/disappointment/anger in me. And that is okay.” This way of dealing with your feelings helps you to accept that bad times are part of life. It also helps to reduce the intensity and destructive power of the distressing sentiments sooner.¹³⁹

In other cases, too, it is important to perceive the negative first. Please take a short test and answer the following two questions.

1. Would you rather have one lovely gift every day for a year, or all 365 gifts in one day?
2. Sprained ankle, tax bill, reprimand at work, broken umbrella... Would you rather experience these events all in one day or spread over several days?

Most people clearly prefer the pleasant gifts distributed throughout the year and the unpleasant events, if they must happen, bundled into a single day. You'll have a really miserable day, but your misery will be time-limited and soon over. This tendency to organize events in such a way as to derive the greatest personal benefit from them is called 'hedonic editing'.¹⁴⁰ You are making an individual adjustment, if you like, designed to maximize your current sense of wellbeing. In short, you do what you can to experience as many good things as possible as often as possible, while allowing the bad things as little space as possible. However, this principle reaches its limits when it comes to serious matters. Try answering this question.

- A close relative dies, your company goes bankrupt, your partner leaves you, you break your shoulder.... Would you rather experience all these events in a single day or spread over several days?

In the face of so many unpleasant events, most people suspect they couldn't cope emotionally if it all happened in a single day, so they opt to distribute them over several days. (My many Russian seminar-participants are an interesting exception: They usually sigh “Судьба” (“Fate”), and resign themselves to packing everything calmly into one day.)

This very human tendency to extend the good and condense the bad is not, in itself, unreasonable. But it can lead you to perceive facts incorrectly. For example, customers can spend up to 100 percent more on a shopping trip when they pay by credit card because it doesn't feel as painful as extracting banknotes from their wallets.¹⁴¹ And the day of reckoning (the credit card statement) is a full six weeks away when the joy of purchasing is active. Hedonic editing can also prove a stumbling block in professional life. For example, employees like to experience every good customer relationship separately (“Things are going great with Peterson, and with the Johnson company, and the logistics guys...”), while they tend to lump the bad ones into a rather general feeling (“Yet another bullshit conversation with a weird customer”). Bundling together many bad customer contacts makes them feel like there is only one bad customer contact – so the danger is that the employee concerned is unlikely to reflect on why these relationships are negative and, therefore, be unable to change their approach accordingly.

So clearly, before re-evaluating, you have to first consciously perceive your immediate feelings – because only then do you really know what is going on.

However, there are also situations in life where you can avoid negative feelings from the very beginning. If we instructed our facial muscles to just ignore the brain's instruction to look sad, would our brain, in turn, give up because its orders aren't being carried out?

This is exactly what happens! For example, if depressed patients receive Botox injections into the lines on their face that form when expressing sadness, irritation and anger, their depressive symptoms are reduced by as much as 50 percent.¹⁴²

What if you don't have Botox to hand? You can achieve much the same effect with rapid bio-feedback from your heart rate. Small devices that notify the wearer when their stress level is rising remind them to take

a deep breath and lower their stress. When someone practices this a bit, they generally feel less stressed after just a few days and get annoyed less often. They have learned not to focus on 'stressors' as *being* stressors, which prevents negative feelings from arising at all.¹⁴³ Can you consciously conjure up positive feelings too? You bet! The magic phrase here is 'emotional contagion'. When people watch videos of laughing babies, they themselves become happier.¹⁴⁴ As the old saying goes: "Smile and the world smiles with you." We can change our mood (influence our brain) by consciously mimicking the mood we want to be in. So, before an aggravating meeting, watch a nice video and keep a smile on your face.

Let's return to our Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön. After naming and re-evaluating a feeling that she had perceived as deep fear the negative and frightening associations evaporated. Unfortunately, there was also collateral damage – she could not recapture the feeling that she now understood as 'bliss'. So mystery and illusion may sometimes be preferable to a barren reality with a name attached. Think, for example, of the beguiling and rather frightening beauty of a mass sung in Latin.

6th golden rule

How amazing – this reappraising!

Not being able to name (understand) something makes us anxious.

Naming and re-appraising, on the other hand, helps us to control negative emotions, and even transform them into positive emotions, which lead to greater wellbeing.

Important: Do not simply ignore negative emotions. Before re-evaluating and making a decision, you need to acknowledge both good and bad feelings.



Brief story to delve more deeply into golden rule number 6

After 55 hours of written examination (11 exams of five hours each), I was awarded the beautiful grade of 10.31 in my second state examination in law. For those of you not familiar with the German system, this is really very good. "With this I can work in any law firm or become a judge," I thought. "All I need to do now is the oral." And what could possibly go wrong in this one short exam – particularly as it was my birthday? Armed with these victorious thoughts I went into the exam. One of the examiners was the head of the entire oral examination board and was not completely convinced by my performance during my allotted hour. He marked me down from my delightful 10.31 to 9.73 and wished me a happy birthday. Outraged, I called my father, who proffered the requisite sympathy. A few hours later, however, he rang

me back. “Earlier”, he said, “I could have skinned your examiner.” I nodded contentedly. “But now I think it has worked out just right.” Horrified, yet curious, I wanted to understand what he meant. “So far everything in life has gone well for you,” my father explained, “so it's time for something to go wrong.” For all my hurt and anger, what he said woke up my brain and made sense to me. As a result, my experience lost its traumatizing elements and shrank to an annoyance that I could use to grow from. What a valuable re-evaluation.

