

Study shows the upside of anger

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Here's a maxim from the "duh" department: People typically prefer to feel emotions that are pleasant, like excitement, and avoid those that are unpleasant, like anger.

But a new study appearing in the April issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, says this may not always be the case. Psychologists Maya Tamir and Christopher Mitchell of Boston College, and James Gross of Stanford University tested whether people prefer to experience emotions that are potentially useful, even when they are unpleasant to experience.

The authors wanted to examine whether individuals are motivated to increase their level of anger when they expect to complete a confrontational task, where anger might enhance performance. They told the study participants that they will either play a computer game that is confrontational (Soldier of fortune – a first person shooter game where killing enemies is your primary goal) or one that is not confrontational ("Diner Dash"—a game in which players guide a waitress serving customers). They were then asked to rate the extent to which they would like to engage in different activities before playing the game.

The researchers found that participants preferred activities that were likely to make them angry (e.g., listening to anger-inducing music, recalling past events in which they were angry) when they expected to perform the confrontational task. In contrast, participants preferred more pleasant activities when they expected to perform a non-confrontational task.

With this preference established, the researchers wanted to examine whether these inclinations to increase anger improved performance. They randomly assigned participants to either the angry or excited emotion induction (or a neutral condition) and then had them play the confrontational and a non-confrontational computer games.

As expected, angry participants performed better than others in the confrontational game by successfully killing more enemies. However, angry participants did not perform better than others in the non-confrontational game, which involved serving customers.

So it seems that individuals are not always striving to feel pleasure and may even be willing to endure some nasty emotions if necessary. “Such findings,” write the authors “demonstrate that what people prefer to feel at any given moment may depend, in part, on what they might get out of it.”

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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