Why Russians Don’t Get Depressed

By Jonah Lehrer  August 12, 2010  2:50 pm  Categories: Frontal Cortex

The saddest short story I’ve ever read is “The Overcoat,” by Gogol. (It starts out bleak and only gets bleaker.) The second saddest story is “Grief,” by Chekhov. (Nabokov famously said that Chekhov wrote “sad books for humorous people; that is, only a reader with a sense of humor can really appreciate their sadness.”) And then, if I had to make a list of really depressing fiction, I’d probably put everything written by Dostoyevsky. Those narratives never end well.

Notice a theme? Russians write some seriously sad stuff. This has led to the cultural cliche of Russians as a brooding people, immersed in gloomy moods and existential despair. In a new paper in Psychological Science, Igor Grossmann and Ethan Kross of the University of Michigan summarize this stereotype:

One needs look no further than the local Russian newspaper or library to find evidence supporting this belief [that Russians are sad] – brooding and emotional suffering are common themes in Russian discourse. These observations, coupled with ethnographic evidence indicating that Russians focus more on unpleasant memories and feelings than Westerners do, have led some researchers to go so far as to describe Russia as a “clinically masochistic” culture.

This cliche raises two questions. Firstly, is it true? And if it is true, then what are the psychological implications of thinking so many sad thoughts?

The first experiment was straightforward. The psychologists gave subjects in Moscow and Michigan a series of vignettes that described a protagonist who either does or does not analyze her feelings when she is upset. After reading the short stories, the students were then asked to choose the protagonist that most closely resembled their own coping tendencies. The results were clear: While the American undergraduates were evenly divided between people who engaged in self-analysis (the brooders) and those who didn’t, the Russian students were overwhelmingly self-analytical. (Eighty-three Russians read the vignettes; sixty-eight of them identified with the brooders.) In other words, the cliche is true: Russians are ruminators. They are obsessed with their problems.

At first glance, this data would seem like really bad news for Russian mental health. It’s long been recognized, for instance, that the tendency to ruminate on one’s problems is closely correlated with depression. (The verb is derived from the Latin word for “chewed over,” which describes the process of
digestion in cattle, in which they swallow, regurgitate and then rechew their food.) The mental version of rumination has a darker side, as it leads people to fixate on their flaws and mistakes, preoccupied with their problems. What separates depression from ordinary sadness is the intensity of these ruminations, and the tendency of depressed subjects to get stuck in a recursive loop of negativity.

According to Grossman and Kross, however, not all brooders and ruminators are created equal. While American brooders showed extremely high levels of depressive symptomatology (as measured by the Beck Depression Inventory, or BDI), Russian brooders were actually less likely to be depressed than non-brooders. This suggests that brooding, or ruminative self-reflection, has extremely different psychiatric outcomes depending on the culture. While rumination makes Americans depressed, it actually seems to provide an emotional buffer for Russians.

What explains these cultural differences? Grossman and Kross then asked students in Moscow and Michigan to “recall and analyze their “deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding a recent anger-related interpersonal experience”. Then, the subjects were quizzed about the details of their self-analysis. They were asked to rate, on a seven point scale, the extent to which they adopted a self-immersed perspective (a 1 rating meant that they “saw the event replay through your own eyes as if you were right there”) versus a self-distanced perspective (a 7 rating meant that they “watched the event unfold as an observer, in which you could see yourself from afar”). Finally, the subjects were asked about how the exercise made them feel. Did they get angry again when they recalled the “anger-related” experience? Did the memory trigger intense emotions?

Here’s where the cultural differences became clear.* When Russians engaged in brooding self-analysis, they were much more likely to engage in self-distancing, or looking at the past experience from the detached perspective of someone else. Instead of reliving their confused and visceral feelings, they reinterpreted the negative memory, which helped them make sense of it. According to the researchers, this led to significantly less “emotional distress” among the Russian subjects. (It also made them less likely to blame another person for the event.) Furthermore, the habit of self-distancing seemed to explain the striking differences in depressive symptoms between Russian and Americans. Brooding wasn’t the problem. Instead, it was brooding without self-distance. Here’s Grossman and Kross:

Our results highlighted a psychological mechanism that explains these cultural differences: Russians self-distance more when analyzing their feelings than Americans do. These findings add to a growing body of research demonstrating that it is possible for people to reflect either adaptively or maladaptively over negative experiences. In addition, they extend previous findings cross-culturally by highlighting the role that self-distancing plays in determining which type of self-reflection—the adaptive or maladaptive one—different cultures engage in.

The lesson is clear: If you’re going to brood, then brood like a Russian. Just remember to go easy on the vodka.

*I think cross-cultural studies like this are an important reminder than American undergrads are W.E.I.R.D.

