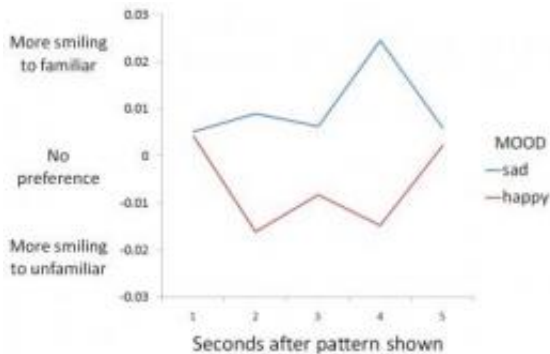


Feeling blue? You'll shun the new

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Subjects smiled more to the familiar in a sad mood and more to the unfamiliar in a happy mood. Credit: Courtesy Piotr Winkielman, UC San Diego.

A sick or sad child might cling to mom's leg. But that same child - fed, rested and generally content - will happily toddle off to explore every nook and cranny of the known world. Or: You're chipper and you decide to check out the new restaurant across town. You're blue and you turn to comfort foods.

If you've seen or experienced these scenarios, you may not be surprised about the latest finding from an international team of social and cognitive psychologists: A [negative mood](#), it turns out, imparts a warm glow to the familiar. Happiness, on the other hand, makes novelty attractive (and can instead give the familiar a "blah" cast). But it is the first time the effect has been experimentally demonstrated in humans.

Led by University of California, San Diego psychology professor Piotr Winkielman, with Marieke de Vries, currently affiliated with the Leiden University Medical Center in the Netherlands, as first author on the paper, the study is published online in the journal [Psychological Science](#).

The findings, Winkielman said, not only contribute to understanding basic human psychology but also have numerous applications: To parenting and other [interpersonal relationships](#) and even in many of the "persuasion professions." In business, in marketing and advertising and in political campaigns, people would be well-advised to take note of the research. When companies introduce novel products, for example, they may want to do so in settings that encourage a happy, playful mood. A surgeon's office, meanwhile, Winkielman said, which people visit rarely and in stressful circumstances, should probably stay away from edgy décor, opting instead for the comfy and familiar.

"The research helps us understand, too," said Winkielman, "why incumbent politicians seeking re-election fuel a negative, apprehensive mood and then offer up such tried-and-true symbols as the flag and apple pie."

It is a classic psychological observation that people prefer familiar stimuli, described 100 years ago by British psychologist Edward Titchener as the "warm glow of familiarity." In a century of research since, many studies have supported the notion and shown that even simple repetition will enhance liking of an object.

The current researchers wondered, however: Is familiarity always pleasant or warm? Perhaps, they reasoned, that varies with an individual's mood.

"We thought the value of familiarity would depend on the context," de Vries said. "Familiarity signals safety, which is pleasant in an unsafe or

stressful context but might actually get boring when all is going fine."

They examined the idea by presenting participants with random dot patterns resembling constellations in the sky and made these familiar through exposure. The researchers put some of the participants in a good mood and others in a bad mood - by asking them to recall joyous or sad events in their lives. They then maintained the mood by playing appropriate music during the remainder of the test. Finally, they measured participants' emotional and memory responses to the dot patterns with ratings and, critically, with physiological measures (skin conductors to assess sweat and facial electrodes to detect incipient frowns and smiles).

As predicted, saddened participants showed the classic preference for the familiar, even smiling at the sight of familiar patterns.

A happy mood, however, eliminated the preference.

"When you're happy," Winkielman said, "known things, familiar things lose their appeal. Novelty, on the other hand, becomes more attractive."

Winkielman noted, too, that the physiological measures of the responses are particularly telling: "These are immediate bodily reactions - not just talk - we're seeing genuine, if mild, emotional response."

The study follows up on Winkielman's earlier, related work on "beauty in averages" and on embodied emotion.

Other coauthors are Troy Chenier and Mark Starr of UC San Diego and Rob Holland of Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands.

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