

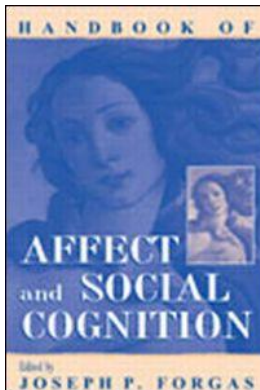
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Joseph P. Forgas

### **Mood as a Resource in Processing Self-Relevant Information**

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## Mood as a Resource in Processing Self-Relevant Information

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The present chapter examines the role of mood in determining how people seek and process information about themselves. We argue that positive mood may serve as a resource for achieving accurate self-assessment or as a goal in and of itself. As a resource, positive mood leads people to seek and process positive as well as negative information about themselves. As a goal, positive mood leads people to focus on positive information about themselves. Whether positive mood serves as a resource or as a goal depends on the value of the information. When the information is highly

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diagnostic of an important self-attribute, mood serves as a resource, but when the information is of low diagnostic value or when it pertains to an unimportant self-attribute, positive mood serves as a goal. We describe a series of studies designed to test these ideas. These studies demonstrate that positive mood leads people to seek negative self-relevant feedback when this feedback has high informational value, but not when the feedback has low informational value. The first set of studies examines search of ability-related information, whereas the second set of studies examines processing of health-related information.

### **MOOD AS A RESOURCE IN OVERCOMING DEFENSIVENESS**

Situations that offer individuals self-relevant information often create a motivational conflict. On the one hand, such new information may help individuals assess their skills, personality traits, or health and guide their future choices and self-improvement attempts (Taylor, Wayment, & Carrillo, 1996; Trope, 1975, 1983, 1986; Trope & Neter, 1994). On the other hand, self-relevant information may uncover individuals' liabilities, threatening their self-esteem and sense of well-being (Brown, 1990; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988; Tesser, Martin, & Cornell, 1996). The motivational conflict is particularly likely to arise in situations in which the information focuses on individuals' weaknesses rather than their strengths (see Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Such situations pose a self-control dilemma. Individuals may want to attain the long-term assessment benefits of negative feedback regarding self-relevant attributes. That is, they may want to know what skills they need to improve, what kinds of tasks to choose or avoid, and how much effort and preparation to invest in the tasks they choose. At the same time, individuals may be deterred by the emotional costs of negative feedback. These costs involve negative esteem-related feelings such as shame, dejection, and disappointment (see Weiner, 1986; Higgins, 1987). Indeed, research on task choice has found that people expect diagnostic failure to improve the accuracy of their self-knowledge, but also to make them feel shameful and dejected. In contrast, people expect diagnostic success to promote their self-knowledge as well as feelings of pride and gratification (see Trope, 1979, 1980; Trope & Brickman, 1975).

Thus, the decision to accept negative feedback that is diagnostic of self-relevant attributes entails a trade-off between long-term information gain and immediate emotional costs (Crocker & Major, 1989; Taylor, Wayment,

& Carrillo, 1996). As argued by Trope (1986), this motivational conflict may be viewed as an instance of a general class of self-control dilemmas in which immediate emotional obstacles may prevent one from enacting a preferred course of action (see Carver & Scheier, 1990; Gollwitzer, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lowenstein & Thaller, 1989; Kuhl, 1984; Metcalf & Mischel, 1999; Mischel, 1974, 1984; Schelling, 1984). Trope and Neter (1994) further proposed that the relative importance of emotional costs and informational benefits of feedback depends on the individuals' mood when they decide whether to accept new feedback. Positive mood presumably serves as a resource in buffering against the affective costs of negative feedback and enabling individuals to focus on the informational implications of the feedback. The weight of long-term information gains relative to the weight of immediate affective costs in feedback seeking should therefore be greater when people are in a positive mood rather than in a negative mood. As a resource, positive mood should thus increase the likelihood of accepting mood-incongruent negative feedback regarding self-relevant attributes (see Aspinwall, 1998; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Reed & Aspinwall, 1998).

