

Sharing in sorrow might make us happier, study shows

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The researchers found that negative emotions were nearly twice as likely to occur in private compared to positive emotions and were three times more likely to be intentionally hidden from others. Image: Alon Othnay

(PhysOrg.com) -- Scrolling through Facebook or mingling at a party, you might get the impression that other people's lives are full of job promotions, exotic travel and successful relationships. We don't often hear about the sad times they're going through, and that can make our own emotional struggles seem worse.

But recognizing that our peers hit rough patches more often than we realize might mitigate our melancholy, according to a new study by Stanford researchers.

Before their work, "no one had shown that people systematically

underestimate how often others feel sad or upset," said Benoît Monin, an associate professor of organizational behavior and of psychology and a co-author of the study published Dec. 22 in [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#).

This misconception is linked to loneliness and unhappiness, according to the researchers.

"When you think everyone else is having fun, you think your life is not that great," Monin said. "So perceptions – even erroneous ones – matter a great deal."

Part of the problem is that negative emotions – like feeling sad, stressed or lonely – aren't usually displayed in public settings. For most of us, a night out with [friends](#) is better than a night in with the remote, so we tend to be happier when spending time with our pals. But even if people are in a rough spot, say from relationship or financial woes, happy hour is no time to bring up bad news.

The result is that "people look at their friends' smiles in social situations and think they're always happy," said Alex Jordan, the study's first author and a recent psychology doctoral graduate who is now a postdoctoral fellow at Dartmouth College.

To confirm the difficulty of knowing when your friends are feeling down, the researchers surveyed college students about their emotional experiences and how often they put feelings like laughing or crying on public display. They also asked how often emotional feelings were shared with friends. Negative emotions were nearly twice as likely to occur in private compared to positive emotions and were three times more likely to be intentionally hidden from others.

The results suggest that "you can't take a happy face at face value,"

Monin said.

In another study, participants were asked how often they had negative and positive emotional experiences, like arguing with a friend or having fun at a party. They were also asked to estimate how often their peers experienced the same types of emotions.

Most participants underestimated the prevalence of their peers' negative emotional experiences and overestimated the prevalence of the positive ones.

These misperceptions occurred even among close friends. Participants in their first semester of college recorded their emotional experiences in private online diaries for 10 weeks. The participants also had three friends judge and describe how happy or sad they seemed. And time after time, those friends thought the participants were happier than they truly were.

These emotional miscommunications might not seem like such a problem, especially if you favor the "fake it until you make it" philosophy. However, our perception of the happiness of others may influence our own emotional state.

In another study, the researchers looked for a correlation between participants' perceptions of how often their peers experienced certain emotions and the participants' own emotional well-being.

Participants who sensed less sadness in their peers said they were lonelier and spent more time brooding over their own problems. And those who thought their peers had lots of positive experiences reported being less satisfied with their own lives.

"Thinking you're alone in your emotional challenges is, understandably,

not much fun," Jordan said.

The study – which was co-authored by Stanford psychologists Carol Dweck and James Gross, as well as researchers at Elmira College and the University of California-Berkeley – stems from Jordan's dissertation work at Stanford.

He first considered the idea that people might view others' lives as happier than they really are after noticing some of his friends were upset after reading others' posts on Facebook.

"They felt disappointed with their lives when they logged onto Facebook and browsed the apparently 'perfect' lives presented by their peers," Jordan said. "I wondered whether people might harbor a more general illusion that others' lives are cheerier than they actually are."

Based on their conclusions from the study, Jordan and Monin have some suggestions for increasing happiness.

"It may be useful to remember that you aren't as alone as you think," Jordan said. "You're probably not aware of the many challenges your [peers](#) are facing."

"Paradoxically," Monin said, "if we told others how unhappy we are, we would probably all be happier in the long run."

So cry on your friends' shoulders and let them return the favor – chances are they've got some bad news to share, too. And it might do you good to hear about it.

Provided by Stanford University

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