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The Fly-on-the-Wall Effect: When Bad Things Happen . . .

Wray Herbert


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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 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 Berkeley, and Ethan Kross of the University of Michigan. Why do 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—these people end up reconsidering their experiences in ways that are less distressing, compared to 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

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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 [on-line 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 benefitted 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 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.

Wray Herbert's book, [On Second Thought](#), is about irrational decision making. Excerpts from his two blogs—"We're Only Human" and "Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in *Scientific American Mind* and in *The Huffington Post*.

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Comments

Comment by [Laurie @mylivingpower](#) on June 24, 2011 @ 1:57 am

A very provocative post! It really does change our stress when we are "flies on the wall" with the hard seasons in life. As a mom of special needs kids, however, those seasons don't ever really go away. One of the hardest things is that in order to survive this role, I have to stay distanced from the challenges of raising mentally ill kids... and I just stay there for life, period. It's too much effort to consciously switch moment by moment between being a fly on the wall when my daughter rages and immersing myself when my husband wants to be close. So what's the happy medium for people in chronic stress like this?

Comment by [David White](#) on July 20, 2011 @ 3:13 pm

I have just come across this article and found it very interesting, yes the distancing format sounds interesting, I believe at this moment in time that this may of been the way I coped with certian experiences in my own life, but this from my perspective can lead to the other view of too much distance between yourself and your true self and that is what we are discussing, good concept and good article and tes with regards to bipolar sounds like a good idea as often from my own experience clients with bipolar are very sensative to being probed by counsellors or psychology, I have used this 'fly on the wall' concept in

therapy and it promotes the non judgemental approach, sounds like common sense to me to be honest.
But your also correct the retraumatisation of clients can often cause more harm than good, excellant
concept.

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