

Confronting meaninglessness

September 12 2011

You've just finished an amazing dinner at your favorite restaurant and you are ready to put on your comfy pajamas and slip into sweet slumber. You arrive at your doorstep and find the front door ajar. Your heart beats wildly in your chest and you peer in, only to discover that your house has been ransacked.

According to author Alexa Tullett, "There's more than one way to interpret this event. You could see it as an indication that there's a bad apple in your neighborhood, and in this case you would only feel comforted if that person was arrested. On the other hand, you could see it as an indication that your neighborhood is less safe than you thought, and in this case there would be many things that could ease your concern: getting better locks, starting a community watch program, or having a greater police presence."

How do you look at this situation? Would you feel relieved if you got safer locks, or would you remain fearful until the robber was taken to jail?

Tullett and her co-authors Rimma Teper, and Michael Inzlicht from the University of Toronto explore the possibility that different threat-reduction approaches can be adaptive in different situations in an article in [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

The authors suggest that the way a threat is construed will determine the types of threat-reduction strategies that will be effective for an

individual.

In the case of the robbery, Tullett says "the general idea is that if you interpret a threat in a very narrow way, as in a dangerous person is out there, there are limited ways that you can resolve the threat. If, on the other hand, you interpret it broadly, there is a broader range of ways that you can resolve the threat."

Imagine another scenario – Your friend has overheard his co-workers at work conversing about how he is a nice guy, but not very attractive. You console him, reminding him of his intelligence and accomplishments and are surprised to find that this doesn't help. This misunderstanding is because you saw this as a threat to your friend's identity as a desirable person, but your friend saw this as a narrower threat to his identity as an attractive person.

According to the authors, social psychologists have collected a large amount of evidence demonstrating the versatility in how we respond to unexpected and unsettling events.

Author Tullett says there is debate on how we respond to unsettling events. Some believe that when people are unsettled by something that happens in one area of life they won't feel better until they experience a boost in that area. Others disagree, and think that the area doesn't matter – feeling better in one area makes people feel better in all areas.

This research helps us understand how both of these can be correct depending on how people interpret certain situations – narrowly or broadly.

More information: "Confronting Threats to Meaning: A New Framework for Understanding Responses to Unsettling Events", *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Confronting meaninglessness (2011, September 12) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-09-meaninglessness.html>

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