

WHEN THE BOTTOM FELL OUT

“Hey Don!,” said my friend, referring to me by my nickname from our college days as he welcomed me into his apartment, “Long time no see, man. How’s everything been? I heard you are doing great!”

“Yeah, I’m doing good,” I said, without much conviction.

I noticed that my friend’s wife was standing behind him, smiling. Even as I waved to her, I realized that because of my depression, I wasn’t able to look at either of them in the eye. I bent down and pretended to focus on unlacing my shoes so that I could avoid their gaze.

“No need to remove your shoes, man,” said my friend as he grabbed my elbow and tried pulling me into the apartment.

“No, no, I insist!,” I said, jerking my hand out more forcefully than I needed to. “We always remove our shoes back home in Austin,” I lied.

How could I tell them that I couldn’t look them in the eye because of how I was feeling? I needed to figure out a way out of this depression, and do it quickly. I couldn’t afford to let them see the state I was in...what would they think of me?

“OK, suit yourself,” said my friend. If he was taken aback by my insistence on removing my shoes, he didn’t show it. I looked up at last and attempted a smile. The corners of my mouth twitched with anxiety. *I couldn’t even smile.* I quickly flattened my smile to make the twitching go away.

“You’re looking good—you haven’t changed a bit!,” said my friend’s wife, smiling at me. I couldn’t tell if she really meant it. She must have sensed my skepticism, because she quickly added, “Really, I mean it!”

“Thanks! You too, *actually*” I said, forcing myself to look her in the eye, and emphasizing the word “actually” more than I should have. It came out sounding as if I was being sarcastic—like I was taking revenge on her for the insincerity of her compliment.

My mind raced, fuelled by the worry that I had offended her. The last thing I wanted was for people to dislike me. Should I clarify that I didn’t doubt the authenticity of her compliment? Should I also make it clear that my own compliment was authentic? No, no! That would be awkward. In my normal, chirpy, state, I could have handled it with aplomb, but the state I was in now, I lacked the confidence pull it off.

God, this was worse than I hoped it would be.

“Wow! What a beautiful house,” I said abruptly, as my eyes darted beyond my friend’s wife into the living room and the kitchen area. I quickly brushed past her, as if I couldn’t bear to wait another moment before immersing myself in the grandeur of their apartment. It was, in fact, a fabulous apartment, so I felt confident that my enthusiasm wouldn’t seem out of place.

Suddenly, a random thought ambushed me: *Should I tell them about how I had bombed my presentation last evening?*

I jerked my head violently to shake the thought out of my head, and stumbled onto the balcony, which was connected to the living room. *I wanted to be alone.* But, I also wanted company. *I wanted to be hugged, and to be told that I was loved.* But I knew that if someone so much as touched me, I would react violently against it. What *did* I want? I really didn’t know! A feeling of helplessness came over me. I felt more helpless than I had ever felt before.

I clutched the railing on the balcony for support as I gazed at the view. I could sense that the view was spectacular, but only in a cold, rational sort of way. The view had no emotional effect on me.

In my mind’s eye, I envisioned my friend and his wife exchanging quizzical looks about me behind my back. I imagined them saying to each other non-verbally: *What’s wrong with this guy?*

Because I had left them with no other option, my friend and his wife joined me on the balcony.

“B e a u t i f u l view!,” I said, drawing out the first word, as if to convey that the one major way in which I had changed in the years that we hadn’t seen each other was in how evolved my ability to discriminate truly good views from moderately good ones had become.

“Yes,” said my friend, who was now standing to my left, at the edge of the balcony. “And if you stand here,” he said, “you can actually catch a glimpse Kowloon island.” He was pointing to a space between two tall buildings in the distance. I followed his gesture with my eyes.

“Oh, yeah?,” I said, faking as much enthusiasm as I could muster, “can I see it?” I moved too quickly into his spot, stepping on his toes. He moved back to let me in.

“Wow, what a view!” I exclaimed, shaking my head, as if in a state of shocked disbelief. I hated myself for sounding so obviously artificial, but I didn’t know how else to deflect attention away from myself.

After a short pause, my friend said, “The view’s even better from a couple feet beyond the balcony. But to catch *that* view you would have to commit suicide.”

I looked back at him, startled. *Suicide?*

“What I mean is, you would have to jump out of the balcony, to catch that view,” he clarified, pointing to a spot just outside the balcony. He stopped just short of saying, “I was only joking!”

Sensing that I was in no mood to appreciate black humor, he added, somewhat resignedly, “let’s go in and eat.”