PS. Thanks to Jad for the tip! And if you’re interested in a controversial new take on depression and rumination, you might be interested in this article.
Comments (10)

Posted by: mwilk | 08/12/10 | 3:23 pm |

I’m not sure “brooding like a Russian” is the healthiest option. This country has some of the highest alcoholism rates in the world. One traditional Russian response to is apparently to drown one’s sorrows in a bottle of cheap vodka. Indeed, excessive alcohol consumption is a major reason life expectancy in Russia has remained flat or even declined in recent years. Us Americans may be fat and stoned on prescription meds, including antidepressants, but at least our life expectancy is still going up.

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Posted by: ericlr | 08/12/10 | 3:44 pm |

Russians aren’t depressed by gloominess because they’re fatalistic. Fatalism is hardly a positive quality. It’s better than hardcore depression, but it can be just as stagnating as depression. Neither fatalism (“You can’t change things, so why worry about it”) nor depression (“Oh things are so awful, I’m going to just lie in bed”) is positive or useful compared to the go-getter attitude that says “I can change things, and here’s where I’m going to start!”

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Posted by: AntonioMalcolm | 08/12/10 | 4:00 pm |

I’ll start by saying that the last two commenters are missing the point of the article, which is to be more objective in self-analyzing, by stepping outside the situation or the self, to prevent it from becoming self-loathing, or to prevent it from becoming simply a session of beating one’s self up.

I’ll finish, however, by saying it’s a rather crummy practice for wired to offer nothing but marketing nonsense as accompanying images when trying to share on article on Facebook. After all, if friends follow the article here, they can plainly notice the option to subscribe, or purchase the author’s books. It’s incredibly tacky to tack the adverts onto shared article updates.

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Posted by: melizza | 08/12/10 | 8:34 pm |

Can’t “self-distancing” also be harmful? I think I’m connecting it to dissociative disorders, because that is what it sounds like. For some it can be quite problematic if they find themselves dissociating frequently. But maybe it’s good in small doses. Like vodka.

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Posted by: salientalias | 08/12/10 | 9:18 pm |

@antonio: I think that thumbnails of adverts is a flaw with Facebook, not Wired. Facebook finds all the images on a given webpage and gives the user the option of which one to use, or whether to include a thumbnail at all. Since this article does not have an accompanying image that goes with the article, all facebook can find is advertisements.

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Posted by: AntonioMalcolm | 08/13/10 | 12:58 am |
Actually, taking a deeper look, I think you may be right (in which case, for the first time ever, I feel like I owe Wired an apology).
I was thinking, at first, they could use the author bio photo, but firebug reveals the author’s photo is place with CSS. If it is Facebook looking for a photo, it’s going to look in the HTML.

Would you look at that, the Motherland is burning. F*ck it, let’s go drink some more potato vodka from the still in the barn.

One of the greatest Russian poets Feodor Tiutchev once wrote the following about Russia:

“Don’t try to get it with your mind,
Don’t try to fit in your dimension:
There is no Russia of your kind –
Here your belief is only mention.”

In my opinion, this is the closest you can get in understanding russian mentality.

I enjoyed reading this article, especially in light of my own predilection for the Russian Romantics of classical music — particularly Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff who arguably wrote the most emotionally charged music in the classical canon and who both suffered from extreme bouts of psychological torment.

Contrary to the argument made here though, they both suffered from what we would probably classify as some sort of clinical depression.

I am from Russia, and live in US for many years. Vodka in Russia is made from wheat, not potato, btw.
Russians do get depressed also, and yes, instead of drugs they use vodka to “get it over”, but lately drugs also. BUT, I agree, russian mentality is different. Usually, they try to see things in negative light and do not expect too much from a future or opportunities life might present to them; and with this kind of attitude, when something good happens, they are happy; when something bad happens, they are kind of “prepared” to it. It is bad manner in Russia to advertise yourself or compliment yourself; Russians also definitely more critical of themselves. Think about American Idol or America’s got talent, how Simon Powell or Pierce Morgan tell truth to contestants, and they get so upset. Some Americans would say that it is outrageous to treat people like this; Russians would say it is right thing to do, someone needs reality check. Americans like to be pleased. It is bad manner here to tell someone in face negative stuff. In opposite, Russians usually will cringe if someone try to please them, because usually they know who they really are and don’t need to be fed with fake compliments. I have learned to be more pleasant here, and accept pleasantries and I don’t
mind it, I don’t need to hear all negative stuff, but for myself I still prefer to look on things in negative way (opposite to my american husband), I am more sceptical and cynical than him, and do not expect too much from life, and it keeps me happier. Americans might not like Russians, and even Russians might not like each other in this country, because of criticism and negative attitude toward everything and everyone, and too much of straightforwardness, but if you would be willing to look over this “barrier” you might learn that russians are very kind, generous, smart and hospitable people, and not too much different from americans