

Pairing Problems with Solutions Decreases Negativity and Fuels Creative Problem-Solving and Performance

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BACKGROUND

It's a common complaint: The news is too negative—and research is now showing the news media's focus on “all that's broken” in the world is having debilitating effects on our happiness and collective forward progress.

In the first in a series of studies in partnership with Arianna Huffington, our research team found that just three minutes of negative news in the morning can lead to a 27% higher likelihood of reporting your day as unhappy 6-8 hours later (*Harvard Business Review*, 2015.) That means that the negative mood and mindset we adopt in the morning can stick with us through our workdays and time with our family.

If the goal is to educate and empower people, thereby sparking positive change, our theory is that merely focusing on the problems *is the problem*. Having a skewed vision of the world ultimately decreases potential. Being exposed to a barrage of negative stories facing our world with little discussion of solutions can leave people feeling helpless as they lose hope that their behavior matters in the face of challenges.

This study aimed to test the impact on the brain of pairing a discussion of solutions with the problem, versus merely presenting the problem. Using real-world stories one might find on the front page of any newspaper, we tested the effect on mood and creative problem-solving of pairing a discussion of potential or actual solutions with that of the problem.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

The results were remarkable. In short, we found that those exposed to solutions reported feeling significantly less negative, including 25% less hostile, 23% less uptight and 19% less agitated than those exposed only to the problems. Additionally, those exposed to solutions to a problem that they could participate in themselves, showed a 20% increase in creative problem-solving compared to those exposed to solutions that were not personally actionable. Pairing a discussion of solutions with problems engenders a positive state of mind with greater potential to create positive change.

METHOD

Participants (N=248) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they were either asked to read an article merely focused on a problem, or an article that discussed both the problem and solutions. Furthermore, in order to examine the effects of solution type, some participants read an article which provided a solution that others had implemented (non-personal) while others read an article which provided more specific, personally actionable solutions to a problem (personal).

Participants were tested both before and after reading the article on their mood and creative problem-solving. For mood, we used

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an abbreviated PANAS (Clark & Tellegen, 1988) scale in which participants rated the extent to which they were experiencing 11 different positive and negative moods. Creative problem-solving was tested using Guilford's (1967) divergent and convergent creativity tests. As examples, one question asked them to list as many possible uses for an object such as ribbon in two minutes and another asked them to list as many commonalities between two objects such as a tractor and a train.

The following articles were used for the study:

Article 1A (problem-focused): "14 Dead in Shooting At Social Services Center in San Bernardino" is the story of a man and woman dressed in tactical gear who used assault rifles to gun down more than a dozen people and injure 17 others at a work holiday party.

Article 1B (solution-focused, non-personal): "How One Major U.S. City Has Prevented Recent Mass Shootings" discusses the serious issue of mass shootings and then explains how the Austin, TX police department has avoided shootings in their city. It gives a step-by-step breakdown of the strategies employed by police there to keep residents safe.

Article 2A (problem-focused): "Hunger on the rise in major US cities, study finds" shared details of a new report which found that many of America's largest cities continue to grapple with rising food insecurity and homelessness. In short, homeless shelters and food pantries across 22 US cities are struggling to keep up with rising demand for their services.

Article 2B (solution-focused, personal): "Striking Back Against Rising Hunger" shared the same findings from the

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previous article but went on to present five potential solutions to food bank shortages that readers could take in their own communities, including donating food and fundraising.

As mentioned earlier, after being exposed to one of these four articles, participants were again tested for mood and creative problem-solving.

RESULTS

As compared to the “problem-focused” group, the “solution-focused” group reported feeling on average 25% less hostile, 23% less uptight, 19% less agitated, and 16% less irritable.

When a person was presented with solutions *they could actually implement themselves*, problem-solving on a subsequent unrelated task increased by 20%. As compared to the group exposed to a city’s solution to mass shootings, the group that read the article suggesting ways they themselves could alleviate hunger experienced a significant improvement in creative problem-solving.