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Several insights occurred to me as a result of that fateful day in Hong Kong, but before I discuss them, let me tell you a little bit about myself. As those who know me well will attest, I am not prone to negativity or depression. In fact, people think of me as one of those blessed with a sunny disposition. I often joke that regardless of the weather outside, the weather inside my head is always sunny. Which is why the bout of depression that attacked me that day—from seemingly out of nowhere—took me by surprise. I didn’t know what to make of it, or how to react to it. It was as if my mind was possessed by a force that I could not control. I felt like a helpless bystander as my mind raced uncontrollably, producing one negative thought after another. And my emotions seemed to go along with my negative thoughts, abetting and fueling them.

Why did I feel so depressed that day?

On the face of it, it would appear that it was all because of a presentation gone wrong. I worked then, as I still do, as a professor in the marketing department at the McCombs School of Business at The University of Texas at Austin. I had been invited to the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology’s (HKUST’s) research camp, as one of four speakers. Even till the day of my departure to Hong Kong, I wasn’t sure that I would be able to make it to the camp, because of my bad back. I had ruptured a disc in the lumbar region of my spine (L5) in an accident two years earlier, and had suffered chronic pain ever since. I had tried a variety of treatments, from physical therapy and a course of anti-inflammatory medication to chiropractic care, but to no avail. Two weeks before to the camp, I inflicted more damage to my back while working out at the gym. The herniated disc pinched my nerves, sending

sharp spasmodic pain down my glutes and the back of my legs, a condition known as sciatica. I could barely sit or even lie down, let alone walk. Yet, I didn't want to pass up the opportunity to travel to Hong Kong. I wanted to present my latest work to a receptive and intelligent audience. I was excited by my research. Plus, I had good friends in Hong Kong whom I hadn't seen in more than 15 years—friends from my MBA days—and I wished to catch up with them.

So, I decided to brave it. Armed with an attaché case of painkillers and muscle relaxants, I boarded the plane to Hong Kong. On the trip from Austin to the connecting flight in Chicago, I overdosed on the painkillers, so much so that my stomach churned and turned acidic. Still, the back pain didn't subside. So, I upgraded to business class on the flight from Chicago to Hong Kong, and that helped a little. On the taxi ride from the Hong Kong airport to HKUST's campus, I lay flat on the back seat and engaged the driver in small talk, hoping to distract myself from the pain.

When I arrived at the hotel, a friendly note informed me of a dinner that was being hosted in honor of the camp's presenters. The note made it clear that I didn't have to attend the dinner: I was free to stay back in my room and take rest. In retrospect, that's what I should have done, but I decided to join the others. I was too excited by the prospect of seeing everyone. At the dinner, I started consuming alcohol, hoping that it would dull my pain.

At the time of this event, I was not one to pay much attention to the interaction effects between drugs with alcohol. My theory was that the interaction effects are too subtle to affect me in any noticeable way. But, boy was I wrong! I didn't know it at that time, but the muscle relaxant that I was taking—Flexiril—, when mixed with alcohol, produces intense nervousness and anxiety. I started feeling nervous and jumpy almost immediately after consuming the first drink, but I chalked my nervousness to the excitement from seeing everyone. To calm my nerves, I drank even more. Before I knew it, I had downed more than six drinks.

I couldn't sleep that night because of the nervousness. So, when the morning arrived, I felt tired—and hung over. This was the day of the presentations, and I was the last presenter. As I sat through the other presentations, I marveled at the speakers' composure and wit. When I tried to visualize myself presenting, however, I imagined failing miserably. In my mind's eye, I saw myself fumbling for words, and feeling ashamed and embarrassed.

By the time my turn to present came, I was a nervous wreck. My hands felt so clammy and cold that I deliberately avoided shaking hands with the person who introduced me. On top of the tiredness and hang over, the jet lag had set in. I felt like I was inside a jar of honey; I was physically, mentally, and emotionally drained. A

part of me clung desperately to the hope that once I began talking, the presentation would turn out OK. But, deep down, I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I was doomed to fail. My opening joke—the one that I had practiced in my mind several times—fell flat. After that, everything went downhill. The audience, who had been attentive and engaged for all the previous talks, started showing distinct signs of being uninterested. One by one, they averted my gaze.

I felt self-conscious and fragmented. I was confused as to why I was feeling the way I was. (I hadn't yet connected my feelings to the interaction between Flexiril and alcohol.) I had made numerous presentations before, and generally enjoyed making them. I was even known for my informal humor and style. And yet, here I was, stuttering and stammering so much that those in the audience were starting to finish my sentences. Others in the audience tried to help me by asking simple questions, but since I could sense their intention—I felt like a child who had accidentally ventured into adult territory—I felt even worse. Soon, even the questions stopped. I couldn't help but compare my presentation to those that came before me, and that crushed me.

