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Foster positivity amid Covid-19 challenges

David Chan

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Many behaviours have encouraged positivity during the pandemic. More can be done to create communities that nurture positive attitudes and experiences.

Like many societies, Singapore has seen its people stepping up to help the needy during the Covid-19 crisis, volunteering, donating and raising funds for vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, lower-income families and people who have lost their jobs. Businesses, too, give back to the community through donations of cash, masks, sanitisers, food and other essential items.

These behaviours complement the Government's efforts to reach out to needy individuals and families. This is critical, given the urgent needs and scale and speed of the economic, social and psychological impact from Covid-19 challenges.

Equally important, the voluntary acts of giving reflect and reinforce the positive attitudes and experiences of the people and the community amid the global pandemic. This positivity occurs for both the giver and the recipient, and it has multiplier effects.

Positivity also contributes to Singapore's psychological defence in the fight against the coronavirus by helping to build the psychological capital that people need, to adapt and deal with the multiple challenges - self-efficacy, optimism, hope, resilience.

Even though Singapore has lifted the circuit breaker and we are gradually reopening the economy, many individuals and families hit severely by the Covid-19 crisis will continue to experience hardship or distress. Moreover, when new waves of infection hit, restrictive curbs may kick in again, resulting in new or exacerbated needs.

Positive attitudes and experiences help people deal with adaptation challenges associated with strict containment measures and post-pandemic realities. They also help with learning and adaptability when people have to leave their comfort zone to pick up new skills by attending training or take up a traineeship opportunity as a transit to a permanent job.

To increase our psychological preparedness and adaptability, we need to understand the science of positivity.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF GIVING

An aspect of positivity that is important for tackling Covid-19 challenges is subjective well-being, which is about satisfaction and happiness. Such subjective well-being is important in helping individuals cope better.

Let's drill into the components of subjective well-being. Satisfaction is the extent to which we evaluate that our needs, wants and preferences are met. It is the cognitive component of subjective well-being.

Happiness is the extent of positive emotions we are experiencing, such as a personal sense of meaning or feelings of joy. It is the emotional component.

Together, satisfaction and happiness help us understand how people evaluate and experience their lives.

Giving creates positive well-being because recipients' needs are satisfied, and givers experience positive emotions when they see their deeds benefit those who need help. The positive attitudes and experiences are mutually reinforcing between the givers and the recipients of help.

Research has shown that giving time, money and other assistance not only benefits the recipient but also leads to positive outcomes for the giver. When people give, they derive a sense of personal meaning from helping others. They also better appreciate their own circumstances as they learn of the situations facing the less fortunate.

The interaction between the givers and the recipients also produces positive social relationships and builds social capital that will benefit the community in many ways.

In the challenging times of the protracted Covid-19 crisis, it is even more important to foster such positivity. One way to do this is to involve people in giving, such as donation, volunteerism, and other community work.

MEANING AND GROWTH NEEDS

Another type of positivity revolves around meaning and growth needs. Meeting such needs motivates positive behaviours. They enable positive attitudes and experiences at work.

Positivity at work can be encouraged when we develop certain core job characteristics that generate meaning and growth.

For example, are we creating and nurturing job characteristics and work conditions for people to want to learn new skills and apply them, and also for people to enjoy what they do at work?

Studies have shown that job characteristics such as skill variety, task identity and task significance are motivating for most employees, and they lead to positive attitudes and behaviours at work.

Skill variety lets us use and practise the different skills that we have. Task identity means we can identify with what we do as being responsible for the whole or more complete outcome of the work. Task significance means we can see that what we do contributes to something wider beyond ourselves such as the organisation or society.

Two extra job characteristics or work conditions matter to many people - having a reasonable level of autonomy or freedom to decide how to accomplish our task and the opportunity to receive feedback to know how effective we are at work.

Together, the above five job characteristics help make work more meaningful, make us feel responsible for work outcomes, and help us see the results of our work. These experiences lead to positive work-related outcomes such as better job performance, higher job satisfaction, and more organisational citizenship behaviours.

As we navigate harsh post-pandemic realities involving disruptive changes in jobs and work processes, it is important to attend to these job characteristics to motivate positive work behaviours and outcomes, and ensure that the personal sense of human dignity is developed and not diminished through work.

POSITIVITY CAN COUNTER NEGATIVITY

Research has shown that positivity can effectively counter negativity.

