

September 4, 2012

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The Fly-on-the-Wall Effect: Understanding How We Learn from Bad Experiences

Posted: 06/30/11 09:39 AM ET

When I was a kid and had to deal with life's early disappointments, my parents would always call it a "learning experience." If I failed to win a coveted academic award or athletic trophy, or if I was rejected by a former best friend, they would assure me that, as bad as I felt at the moment, the pain would help me build character over the long haul. It was a good thing.

It didn't feel like a good thing, but I trusted that they knew what they were talking about. And they weren't alone. Indeed, common wisdom holds that when bad things happen to us, we should try to examine our negative feelings in order to defuse them. This applies not only to kids but to adults, as well, as any stroll through the bookstore's self-help section will illustrate.

But is it true? The scientific evidence on such self-reflection is actually quite mixed. On the one hand, many studies do show that reflecting on why we're distressed can have benefits, in both physical and mental health. Coming up with explanations for bad experiences appears to bring closure, and with it, relief. But on the other hand, these attempts at self-understanding can often backfire, leading to endless rumination on negative thoughts and feelings.

This paradox intrigued psychological scientists Ozlem Ayduk, of the University of California, Berkeley, and Ethan Kross of the University of Michigan, who wondered why only some people succeed at learning from their bad experiences, while others fail. The scientists [suspected](#) that there is not a single way to examine one's disappointments, and that some of us may have a more adaptive style of self-reflection than others. Specifically, they suspected that people who can be distanced observers of their own experiences -- like a fly on the wall -- end up reconsidering their experiences in ways that are less distressing compared with those who relive the bad experiences in all their unpleasant detail.

Call it the fly-on-the-wall effect, which Ayduk and Kross have been [examining](#) for the past few years in the laboratory. In one series of experiments, for example, they asked volunteers to recall an intensely unpleasant experience -- one that made them either very sad or very angry. Then they gave different volunteers different instructions. Some were told to visualize the experience through their own eyes, to immerse themselves in the sadness or anger and try to understand the feelings. Others were instructed to take the perspective of a fly on the wall, and with that perspective understand the feelings of that "distant self."

Those who re-immersed themselves in the bad experience had, well, another bad experience. In the [words](#) of one such volunteer, "Adrenaline infused. Pissed off. Betrayed. Angry. Victimized. Hurt. Shamed. Stepped-on. Shitted on. Humiliated. Abandoned. Unappreciated. Pushed. Boundaries trampled upon..."

Whew, that can't be fun. Or helpful. By contrast, those who deliberately distanced themselves from their pain were much less likely to relive the experience with such intensity. They were much more likely to reconsider it in a coolly analytic way that brought insight and closure. In short, they were looking for and finding meaning in the painful experience. As a result, they also reported much less distress than those who stayed close to their pain.

It appears that some people do this kind of self-distancing on their own, while others do not. In a different set of studies, the scientists [asked](#) volunteers to reflect on a negative experience, but they didn't instruct them how to go about it. Instead they asked them afterward about their reflections. Those who showed a self-distancing style as a personality trait experienced less distress, both immediately and weeks later. And as [reported in the latest issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Science*](#), they were also less hostile and, perhaps as a result, showed less of the cardiac reactivity that's harmful to health (persistent high blood pressure, for example). People who ruminate often show this worrisome kind of cardiac distress.

Rumination is often a symptom of depression, and the scientists wondered if those suffering from mood disorders might benefit from fly-on-the-wall perspective-taking. In one [study](#), they found that it was the most severely depressed people who gained the most from self-distancing reflection on life events. This preliminary finding suggests that deliberately adopting the fly-on-the-wall point of view might lead to a healthier kind of reflection for the clinically depressed. Another study found similar therapeutic benefits for people suffering from bipolar disorder, who have trouble keeping their positive emotions in check when thinking about the good things happening in their lives. A dose of self-distancing helped bipolar patients think about successes without abnormal emotional or physiological reaction.

So it appears that the fly-on-the-wall perspective can dampen reactions to both positive and negative experiences, which may have a hidden and counterintuitive lesson for all of us: It's important to keep misfortunes in perspective and learn from them. But on the same token, if you want to savor life's positive experiences, forget the fly on the wall and immerse yourself in your reflections, visualizing every detail and feeling every emotion as fully as possible.

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