My throat was parched, and I desperately wanted to drink water from the glass on the table, but when I tried to lift the glass, my hands trembled so much that I spilt the water. I hastily replaced the glass on the table, and continued to babble on with a dry mouth.

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There is a vast literature in psychology on what is known as the self-serving bias. The bias refers to the prevalent tendency among people to interpret events and outcomes in a manner that portrays oneself in the best possible light. Thus, for example, when one loses a game of tennis, one quickly attributes the loss to lack of practice (“The last time I played was over a year back!”), or to inferior equipment (“The strings in my racquet are too loose”). A win, on the other hand, is readily attributed to one's superior abilities, even if such attribution is done subtly (“My game really improved after I started taking tennis lessons. If you want, I can introduce you to my coach.”)

I caught myself engaging in self-serving bias as I was making the presentation; all kinds of excuses escaped my lips—from jet lag, to tiredness to back pain.

“Have you ever tried to make a presentation with back pain?” I quizzed the audience, daring them to respond, “that too with jet lag?”

I even chastised the audience for being tired: "I know it's late in the day, guys, but try to keep up your energy..."

Some of the audience members nodded and made sympathetic faces and noises. But most of them, like me, couldn't wait for the presentation to end.

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At the post-presentation party, I drank even more, hoping that I would black out, but that didn't happen. The alcohol only made me feel even more jumpy. I was now starting to feel depressed too. The muscles on my neck stiffened and lumped up. I could literally feel balls of muscles all the way from the top of my neck down to my shoulders and lower back.

The night of the presentation was the worst of my life. As I lay in bed, my mind kept replaying the presentation. The presentation had been such an unmitigated disaster that I couldn't find anything even remotely positive about it to make myself feel better.

At 3:00 am, I got out of bed with exaggerated energy, put on my shorts, t-shirt, and sneakers, and went for a run, hoping to escape the mental torture through sheer physical exertion. But I didn't have the energy to complete even half a mile. I went back to my room feeling defeated, and forced myself to do pushups. That wired me up even more. I tried to watch TV to distract myself from how I was feeling, but I was too conscious of my intentions to make myself feel better, so I couldn't focus on the TV. I tried to take a bath, but abandoned it midway because, in my state of self-hate, I felt like I didn't deserve a bath. I hoped that shaving would help, but when I examined myself in the mirror, I was horrified at how much I had aged in the last two days.

I went back to bed and tried to sleep, but couldn't. I spent the rest of the night oscillating between reassuring myself that sleep would come and dreading the possibility of not falling asleep. I wished to be close to my family or to be able to least talk to them, but I was convinced that they wouldn't be of any help to me. I felt like I had to take responsibility for solving the problems I had created. But I wasn't even sure what my problem was beyond a recognition that my mind had run amok.

I desperately wanted to feel good, especially since I was soon going to meet a friend I hadn't seen for over 15 years. *I couldn't let him see me in the state I was in*, I kept telling myself, which only made matters worse.

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Before that fateful day in Hong Kong, if someone had asked me what I thought was the world's worst disease, I would have answered, "Cancer" or "AIDS". But, after that day, I knew that the world's worst disease is not a physical ailment. It's a mental ailment: it is depression.

This is not to trivialize the pain that physical ailments can cause. I volunteer to help those suffering from both cancer and AIDS. I take them to their appointments in hospitals, and I visit them at their homes to chat with them and to help them with their chores. Many of the patients I help suffer great physical pain. But, surprising though it may sound to some of you, it is not unusual for many of them to be emotionally normal and even happy. Indeed, during the orientation presentation that the members of my organization give to new volunteers, we explicitly mention this point to them—that the people we serve are often some of the most positive people we know.

To a person well-versed with the literature on happiness, the idea that people with serious physical ailments can be happy wouldn't come as a surprise. A famous study, conducted by Brickman and Janoff-Bulman in the 1970s, tracked the happiness of two sets of people over the course of several months. One set had the fortune of winning a lottery, and the other set had the misfortune of becoming paraplegic, a serious physical ailment that limits physical movement. Although the lottery winners were significantly happier than the paraplegics in the days immediately after the event—as one would expect—the happiness levels of the two groups converged over the course of the next few weeks and months. A year after the event, some of the paraplegics were happier than some of the lottery winners!

