

# Why bad moods are good for you—the surprising benefits of sadness

May 15 2017, by Joseph Paul Forgas

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Homo sapiens is a very moody species. Even though sadness and bad moods have always been part of the human experience, we now live in an age that ignores or devalues these feelings.

In our culture, normal human emotions like temporary sadness are often

treated as [disorders](#). Manipulative advertising, marketing and self-help industries claim happiness should be [ours for the asking](#). Yet bad moods remain an essential part of the normal range of moods we regularly experience.

Despite the near-universal [cult of happiness](#) and unprecedented material wealth, happiness and life satisfaction in Western societies has [not improved for decades](#).

It's time to re-assess the role of bad moods in our lives. We should recognise they are a normal, and even a useful and adaptive part of being human, helping us cope with many everyday situations and challenges.

## **A short history of sadness**

In earlier historical times, short spells of feeling sad or moody (known as mild dysphoria) have always been accepted as a normal part of [everyday life](#). In fact, many of the greatest achievements of the human spirit deal with evoking, rehearsing and even cultivating negative feelings.

[Greek tragedies](#) exposed and trained audiences to accept and deal with inevitable misfortune as a normal part of human life. Shakespeare's tragedies are classics because they echo this theme. And the works of many great artists such as Beethoven and Chopin in music, or Chekhov and Ibsen in literature explore the landscape of sadness, a theme long recognised as instructive and valuable.

Ancient philosophers have also believed accepting bad moods is essential to living a full life. Even hedonist philosophers like [Epicurus](#) recognised living well involves exercising wise judgement, restraint, self-control and accepting inevitable adversity.

Other philosophers like the [stoics](#) also highlighted the importance of

learning to anticipate and accept misfortunes, such as loss, sorrow or injustice.

## What is the point of sadness?

Psychologists who study how our feelings and behaviours have evolved over time maintain all our affective states (such as moods and emotions) have a useful role: they alert us to states of the world we need to [respond to](#).

In fact, the range of human emotions includes many more negative than positive feelings. Negative emotions such as fear, anger, shame or disgust are helpful because they help us recognise, avoid and overcome threatening or dangerous situations.

But what is the point of sadness, perhaps the most common negative emotion, and one most practising psychologists deal with?

Intense and enduring sadness, such as [depression](#), is obviously a serious and debilitating disorder. However, mild, temporary bad moods may serve an important and useful [adaptive purpose](#), by helping us to cope with everyday challenges and difficult situations. They also act as a social signal that communicates disengagement, withdrawal from competition and provides a protective cover. When we appear sad or in a [bad mood](#), people often are concerned and are inclined to [help](#).

Some negative moods, such as [melancholia](#) and [nostalgia](#) (a longing for the past) may even be pleasant and seem to provide useful information to guide future plans and motivation.

Sadness can also enhance empathy, compassion, connectedness and moral and aesthetic sensibility. And sadness has long been a trigger for [artistic creativity](#).

Recent scientific experiments document the [benefits](#) of mild bad moods, which often work as automatic, unconscious alarm signals, promoting a more attentive and detailed thinking style. In other words, bad moods help us to be more attentive and focused in difficult situations.

In contrast, positive mood (like feeling happy) typically serves as a signal indicating familiar and safe situations and results in a less detailed and attentive processing style.

## Psychological benefits of sadness

There is now growing evidence that negative moods, like sadness, has psychological benefits.

To demonstrate this, researchers first manipulate people's mood (by showing happy or sad films, for example), then measure changes in performance in various cognitive and behavioural tasks.

Feeling sad or in a bad mood produces a number of benefits:

- **better memory** In one study, a bad mood (caused by [bad weather](#)) resulted in people [better remembering](#) the details of a shop they just left. Bad mood can also improve [eyewitness memories](#) by reducing the effects of various distractions, like irrelevant, false or misleading information.
- **more accurate judgements** A mild bad mood also reduces some biases and distortions in how people form impressions. For instance, slightly sad judges formed more accurate and reliable impressions about others because they processed details [more effectively](#). We found that bad moods also reduced [gullibility](#) and increased scepticism when evaluating urban myths and rumours, and even improved people's ability to more accurately [detect deception](#). People in a mild bad mood are also less likely to rely

on simplistic [stereotypes](#).

- **motivation** Other experiments found that when happy and sad participants were asked to perform a difficult mental task, those in a bad mood tried harder and [persevered more](#). They spent more time on the task, attempted more questions and produced more correct answers.
- **better communication** The more attentive and detailed thinking style promoted by a bad mood can also improve communication. We found people in a sad mood used more effective [persuasive arguments](#) to convince others, were better at understanding ambiguous sentences and better communicated when [talking](#).
- **increased fairness** Other experiments found that a mild bad mood caused people to pay greater attention to social expectations and norms, and they treated others less selfishly and more [fairly](#).

## Counteracting the cult of happiness

By extolling happiness and denying the virtues of [sadness](#), we set an unachievable goal for ourselves. We may also be causing more disappointment, some say even [depression](#).

It is also increasingly recognised that being in a good mood, despite some advantages, is [not universally desirable](#).

Feeling sad or in a bad [mood](#) helps us to better focus on the situation we find ourselves in, and so increases our ability to monitor and successfully respond to more demanding situations.

These findings suggest the unrelenting pursuit of happiness may often be self-defeating. A more balanced assessment of the costs and benefits of good and bad moods is long overdue.

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