

The Adaptive Role of Negative Emotions in Optimal Functioning

Authors : Brianne Nichols, John A. Parkinson

Abstract : Positive Psychology has provided a rich understanding of the beneficial effects of positive emotions in relation to optimal functioning, and research has been devoted to promote states of positive feeling and thinking. While this is a worthwhile pursuit, positive emotions are not useful in all contexts - some situations may require the individual to make use of their negative emotions to reach a desired end state. To account for the potential value of a wider range of emotional experiences that are common to the human condition, Positive Psychology needs to expand its horizons and investigate how individuals achieve positive outcomes using varied means. The current research seeks to understand the positive psychology of fear of failure (FF), which is a commonly experienced negative emotion relevant to most life domains. On the one hand, this emotion has been linked with avoidance motivation and self-handicap behaviours, on the other; FF has been shown to act as a drive to move the individual forward. To fully capture the depth of this highly subjective emotional experience and understand the circumstances under which FF may be adaptive, this study adopted a mixed methods design using SenseMaker; a web-based tool that combines the richness of narratives with the objectivity of numerical data. Two hundred participants consisting mostly of undergraduate university students shared a story of a time in the recent past when they feared failure of achieving a valued goal. To avoid researcher bias in the interpretation of narratives, participants self-signified their stories in a tagging system that was based on researchers' aim to explore the role of past failures, the cognitive, emotional and behavioural profile of individuals high and low in FF, and the relationship between these factors. In addition, the role of perceived personal control and self-esteem were investigated in relation to FF using self-report questionnaires. Results from quantitative analyses indicated that individuals with high levels of FF, compared to low, were strongly influenced by past failures and preoccupied with their thoughts and emotions relating to the fear. This group also reported an unwillingness to accept their internal experiences, which in turn was associated with withdrawal from goal pursuit. Furthermore, self-esteem was found to mediate the relationship between perceived control and FF, suggesting that self-esteem, with or without control beliefs, may have the potential to buffer against high FF. It is hoped that the insights provided by the current study will inspire future research to explore the ways in which 'acceptance' may help individuals keep moving towards a goal despite the presence of FF, and whether cultivating a non-contingent self-esteem is the key to resilience in the face of failures.

Keywords : fear of failure, goal-pursuit, negative emotions, optimal functioning, resilience

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