The Brickman and Janoff-Bulman findings are, of course, counter-intuitive, which is why they became so well-known. Their findings are so counter-intuitive, in fact, that even after learning about them, most people can't believe that they would ever return to an "average" level of happiness after winning a lottery or becoming paraplegic. More recently, researchers have started exploring why people overestimate the duration and intensity of their emotional responses to major life events. An important reason appears to be the inability of people to empathize with how life actually looks like after such an event. Findings show that, after imagining winning the lottery, people think that the rest of their life is going to be one big party. Likewise, after imagining becoming paraplegic, people think that they wouldn't have anything to look forward to. But in reality, normal life steps right back in: even lottery winners have to contend with budget constraints (albeit at a higher level) and pesky relatives who emerge out of the woodworks to claim their share of the fortune, and even paraplegics can learn new activities and enjoy them.

So, surprising though it may sound, people who suffer from a physical ailment, even a relatively serious or fatal one, can be happy. Depressed people, on the other hand, are—by definition—unhappy. And depression is not a plain vanilla unhappiness: it is a soul-wrenching condition.

The most prominent aspect of depression is the internal fragmentation. Everyone wants self-respect, but in a state of depression, you feel like you don't deserve self-respect. During the initial phases of depression, you switch back and forth between trying to find reasons for why you should be respected and recognizing why you shouldn't, before you inevitably arrive at the conclusion that you don't deserve self-respect. Then, it becomes even worse. You lose your desire to live, and yet, you realize that you ought not to feel that way because of all the people—parents, spouse, kids, friends—who depend on you.

In some ways, feeling depressed can feel even more torturous if you are well off, since you feel that there is nothing or no one you can blame for your state. You feel fully responsible for your predicament, even as you feel powerless to help yourself. You recognize that people who are materially less well-off deserve more attention, compassion and sympathy than you do. But, yet, you can't escape feeling that, at an emotional level, you are worse off than many of them. You secretly wish that you could swap positions with them and lead their simple, innocent life. However, the idea of simplifying one's life is never seriously considered for a variety of reasons, the most prominent ones being the uncertainty about how to go about effecting such a change, as well as uncertainty about whether the change would produce the desired effect.

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Within weeks of returning to Austin, I was back to my normal, chirpy, self. But the event in Hong Kong had had a profound effect on me. I mentally revisited it several times, to try and make sense of it. On the flight back to Austin, I happened to read about the interactive effects of Flexiril with alcohol, and realized that at least some of my nervousness could be attributed to external sources. That made me feel relieved; I was now more confident that a similar attack was less likely in my future. However, the intense and immersive nature of the experience opened my eyes to a fresh perspective on life. In particular, three sets of insights occurred to me as a result of the experience in Hong Kong.

First, I recognized, as a result of sharing what had happened to me in Hong Kong with my close friends, that I wasn't alone in what I had experienced. Although the particular circumstances that triggered the depression varied across my friends, almost every one of them—both those living in the US and those back in India—had

undergone something similar to what I had. This surprised me at first, since my friends are generally well-to-do and accomplished in their fields. Further, they all seemed chirpy and positive whenever I interacted with them. How did I miss their encounter with depression?

Then, I remembered what research on depression has repeatedly shown, namely, that people do not generally reveal their negative feelings, especially in contexts or cultures, such as the US, in which they are expected to look and feel happy. As a result, most people, and especially men, keep their negative feelings to themselves. Indeed, my colleagues and I had done some research on this myself, and our findings showed that unless one uses the right language to make men feel comfortable about how they feel, they are unlikely to seek help for their depression.

The reluctance to reveal one's negative feelings to others may have something to do with the impostor syndrome as well, which refers to the prevalent finding that, despite being successful, many people feel that they are not really as competent as their accomplishments make them out to be. Those suffering from the impostor syndrome are constantly plagued with self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, and some findings suggest that a significant proportion of even those that are considered highly accomplished suffer from it. To overcome the impostor syndrome, many of us never explicitly acknowledge our self-doubts and negativity even to ourselves, let alone to others—until, that is, someone we trust and respect divulges *their* self-doubt to us. Findings show that self-disclosure, especially about issues that are deeply personal, is one of the most powerful promoters of intimacy. Thus, when I revealed my encounter with depression to my friends, they must have felt comfortable enough to reveal their own negative experiences to me.

The fact that almost every one of my friends had had an experience similar to mine convinced me that, if not depression, than at least low-level stress and anxiety were much more commonplace than would appear to be the case at first glance. This conclusion is, of course, entirely consistent with the following fact: currently, antidepressants are the most prescribed drug worldwide.

