



A bad prognosis, being dumped by a long-term partner, bypassed for that dream job or being denied that much-desired baby. Could anyone mount a worthy argument that bad news can actually be good? Probably not. However, with a shift of perspective, lemonade can be made from the sourest lemons. Accepting and managing bad news with a sense of purpose can leave the sweetest taste — if you're prepared to squeeze.

Positive psychology could almost be regarded as a postmodern response to a world seemingly on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Freud would have had us wallow in our misery, while modern-day evangelists believe happiness can be trained within us.

However, more and more we see a backlash against this wide-eyed approach, as remaining steadfastly positive may, in fact, prevent you from accepting things as they are and getting on with finding alternate options for how you live your life. A positive affirmation can make you feel better, but can it really make you better?

While this is not an argument promoting a pessimistic approach to life, being blindly optimistic, from an evolutionary point of view, is actually not good for your survival, nor does it train you to manage adversity. What if you grappled with it head on instead of rationalising bad news with denial, believing the universe will provide or placing an arbitrary positive spin on things? By accepting that bad news is part of life you can make sense of things when they happen to you and devise a course of action that is meaningful and valid.

Bad news can teach you more about yourself, help you to be more

compassionate and build resilience. Moreover, when bad news hits, you are presented with an opportunity to think differently and creatively about your circumstances, which results in you acting and reacting in a conscious and accountable way.

If life is bittersweet, then knowing how to take the good with the bad means you never run out of juice.

SILVER LININGS PERSONAL PLAYBOOK

Life for Millie was better than good. Or at least she convinced herself of that. On track for partnership in a law firm, she didn't mind working long into the night and missing out on seeing her friends and family. As for her fiancé, she constantly assured him life would get better once she was handed the keys to the kingdom. One Monday lunchtime, she went to her GP to pick up some results from her routine annual check-up. She was told she had advanced breast cancer. She didn't make it back to the office.

With the prospect of a double mastectomy, this was the worst news of her young life. The following days and weeks were filled with tears, shock, a bout of depression and grief at the impending loss of her breasts. Then one day she decided to make lemonade.

While Millie couldn't change the prognosis, she could manage how she

viewed it. She decided to change her life. She quit her job and post recovery joined a smaller firm with family-friendly hours. She took up yoga and found joy in baking, bike riding with her boyfriend and forming a book club. She missed her breasts desperately but realised she had been missing out on something far more valuable. The good news was she had given herself the gift of a meaningful life. In her bridal dress, she had a cup-size made to order. Her wedding was the happiest day of her life.

THE DOWNSIDE OF DENIAL

Many would argue that Millie should have fought the prognosis. Certainly there is some credence in fighting the good fight. We live in a society which, quite rightly, questions long-held beliefs and conventional practice. Yet there are times when we have to accept the nature of things and acknowledge that life will present challenges that cannot be undone by sheer will. Positive thinking will take us so far, but can we wish ourselves well? For many of us, when bad news arrives, we go into a place of denial, which may just be deferring the inevitable.

Denial prevents you from managing the situation to make the decisions to create a meaningful response to the problem. Instead, you are diverted by not accepting the news and fighting it. Moreover, the dark side to positive thinking, after having invested in mantras and changing negative thought patterns, is that when it doesn't work you are left with a feeling of self-recrimination, blaming yourself for not trying hard enough. Acceptance requires real courage, but it also becomes a gift to yourself as you are empowered to choose how you manage

Sometimes bad news can actually be good if you know how to approach it.

WORDS / MARIE ROWLAND

The GOOD news about BAD news



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Photography Getty Images



your life as you forgo desired future outcomes for here-and-now action.

Moreover, denial doesn't allow you to mourn for what you have lost. In the instance of not getting that dream job, taking the denial option means you may respond by saying you didn't want it anyway. This form of rationalising is a way to cope and to refuel those energy reserves to keep on going, which of course is vitally important. However, when you do lose or miss out, it's in your best interests to acknowledge the disappointment. You can assess what went wrong and consider your options.

Honest reflection does not green-light wallowing in disappointment or taking on the victim role. To feel the pain of loss is to put a value on it. You can then accept it and get on with creating your means of moving forward in a positive and meaningful way.

THE UPSIDE OF ACCEPTANCE

Many religions and philosophies espouse the power of acceptance with the aim to lose ego and attachment to outcomes. Central to the Buddhist philosophy is the notion of *equanimity*, one of the four tenets of this belief system, along with (sympathetic) joy, compassion and love/loving kindness. The more secular notion of equanimity is to respond to good news or bad with exactly the same attitude or deference. This is not the same as indifference; in Buddhist philosophy equanimity amounts to non-attachment. To be able to display the same presence of mind and respond mindfully and with emotional detachment is the embodiment of equanimity.