But first, negative emotion by itself is not the same as negativity. When our goals are frustrated, we experience negative emotions. Similarly, we feel negative when someone behaves in a way that impedes or hurts the progress towards a collective goal that we and many others are helping to achieve.

An example is when someone violates a Covid-19 safe management rule and behaves in a socially irresponsible way when most of us are adhering to the measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus. But that is not negativity - it is simply a negative reaction that we experience.

Negativity, in contrast, is a mindset, not just a momentary emotion or reaction. For example, negativity manifests itself when we form a negative opinion based on simply knowing who the person is or which group he or she belongs to, regardless of what the person says or does. When we consistently evaluate others negatively because of their particular group membership or who they are, such as being member of a political party or a nationality group, instead of what they said or did, it is a type of negative confirmatory bias which accumulates to form negativity.

Negativity is often developed, and strengthened over time, by repeated unresolved negative experiences and emotions. So, don't just lament or lambast negativity. Empathise with people's negative experiences, and seek to understand why things have come to this.

Positivity, however, is not the direct opposite of negativity - it is not a positive confirmatory bias. As I have explained previously, positivity involves positive attitudes and experiences such as self-efficacy and sense of meaning, and they lead to actual positive outcomes like performance and helping behaviour.

Research has shown that it is possible for us to become lower on negativity without, at the same time, becoming higher on positivity. Conversely, it is possible to be low on positivity without being high on negativity. So a reduction in negativity by itself does not mean that positivity is increased, and vice versa.

But research has also shown that it is not quite possible to be consistently high in both positivity and negativity at the same time. The two are counteracting in that having high intensity on one - either positivity or negativity - will make it difficult to simultaneously have high intensity on the other. One can be low on both positivity and negativity, or high on either one but low on the other, but it is difficult to be high on both.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that positivity and negativity are not direct opposite poles of the same thing. They are different constructs that are inversely and moderately correlated.

So, while it may be difficult to directly reduce negativity, it is constructive to focus on increasing positivity. When we successfully increase positivity, we reduce negativity and therefore the negative outcomes associated with negativity.

Positivity is probably the most effective way to counter negativity. At the same time, we achieve the many direct benefits of positivity.

In managing negative reactions during the Covid-19 crisis, it is important to understand the distinction between negative emotions and negativity, and how positivity can effectively counter negativity.

Back to the example of public reactions to a violation of safe management practices. There have been numerous cases of people ignoring control measures and behaving irresponsibly, such as not wearing

a face mask in public and failing to maintain social distancing. Photos of these violations were circulated in social media and also reported by mainstream media.

In all of these cases, regardless of the nationality of the offenders, Singaporeans experienced negative emotions and reacted angrily, and understandably so, because the offenders were socially irresponsible and frustrating our collective goals to curb the spread of the coronavirus in the community.

However, in those cases that involved offenders who are foreigners, some Singaporeans generalised their negative comments to foreigners in general living in Singapore or alleged that foreigners receive preferential favourable treatment in the enforcement of the Covid-19 safe management rules.

In commenting on the public reactions to these violations, policymakers and community leaders should not confuse or unwittingly give the impression that they have confused an important distinction. The legitimately negative emotion experienced by the general public when they reacted to the socially irresponsible behaviours of the offenders (regardless of their nationality) is not the same as the negativity that some Singaporeans manifest when they extrapolate negative sentiments to all foreigners in Singapore and make unfounded allegations about preferential treatment.

The first is an understandable negative reaction to a specific irresponsible act such as not wearing a mask. The second is a negativity mindset that has been built up towards foreigners, which need addressing.

But if we focus exclusively or disproportionately on calling out Singaporeans' negative comments on foreigners and labelling the reactions as xenophobic, then this dominant approach to managing negativity is counterproductive - it will just create more negativity because the public will rightly or wrongly perceive that their concerns and legitimate negative reactions are ignored or trivialised.

So it is important to distinguish between negative emotions and negativity, and between negativity and positivity.

Public expressions of negative emotions need not always be a bad thing. They reflect people's concerns, aspirations, goals and experiences. They highlight the need to clarify facts, ensure impartiality, and enhance fairness perceptions. They can and have helped policymakers and leaders identify problems, revisit priorities and formulate solutions.

But, whoever we are, we can learn to respond appropriately to avoid unintended consequences that end up fostering more negativity.

Finally, let's focus more on fostering positivity in the community to address negativity and tackle Covid-19 adaptation challenges. Positivity is necessary for us to emerge stronger and better from the coronavirus crisis.

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