

"Good Things Happen"

MINDSHIFT

Changing How Educators See Negative Experiences in the Classroom



Humans have a negativity bias that makes it hard to notice when things are going well. With some practice, educators can learn to intentionally see the good along with the bad in their classrooms. (iStock)

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By Patricia A. Jennings

Overcoming the Negativity Bias

An easy first step is to recognize and mindfully attend to positive emotional experiences in your classroom and at home. Evolution selected for a *negative attribution bias* that makes us tend to dwell on the negative and ignore the positive. During a typical day, 10 great things may have happened and one horrible thing. When we get home and our partner asks us how our day went, typically we focus on the one horrible thing, forgetting about the 10 great things.

From a Stone Age perspective the negativity bias was important for our survival: The ancient human walking down a path who saw something that looked like a snake would be more likely to survive if he jumped back quickly, assuming the worst. If another kept walking, curious as to whether or not it actually was a snake, he might get bitten and die, taking himself out of the gene pool. Because natural selection favored hypervigilance, we need to make a concerted effort to notice and focus on the positive—and even savor it.

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For example, a fourth-grade teacher I'll call Jane had been teaching for nine years and was on the verge of dropping out of the profession from exhaustion. She told me, "I just don't think I can keep this up another year. I love the kids, but it seems like a thousand things a day drag me down and it doesn't seem worth it." She asked me if I had any suggestions and I offered to observe her class for a day to see what was happening to elicit this discouragement. When I

arrived in her classroom, I was impressed by its organization and the aesthetic appeal.

As the day began, a string of cheerful students bounced through the door, excited to start their day. Their happiness was palpable, and it made me wonder if I was in the right classroom! Soon I saw her approach the door to greet her students with a smile and offers of hugs, handshakes and fist bumps. Once the class was underway, I noticed two students who seemed to consume all of Jane's attention. The two boys were constantly bickering with each other or other students, dominating Jane's time and attention. Before anything had even happened that morning, I could see tension arise in Jane as she braced herself to deal with the two of them. She was hypervigilant, constantly glancing at them warily throughout the morning, ready to pounce if they got out of line. While it was obviously incredibly stressful to constantly monitor these two, the other students were deeply engaged in learning and I observed several moments of joy and enthusiasm shared by Jane and her other students.



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After class was over, we sat down to discuss my observations. The first thing she said was, “Oh no, what a horrible day. I am so exhausted. Sorry you had to watch that.” I was flabbergasted because I didn’t really think it was that bad at all. “Jane, I was actually about to tell you what a wonderful class you have.” She was shocked. “Really? What do you mean? Carl and Joey were constantly bickering and bothering the other students. It was really getting on my nerves.” I told her that I thought their behavior was pretty normal for that age and that I noticed so many wonderful learning moments that their disruptions seemed minor. I also explained the negative attribution bias.

She was astonished to learn that she had focused so much on the few challenging students that she had missed out on celebrating the many joyful learning moments that had occurred. I offered a practice to help her change this habit. “Each day, after your class is over, write down all the good things that happened that day. You can even include your students in this

process by putting up a paper on the wall and inviting everyone to write good things that happen each day. At the end of the day, look at the list with the class and review them.”

THE TRAUMA-SENSITIVE CLASSROOM



BUILDING RESILIENCE WITH
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She took to this suggestion with relish and created a whole bulletin board devoted to this activity. At the top she put “GOOD THINGS HAPPEN” in large, colorful letters. Students were invited to write and draw about good things that happened on small pieces of paper that were posted each day. To her surprise, the first day there were 15 good things posted and more than half of them had been written by the students. Furthermore, Carl and Joey got excited about this activity and wanted to be part of making good things happen. Jane realized that this was an opportunity for encouraging their pro-social behavior. She began catching them when they were doing the right thing, rather than being constantly alert to their tendencies

to get in trouble. Reinforcing their positive behavior with recognition made a big difference, and soon they were as engaged as the rest of her students.

Several months later I checked in with Jane to see how things were going. Beaming, she laughed, “I love my job! We’re having so much fun. I can’t believe how things turned around.” She also told me how her relationships with Carl and Joey had improved. “I actually really like them now. I see that they were just more immature than the others and needed direction and positive attention.” Jane had recognized their needs and was able to show compassion to them, rather than reinforcing their negative behaviors.

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