When it comes to managing bad news, equanimity is a very handy psychological resource as it encourages us to cope at optimum levels. For Buddhists, equanimity allows the mind to become the friend rather than work against the individual. Yet it should neither be misunderstood nor underestimated. To have equanimity is not to succumb to indifference. On the contrary, it requires a diligent mind that is always on alert. This higher state requires a conscious awareness where insight and detachment become a daily practice. When practised in its purest sense, the individual loses a sense of self or "mine", and once the ego has been released equanimity moves

from the mind to the heart, where compassion, wisdom, patience and openness to experience abound.

So, when faced with the onslaught of bad news, the philosopher practising equanimity would not ask, "Why has this happened to me?" but rather, "Why shouldn't this happen to me?" This approach of course allows for the practitioner of equanimity to face the inevitable pain of being in this world, with courage and compassion for oneself and others.

This is an ideal state and far from easy. We are so attached to life and if anything was to strike at what you value most, such as your children or partner, then of course your equilibrium is shattered. Making

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sense of the world can seem beyond your reach, but using the principle of equanimity can, over time, restore your will to participate in life and to live with grief and perhaps find a new purpose in life, not unlike the phoenix rising from the ashes of despair.

When Sarah, after multiple rounds of painful IVF, finally conceived and took her baby to term, all the sacrifices she and her husband had made seemed worth it. Their happiness was shattered when she gave birth to a stillborn child. Life could not have been bleaker.

But, like that phoenix, after taking enough time to mourn, Sarah learned to live with the grief and found a new life-calling as a bereavement counsellor to those who had endured similar experiences.

While we may always carry some of the sadness with us, to detach from that sense of "mine" in order to give to others is the road to inner peace.

IT'S NOT ME, IT'S THE UNIVERSE

Most of us have blithely succumbed to the sentiment "This is what the universe is bringing" or its variant, "This is meant to be." At its heart, this conclusion is a rationalisation, a way to explain

things that are inexplicable or simply beyond our control. It requires very little rigorous investigation, but the net result is an unconscious acceptance of things, either good or bad.

While this may appear to be quite a benign way to make meaning of the world, it also means we take little or no responsibility for the things that happen in our lives. Nor does it account for terrible things returning upon innocent individuals. Is the universe responsible for the harm that is perpetrated? Equally, when you enjoy good fortune, should the universe get the credit?

While bad news is often out of your control, how you manage it is within your control. The universe is not the protagonist here — you are. The existential viewpoint is to regard the individual as a universal entity that defines meaning and purpose in itself. The interpretation and management of news is a deeply subjective process and, the more accountable you are for your responses, the more power you have to create optimum outcomes.

How you handle good news or bad may be more about how you handle and view yourself. To not let circumstances determine how you view the world but moreover to look to yourself for self-determination is the first step to self-actualisation. This allows you to build resilience and to boost your sense of optimism, making a difference to the world you inhabit. This is far from a Pollyanna approach or faking it to make it. It is about a genuine relationship with the self.

OPEN ARMS, OPEN HEART

As the Chinese proverb goes, "May you live in interesting times." The latter part of the 20th and the start of this new century have indeed been interesting in both pace and perspective. This is the time of Me, Mine and More.

Technology and science have conspired to give us power and privilege whereby we have come to believe we are entitled to more, from happiness to having it all. So when we are denied our hearts' desire we believe life has been unfair.

Have we lost our perspective? Have we lost the capacity to step back and acknowledge that, while our situation may not be great, life for so many is



far, far worse? Our bad news may not be so bad after all. Perhaps we need to practise empathy to know that, while we may have resources to bounce back, many don't. Perspective allows us to look beyond our own world and into those of others. The upside of perspective is you stop grumbling about your lot in life and open your heart to gratitude.

Being grateful is the gift that keeps on giving. You lose that drive to consume and to compete, reverting to

the age-old philosophy of unadulterated acceptance. You get to live in the here-and-now as you acknowledge all that you should be thankful for. Gratitude gives you the gift of smiling and restful contemplation. In this state you can give to others and your generosity is boundless. Mine becomes Ours. I becomes We. Me becomes Us.

The good news is that bad news can teach you so much more about how to be a better and more loving person.

It teaches you to not take things for granted and to reconnect with yourself and your purpose. It may mean you have to change direction, detach from ego or become more innovative, but with these new-found skills you find the sweetest nectar in life can be made from even the sourest lemons.

Life doesn't suck, after all. 🍋

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