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[Wellness](#)

Perspective

It's natural to feel happy and sad at the same time. Here's when it can become a problem.



By Galadriel Watson

When my son left for university, I felt both elated for him and sad that he would no longer be home. When I'm invited to dinner, I'm pleased to be included but would also rather lounge on the couch. When I occasionally leave my mask in my bag, I delight in the freedom but worry about my health.

Wrestling with two opposite feelings at once is called ambivalence. It's a normal part of being human, but at times such internal conflict can be unhealthy. I spoke with three experts to understand more about this phenomenon.

What is ambivalence?

Ambivalence means “feeling both good and bad,” Jeff Larsen, a professor of psychology at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, told me. Feeling bittersweet or nostalgic are common forms of it. “Think about how you might feel when you’re at the top of a roller coaster: excited but also terrified.”

Amusement parks aren’t required. Everyday events can trigger this state, and Larsen has found that “meaningful endings” can, too. University students, for example, are likely to spend their graduation day reminiscing about the good times over the past several years. In a study led by Larsen, which is in the process of being published, such graduates reported both happiness and sadness on this occasion. “We feel sad when we experience an irrevocable loss,” he says.

The benefits of ambivalence

The ability to experience two contradictory feelings at once has an evolutionary benefit, says Antonio Damasio, professor of psychology, philosophy and neurology at the University of Southern California and author of “[Feeling & Knowing: Making Minds Conscious](#).” “Animals that have only positive or negative feelings are very limited because things are too much black or white,” he says, “whereas we have the possibility of seeing nuances.”

These nuances can help people make good decisions. If an animal approaches a watering hole without considering the possible outcomes, it may get eaten. As for humans, say you meet a person you like but who gives you strange vibes — and then wants you to do something with your finances. Ambivalence makes you “more likely to be cautious when you make the decision and think twice,” Damasio says.

It can also help you learn from yesterday’s missteps. David Newman is a postdoctoral scholar in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of California at San Francisco. He gave this example: “If you feel nostalgic about some past romantic relationship, maybe it’s good to not simply just act on the positive but also remember some of the negative, so you don’t repeat the mistakes.”

When ambivalence is unhealthy

So when does ambivalence become a problem? In the 18th and 19th centuries, nostalgia was considered a [serious psychiatric condition](#). Being too attached to the past meant one couldn’t adapt to the present — which could ultimately lead to death. While nostalgia is no longer classified as such, Damasio says that negative emotions of any kind can infringe on your physical health, as they involve chemical molecules that result, for example, in increases in blood pressure, repeat tightening of blood vessels and changes in cardiac rhythm. These can cause diseases in blood vessels and the heart.

Mental well-being may also suffer. [Prolonged ambivalence](#) has been associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression and addiction. “People tend to be really sad when they feel nostalgia,” Newman says. By comparing the present to an idealized past, “you’re always going to be upset and feeling as if you’re not satisfied.”

Ambivalence can also make us freeze. Whether deciding to buy a car or break up with a partner, “the prospect of teasing apart the pros and cons can make it really difficult to make a decision,” Larsen says. “In those cases, ambivalence can paralyze us.”

Who is more susceptible?

Are there some people who feel ambivalent more often than others? Newman’s work has found that neurotic people or those who try to avoid negative stimuli are more likely to become nostalgic: They tend to find the present unpleasant and so spend more time idealizing the past.

As for ambivalence in general — not just nostalgia — people who are open to new experiences tend to feel more mixed emotions. “If you’re always seeking out the same thing, you’re probably seeking out the things that make you happy,” Larsen says. If you like to dive into new situations, you may experience the fun you were hoping for, but you may also experience some less-than-great aspects you hadn’t expected — thus ending up with contradictory feelings.

Damasio adds: “There are people that are extremely jovial and forward-looking and are in a sort-of permanent happy state, and people that are cautious and tend to be always finding something negative with day-to-day events.” The latter may experience more ambivalence in their everyday lives.

What can I do if I'm too ambivalent?

What can people who experience an unhealthy amount of ambivalence do about it? One simple way is to keep a gratitude journal. Sustaining this habit can force you to focus on the positive side of things, which Newman says can improve one’s well-being.

Therapy could also help. By learning various skills — to increase mindfulness, for example, or the ability to endure distress — people taking part in dialectical behavior therapy “find a way to tolerate, and hold together side by side, experiences or realities that seem incongruent,” says Sarah Mintz, a psychologist with the Wake Kendall Group in Washington. This enables them to “move away from extremes or embrace confusion.”

Even without a therapist’s guidance, people can try breathing exercises, such as “falling into the pauses between your in-breath and out-breath,” Mintz says.

Sometimes, the answer may be as simple as letting your conflicting feelings run their course. “Often, mixed emotions get resolved, so we’re left feeling one or the other,” Larsen says.

Plus, it’s important to remember that feeling sad or scared can help us. Like animals at a watering hole that need to judge what’s safe, humans, too, can benefit from the contradictory emotions caused by ambivalence. “The world’s a complex place,” Larsen says, “and we simplify it at our peril.”

Galadriel Watson is a freelance writer and author of many children’s books. Find her at galadrielwatson.com and on Instagram at [@galadrielwatson](https://www.instagram.com/galadrielwatson).