

# A 'forest instead of the trees' viewpoint may motivate change after negative feedback

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Negative feedback can sting, but thinking about the big picture may help transform criticism into positive change, according to new research published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

"People are defensive when they are told about something they did wrong," said lead researcher Jennifer Belding, Ph.D., from Ohio State University. "Listening to [negative feedback](#) requires self-control because you have to get past the fact that hearing it hurts and instead use the information to improve over time."

In three experiments, researchers found that people were more likely to accept criticism and make steps toward changing their behavior if they took a broad "forest instead of the trees" view and thought change was possible. The study was published online in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* on April 24, 2015.

In the first experiment, 85 undergraduate students at Ohio State University (47 female, 38 male) were randomly divided into two groups with one group encouraged to think in a broad view, which is known as high-level construal. They were asked to name a category for 20 different objects. For example, these participants would say that a soda is a type of drink. The other group was encouraged to think in a narrow view, or low-level construal, by picking a specific example for each object. These participants might have said that an example of a soda is a Coke.

After reading about the dangers of skin cancer and tanning, participants were asked if they were motivated to reduce their risk by using sunblock and other means. Participants who enjoyed tanning were more motivated to change their behavior if they had been encouraged to think in a broad perspective.

People also need to believe change is possible to motivate them to alter their behavior, according to the findings of a second experiment with 133 [undergraduate students](#) (58 female, 72 male, three unrecorded). One group read a message suggesting that skin cancer could be prevented through applying sunblock and avoiding tanning, while the other group was informed that skin cancer was caused by predefined characteristics, such as genetics and ethnicity. When participants were given the option to read about skin cancer prevention tips, participants with a family history of skin cancer spent more time reading the materials if they had been told that skin cancer was preventable.

Two additional experiments conducted online with more than 600 participants had similar results. People who tanned were more motivated to seek information about skin cancer prevention tips if they had been encouraged to think in a broad view and if they believed [skin cancer](#) could be prevented.

"Thinking about the big picture is going to make people more open to negative feedback when it's something you can and should improve," Belding said.

The research findings have practical implications. When delivering negative feedback to an employee, a supervisor should speak broadly about why these improvements are needed and possible before addressing specific steps, Belding said. Screaming and blaming never helps because it makes employees more defensive and less likely to change their behavior, she added.

In a similar vein, health education campaigns should focus on the large picture and inform people that change is possible to motivate action, Belding said.

**More information:** Belding, J.; Naufel, K.; and Fujita, K. (2015). Using High-Level Construal and Perceptions of Changeability to Promote Self-Change Over Self-Protection Motives in Response to Negative Feedback. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(6).

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

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