The second insight I had is that one can't really take one's emotional health for granted, since one's emotional health depends to such a critical extent on the random outcomes that one is dealt. Till that day in Hong Kong, if someone had asked me the secret to my sunny personality, I would have been inclined to take all credit for it. I would have smugly attributed my happiness to the choices I had made. I would have said that I was happy because, unlike most others, I had chosen, among other things, to celebrate the positives in life, rather than brood about the negatives. After my brush with depression, however, I realized with much greater clarity that

my happy-go-lucky attitude was, in large part, due to having had luck on my side. I had had a great childhood, wonderful parents, and a comfortable life. In addition, I was born with “happy genes,”—research shows that about half of one’s happiness is due to genetic factors—and was lucky enough to have been raised in a country and culture that emphasized education. All these elements combined to provide me a solid platform on which to build my career and personal life. I was now happily married with two kids, and held a steady and satisfying job. The event in Hong Kong made me wonder whether I could have maintained my sunny disposition if my life circumstances had been different. I concluded that I owed a lot more of my emotional positivity to chance events and outcomes that were out of my control than to the choices I had made.

My final insight was to recognize that I wasn’t qualified to look down upon people who feel negative. Till the event in Hong Kong, I was prone—as I think many people are—to asking people to “lighten up” when they felt negative. If my colleague complained about his students, or if my wife was anxious about meeting strangers at a party, my inclination was to advise them to snap out of their negativity. What the event in Hong Kong made me realize is that, asking people to lighten up when they are feeling negative is like asking them to hoist themselves up by their shoelaces: it can’t be done. Emotional negativity is not a matter of simple choice, but rather, is the correlate of being weighed down by an onslaught of negative thoughts. So, unless one develops the ability to control one’s mind, one doesn’t have much hope of overcoming negativity.

This last insight had a paradoxical effect on me: it made me both more empathetic towards others’ negativity and, simultaneously, less forgiving of my own negativity. If I, with so much going for me—great job, great family, good health, etc.—, couldn’t be positive, I asked myself, then who could? I knew, of course, that I wasn’t even close to being the richest person in my friends’ circles (let alone the country or the world), and that I wasn’t as famous or respected as many of my colleagues, but I certainly belonged to that very tiny proportion of people who had all the commonly accepted determinants of happiness: wealth, health, quality of relationships, and education. I knew, of course, that even with all these going for me, things could suddenly go awry (as they had in Hong Kong), but till that happened, why wasn’t I as happy as I could be? I recognized that, given my life circumstances, I should be *bubbling* with enthusiasm and good cheer. What was preventing me from being consistently ecstatic?

From that point onwards, I made it my explicit goal to be as happy as I could be.

Initially, I felt that seeking to be happy is a selfish thing to do. *What about others' happiness*, I asked myself, *don't they deserve to be happy too?* But I quickly realized two things. First, I realized that I was most capable of being selfless when I was happy myself. It turns out that I am not alone in this regard. As we will see shortly, findings in positive psychology confirm that happy people are, in general, more generous and giving than those who are less happy. So, seeking to be happy didn't seem like such a selfish thing to do. Second, perhaps as a consequence of how I acted when I was happy, the others around me didn't seem to mind my happiness at all. If anything, the happier I was, the more people seemed to seek my company! So, again, judging from the others' reaction, it didn't seem like seeking happiness was a selfish thing to do.

Thus, with the one misgiving that I had about pursuing happiness out of the way, I began my journey—of seeking to experience a sustained state of emotional positivity—in earnest. It helped, of course, that I was—and still am—a researcher interested in the topic of happiness. I was thus quite aware of the cutting-edge research on happiness. Perhaps more importantly, my somewhat unusual position for a happiness researcher—as a faculty in marketing, rather than in psychology—exposed me to a greater breadth of ideas than I would have been had I been a psychologist, as will become obvious in the chapters to follow.

What started as an introspective enquiry into identifying the true determinants of happiness, however, soon turned my world upside down. To experience a sustained state of happiness, it turns out, is not just difficult, *it is one of the most difficult things you can ever try to do*. I did not know this at that time, which was probably a good thing, since I may have never embarked on my endeavor otherwise. However, in the interest of full disclosure, I should give you fair warning. By setting your sights on happiness, you have—whether you know it or not—chosen to undertake one of the most challenging journeys of all time. If you are serious about it, achieving your objective will require you to be ready to give up everything you've got. It will require you to not just be open-minded, but to display extraordinary courage. It will require you to be willing to question everything you know, and to abandon everything you hold dear. It may even require you to abandon your sense of self-identity.

And if you choose to go on this journey, your life will likely evolve in the shape of the smile below—things will get worse first before they get better. (One hopes, of course, that the smile will be lop-sided—not unlike Clark Gable's from *Gone with the Wind*—that is, that you will end up happier than you currently are.)



Figure 1: Time on the x-axis and emotional positivity on the y-axis.

But at the end of it all, it will be worth it.

And if you are ready to begin, so am I.