Lessons for you personally

At work

- You have an interview with a potential employer. This job would be perfect for you! Before the conversation, however, you feel that your fear of failure might gain the upper hand, and rather than inspiring you with a powerful adrenaline rush will paralyze you instead. What can you do about it? First of all, give yourself a concrete description of the situation: “I really want this job and I am panic-stricken that I will not get it. This fear will paralyze me!” Then imagine the forthcoming interview as an opportunity to find out whether you are really interested in the new company. In other words, reframe the conversation in your own mind not as an interview designed to test your value, but instead as an exciting exploration. Armed with this mental strategy you can keep your amygdala in check.
- In a negotiation you notice that you are getting angry with the other side (“Who do they think they *are*?”), but you suppress your anger because you think it is inappropriate simply to rage. But beware: Suppressed anger can compromise what you get from the negotiation because it is stopping you from concentrating.¹⁴⁵ What to do? If you are in the stronger position, you can even express your anger openly at the way the negotiations are going.¹⁴⁶ In the sense of “Good heavens, why does no one understand: the market simply does not work like this!” Then the opposite side has the feeling that they have not understood a fundamental point and, as research shows, are willing to give in. But always avoid personal attacks: Your counterpart will only dig their heels in, jeopardizing your success... If you are in a weaker negotiating position, you need some

time and space to regain your grip. Therefore, you should always stipulate before a negotiation that a short break is taken every 20 to 30 minutes. You can hold out until then, and during the break take a more thorough look at your anger, re-evaluate it and return to the negotiation refreshed.

At home

- Your partner is often dissatisfied with him- or herself. They think they eat too much, watch too much television or do too little exercise. Try to get them to name objectively what they are doing at the very moment when they are expressing their dissatisfaction. They might be “lazing around”, for example. Now get them to describe the feeling that results from naming how they feel. For example, they might say: “I worked really hard today, I earned it.” In this case they ought to be able to embrace and enjoy lazing around as something positive. Alternatively, they might say: “Today I have done absolutely nothing of what I wanted to do.” In this case, simply being aware of why they are dissatisfied can help to defuse the destructive power of their feeling; they could even transform that awareness into something constructive – like going for a run, doing an hour's work, tidying their office. If it's difficult to have this kind of conversation with your partner, you could try getting your own message across and hope that in the long run your partner will also open up. For example, you might express your own negative feelings in the following way: “I ate far too much at lunch; I'm really cross with myself.” Then come up with a solution: “Darling, why don't we just have a healthy salad tonight? That will make me feel better!” Incidentally, research shows that re-evaluation in this way affects our counterparts too: They participate in the resulting positive feelings, but not in any remaining negative ones. Therefore, re-evaluation helps to generate positive feelings between the (conversation) partners – whether in work or personal contexts.¹⁴⁷
- Your child is terrified of cats after one scratched her a couple of years ago. How can you help her deal with her fear? On the one hand, you could take her to see a behavioral therapist. Alternatively, you yourself could carefully apply the following research on 'fear extinction'.¹⁴⁸ Participants were subjected to a negative stimulus

(flashing squares combined with an electric shock). The next day, half the participants were subjected to the negative stimulus again, but ten minutes later they received a new stimulus (flashing squares without the shock). The other half of the participants were not subjected again to the previous day's negative stimulus, but only to the flashing squares without the shock. The first group no longer showed a fear reaction, but the second group continued to show high stress reactions. This seems to suggest that we can only write new information on a track in the brain if we have 'scratched' it first. If you are to apply this to your daughter, first introduce a slightly scratchy cat and then immediately afterwards bring in all kinds of lovely ones. This should help to defeat the negative feeling that 'cats are dangerous'.

For yourself

- You tend to get angry with yourself quickly. For example, you hardly ever get lost, but on this occasion you took a wrong turn and as a result will be almost an hour late for a business dinner. You beat yourself up: "Damn, this is the crowning glory of a difficult day. I'm going to hold them up for dinner, which will annoy them. This is so embarrassing!" Now, instead of berating yourself and practicing an 'energetic pessimism', you could instead use the instrument of re-evaluation: promote thoughts that are equally true, but positive. For example: "Well, at least I'll save myself an hour with that difficult Bill Peters. And this really is beautiful countryside: I'll have to come here again with the family.... Oh, what the hell, I'm usually on time, it's really no big deal. I wonder how they will react – and whether *they* managed to figure out the right route right away." Doing this should take the pressure off you, so although you come to the restaurant late, you'll be in a good mood.
- You have written a document and sent it to a few friends to gather comments. Unfortunately, every time you receive an email with comments, your gall rises and you would like to delete it immediately – even while you know that the comments are usually useful and serve to improve the text. (By the way, this is how every author feels about their editor!) Maybe you can help yourself by using the image of the two arrows. The first arrow is the pain each

email causes, because you now have additional work to do. The second arrow is the one in your head that says: “Maybe I can't write after all”, or “Oh dear, why doesn't anyone understand me?” or “Sodding document, I wish I hadn't started it.” If you can deflect this second arrow with its negative thoughts, then even the first arrow slowly loses its pain. Now you are in a position to enjoy the luxury of having someone take the time to help you improve your work.

Five questions for reflection

1. Imagine that today is going to repeat itself every day for the next four months, as in the film 'Groundhog Day'. How might you re-evaluate some annoying situations you've experienced during the day so that you could indeed endure them for another 120 days?
2. What physical signs can you learn to spot in yourself in order to be able to prevent negative feelings or stressful situations early on?
3. Did anything about the story of the Buddhist nun bother, annoy, irritate or stress you?
4. How would you need to change your thinking so that the story didn't have this effect on you?
5. If you're now thinking: “For goodness' sake, aren't we allowed to get annoyed?” how might you reinterpret this reaction more positively?