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HEALTH

WHAT IS THE OPTIMISIM BIAS? STUDY REVEALS BEST TIME TO BREAK BAD NEWS

BY KASHMIRA GANDER ON 8/6/18 AT 1:00 PM

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There's no perfect time to break bad news—but dropping hard-to-handle information while a person is already stressed can have a big difference, according to research.

What is known as the optimism bias forms the basis of research published in *The Journal of Neuroscience*. In general, we are optimistic about life events such as marriage or avoiding car accidents. We hope our marriages will last and we'll cross the road pain-free. But what happens when we are already stressed? This is the question the authors sought to answer.

Dr. Neil Garrett, who is co-authored the study at University College London before joining the Neuroscience Institute at Princeton University, told *Newsweek* people are generally optimistic in calm conditions.

"This means that they ignore bad news telling them that the future is worse than they expected but embrace good news telling them that the future is going to better."

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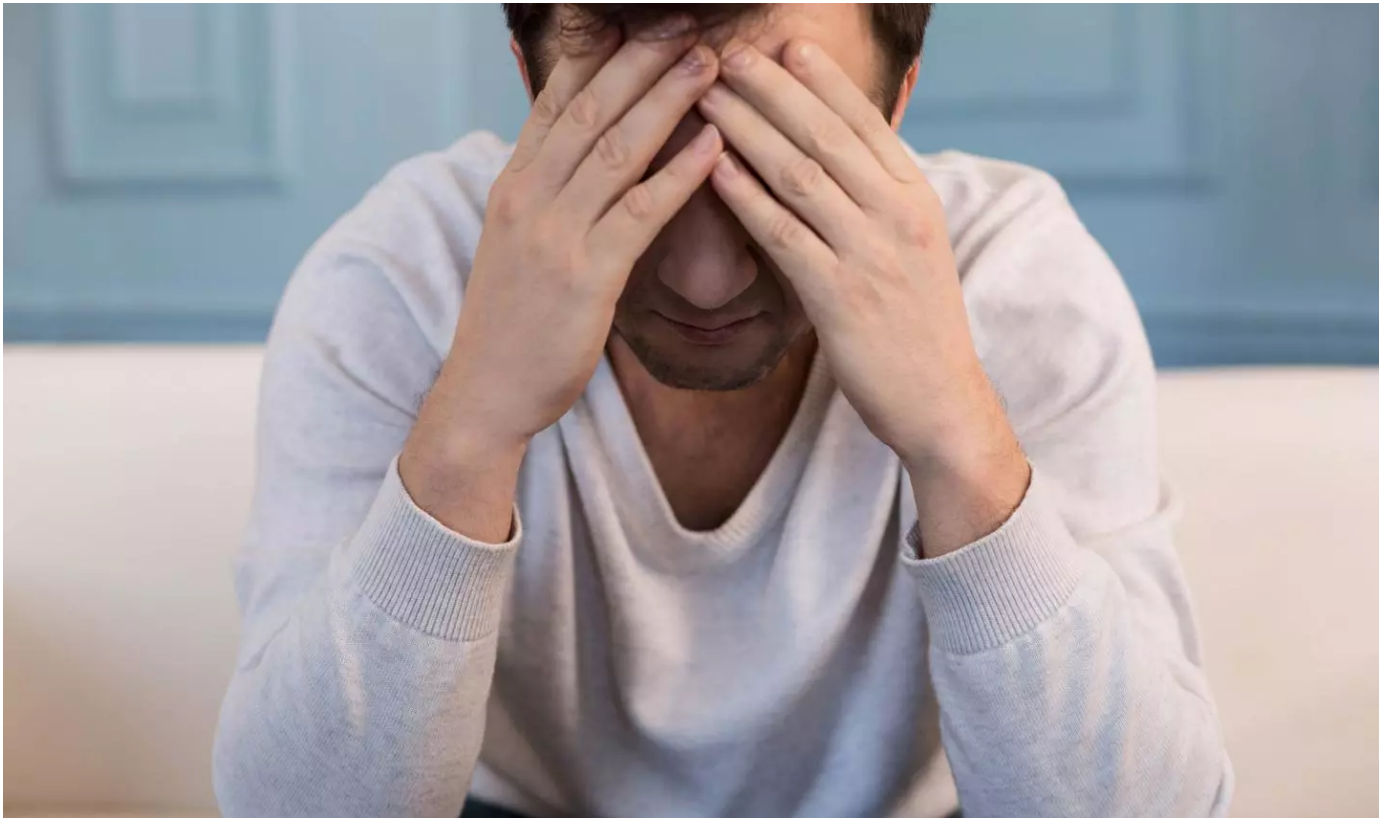


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He explained the study shows "when individuals are under stress this optimism goes away because people become much more vigilant to bad news. It suggests that this optimistic mode of processing information we've seen lots of times before is like a switch that increases or decreases in response to changes in the environment."



People process bad news better under stress according to the authors of a study.

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The paper builds on existing studies that suggest individuals are more likely to accept information if it positive. This unconscious psychological practice can be useful. It can help to motivate us, for instance. But it's a double-edged sword, and can lead us to underestimate risks.

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To test their hypothesis, the psychologists recruited 35 participants. All the participants were asked to estimate the likelihood of certain life events, such as being the victim of credit card fraud. To spike the stress levels of one half of the group, researchers warned them they would have to give a speech on a surprise subject to a panel of judges after finishing the task. The others were asked to complete a simple writing test prior to the task. The team hooked participants up to a special machine to test their stress levels, and asked them how anxious they felt. Afterward, the respondents were informed how their estimate compared to the accurate risk level.

The more stressed the participants felt, the more likely they were to incorporate bad news into their existing belief system while their attitude towards good news remained the same, the resulting data suggested. The team found the opposite effect with relaxed individuals in regards to the bad news.

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These findings were repeated in firefighters, who were asked to fill out the risk-rating task online before between calls at the station.

"Identifying that our environment plays a key role in how optimistic we are suggests that by altering one's environment we might be able to enhance optimism in individuals where it is persistently absent," said Garrett. That could include those suffering from depression.

"In addition, some of the biggest decisions we make—such as buying a house, choosing a job or a medical treatment—are very stressful. Being aware that because of this we are more sensitive to negative information can help us think about how we best ought to communicate information to help people come to a decision."

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