

Negative personal experiences add meaning to life

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University of Minnesota Professor Kathleen Vohs.
Credit: University of Minnesota

While many people say they appreciate positive experiences more than negative ones, there is a hidden benefit of negative experiences. While someone involved in a negative situation might not enjoy it, a recent study from the University of Minnesota and Stanford University indicates that a negative experience can provide meaning for the individual.

University of Minnesota Professor Kathleen Vohs and fellow researchers found that happiness and meaningfulness are often described as forms of positivity. However, the researchers concluded conceptualizing meaningfulness as inherently positive obscures the ways in which [negative experiences](#) can provide meaning in people's lives. The research was recently published in *Current Opinion in Psychology*.

"It's almost a truism that people desire positive experiences and avoid negative ones," said Vohs, a professor of marketing at the Carlson School of Management. "Yet trying to live in a world without challenge, troubles or difficulties is both not

realistic and could actually make for a less meaningful life."

To determine if negative experiences did provide meaning in people's lives, the researchers studied interviews with parents whose [young children](#) had died recently.

Researchers found few of these parents used language expressing happiness, but nearly all of them used language seeking understanding of the event. The researchers also studied interviews of less [traumatic events](#)—like fights with a spouse, job loss or illness—to determine how they can similarly cause a search for meaning.

These findings support Vohs's previous research that found:

- happiness was about feeling good, avoiding feeling bad and having one's needs met;
- meaning, however, was derived from behaviors and feelings reflecting concern for others and outcomes;
- happiness is about the present moment and avoiding reflection, while meaning requires conscious reflection.

When a negative experience occurs, it can force an individual to reflect on why it might have happened, effectively fueling the processes that provide meaning in life.

"Our research showed that while people don't necessarily like or appreciate [negative events](#), it is exactly those events that stimulate the mental processes that produce meaningfulness," Vohs said. "That is, negative events seem to provide an opportunity to draw [meaning](#) from them, and recognizing that offers a new perspective on the value of negativity in everyday life."

More information: Kathleen D Vohs et al. It's not going to be that fun: negative experiences can add

meaning to life, *Current Opinion in Psychology*
(2018). DOI: [10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.04.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.04.014)

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