

Feeling bad has academic benefits, research says

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Erin Barker: “If you're generally happy, negative emotions can be motivating.”
Credit: Concordia University

For some, the start of December marks the beginning of the most wonderful time of the year. But for most university students, the coming

weeks mean final exams, mounting stress and negative moods.

While that doesn't seem like an ideal combination for great grades, new research from Concordia University in Montreal shows that the occasional bout of bad feelings can actually improve [students' academic success](#).

A study published in *Developmental Psychology* by Erin Barker, professor of psychology in Concordia's Faculty of Arts and Science, shows that students who were mostly happy during their four years of university but who also experienced occasional negative moods had the highest GPAs at the time of graduation.

In contrast, the study also confirmed that students who experienced high levels of negative moods and low levels of positive moods often ended up with the lowest GPAs—a pattern consistent with depressive disorders.

"Students often report feeling overwhelmed and experiencing high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms," says Barker, who is also a member of the Centre for Research in Human Development.

"This study shows that we need to teach them strategies to both manage negative emotions and stress in productive ways, and to maintain positive [emotional experiences](#)."

For the study, Barker and her co-authors worked with 187 first-year students at a large university. The researchers tracked the students throughout their four years of schooling by having them complete questionnaires about recent emotional experiences each year, beginning in the first year and continuing throughout their undergraduate degree.

Negative emotions signal a challenge

"We looked at students' response patterns to better understand how experiences of positive and negative emotions occurred over time. We then combined average patterns to look how each person varied from their own average and examined different combinations of trait and state affects together," Barker explains.

"This allowed us to identify the pattern associated with the greatest academic success: those who were happy for the most part, but who also showed bouts of elevated negative moods."

These findings demonstrate that both negative and positive emotions play a role in our successes.

"We often think that feeling bad is bad for us. But if you're generally a happy person, [negative emotions](#) can be motivating. They can signal to you that there is a challenge that you need to face. Happy people usually have coping resources and support that they draw on to meet that challenge."

In January, Barker and psychology graduate students Sarah Newcomb-Anjo and Kate Mulvihill will expand on this research by launching a new study focused on life beyond graduation. Their plan: examine patterns of emotional experience and well-being as former students navigate new challenges associated with finding work or entering a post-graduation program.

More information: Tracking Affect and Academic Success across University: Happy Students Benefit from Bouts of Negative Mood, spectrum.library.concordia.ca/981585/

Provided by Concordia University

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