DISCUSSION

Participants who were presented with personal solutions carried that positive effect to the new domain—it had a significant impact on participants’ creativity and problem-solving ability. Reminding the brain that there is a path forward allows us to import that empowered mindset to other challenges. Additionally, being solution-focused (whether personal or non-personal) made people feel better.

APPLICATION

At the Institute for Applied Positive Research, we believe that research is only as powerful as its application. This study provides us with a road map that has big implications for business professionals and the media. Below are recommendations on ways to apply this research to fuel performance and collective forward progress.

FOR BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS

For a manager leading employees through hard times, this study shows that it is possible to talk about the negatives (such as scarcity of resources) and yet maintain engagement and the ability to solve problems. As published in *Harvard Business Review* (2016), the following are recommendations for managers leading their teams through tough times:

Don't "Ostrichize" Your Team: Many leaders have ostrichized themselves: sticking their heads in the sand in an attempt to preserve happiness, hoping that the negativity in the world will never touch their lives. But this research shows that you can face problems head-on, as seeing solutions increases the belief that your behavior matters—and improves mood to boot. So instead of hiding from the fact that your team has low engagement scores, or ignoring that one of your sales leaders is undermining the sales process of others in that region, pointing out the problem can be the first step in solving the problem.

Pair Up: Often when leaders are faced with a problem, they plan how they are going to present it to their team. Equally important is spending time planning the discussion of the solution. If the solution is not already clear, involve your team in a

brainstorming session. You can turn this business challenge into a team building exercise, which could benefit the organization at the same time by highlighting the right path forward. The more you communicate to your employees that their behavior matters and that they have control in solving this issue, the more they will feel empowered to take action. There is a great example of this from a technology lead from [Hewlett-Packard in the wake of restructuring](#). She had her team brainstorm ways they could stay engaged in the midst of uncertainty. They came up with 5/55, which meant devoting five minutes to venting any worries followed by 55 minutes of uninterrupted intense concentration on a project. That team-generated solution gave the group a new common language and increased focus on their work.

Showcase Their Track Record: A feeling of progress begets more progress. Remind your team of how successful they have been in the past when faced with challenges. Show them how far they've come as a team by pointing to specific accomplishments. For example, [at Adobe there is a wall](#) outside of the cafeteria made of bricks on which are written the various patents and inventions they've created to overcome previous challenges. Getting them to move their attention away from all that's going wrong to all that has gone right in the past will help them feel ready to take meaningful steps forward.

FOR NEWS MEDIA

If the aim is to inform people and empower them to create positive change in the world, journalists will only achieve that by more often incorporating a discussion of potential or actual solutions into news coverage. For more on the psychological impact solution-focused reporting can have on individuals and organizations, you're encouraged to download the [Journalist](#)

[Manifesto](#) by former national CBS News anchor Michelle Gielan, which provides a research-based case for shifting news coverage away from an obsessive focus on the negative.

Specifically related to this study, journalists can take the following approach to covering the news in a way that better serves society:

Just because it made the wires doesn't make it news: A negative event such as a deadly car crash or three-alarm fire is not automatically news, especially if it was a one-off tragedy about which little can be done. Reporting on a barrage of these sensational stories without a focus on solutions does viewers/readers a disservice.

Report the problem *and* the solution: A story about a serious issue is often not complete without discussing potential or actual solutions. As a journalist, part of the responsibility of the job is to source out solutions from experts or the public. Fostering discussion through social media or article comments can engage the public in the search for the right answer.

Showcase inspiring stories: People who have been able to thrive after major challenges such as cancer, job loss or foreclosure become role models for the rest of us, and their stories can inspire others to create positive change in their own lives. Showcasing inspirational stories of people or organizations that have employed concrete, accessible solutions and found success provide a road map for viewers/readers and fuel hope for all.

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