### **Mood-Incongruent Information Search**

Trope and Neter (1994) conducted two studies that examined the impact of mood on the ways in which participants subsequently searched for feedback information. They predicted that participants would show more interest in negative (rather than positive) feedback when they are in a positive (vs. neutral or negative) mood. In the first study, participants completed a spatial abilities test and were told either that they performed very well (in the top 10% of the student distribution: success condition) or very poorly (in the bottom 30% of the student distribution: failure condition). Participants in the control condition completed a similarity judgment task and were not given any feedback about their performance. A manipulation check indicated that those participants who received positive feedback about their spatial abilities reported a positive mood compared to those in the control and negative feedback conditions. Those who received negative feedback reported being in a negative mood compared to those in the control and positive feedback conditions. All participants were then told that they would be taking a social sensitivity test, and were informed that detailed feedback about either their assets or liabilities in social sensitivity would be available on completion of the test. Participants were then asked to indicate which kind of feedback they would prefer.

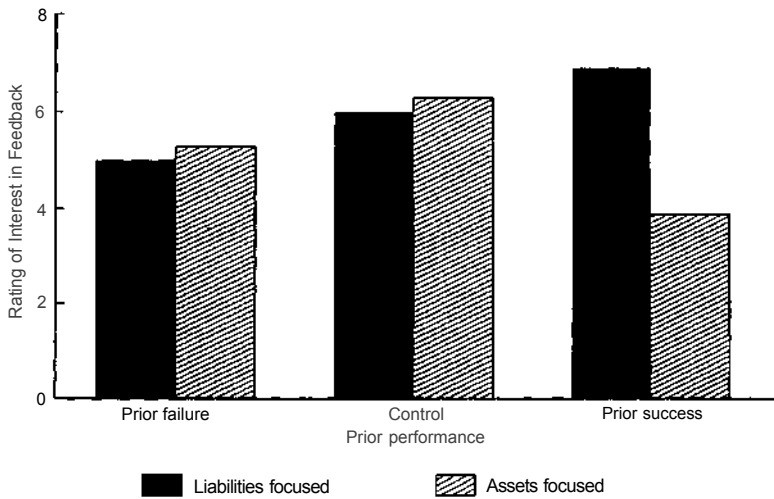


FIG. 12.1. Interest in assets-focused and liabilities-focused feedback as a function of prior outcomes on an unrelated task (Experiment 1).

As shown in Fig. 12.1, participants in the control and failure conditions preferred the feedback concerning their assets compared to the feedback concerning their liabilities. In contrast, those participants who had just received positive feedback concerning their spatial abilities significantly preferred feedback about their liabilities compared to their assets. These results seem to suggest that the positive experience of hearing about success acted as a buffer for participants, enabling them to handle the affective costs of listening to information concerning their weaknesses with regard to social sensitivity.

In the second study, positive or negative mood was induced by asking participants to recall prior life events. In the first part of the study, participants were asked to complete a social sensitivity test. In the second part, they were instructed to recall either positive or negative events from the past. Participants in the control condition were asked to complete a similarity judgment task. Then, in the third part of the study, participants were given feedback on the results of the social sensitivity test that they took in the first part of the experiment. They received positive feedback about some of the subscales of the test and negative feedback about the other subscales. They were then asked to indicate their interest in hearing more detailed and comprehensive feedback about each subscale. Trope and Neter predicted that those participants who had recalled positive life

events would be more interested in negative feedback regarding their social sensitivity.

Participants who were asked to recall positive life events reported being in a more positive mood compared to participants in the control and negative life events conditions. Participants who recalled negative life events reported a more negative mood compared to participants in the control and positive life events conditions. As indicated in Fig. 12.2, participants in the control condition and participants who recalled negative life events were more interested in positive (vs. negative) feedback about their social sensitivity. In contrast, participants who recalled positive life events were significantly more interested in negative (vs. positive) feedback. Similar to the results from the first study, participants who were in a positive mood were more likely to select information concerning their weaknesses rather than their strengths. The opposite pattern was found for participants who were in the control condition or who were in a negative mood due to recalling negative experiences. Subsequent research by Trope and Pomerantz (1998) and by Aspinwall and colleagues (see Aspinwall, 1998; Reed & Aspinwall, 1998) provides further evidence showing that positive mood enhances people's preference for useful negative information about themselves.

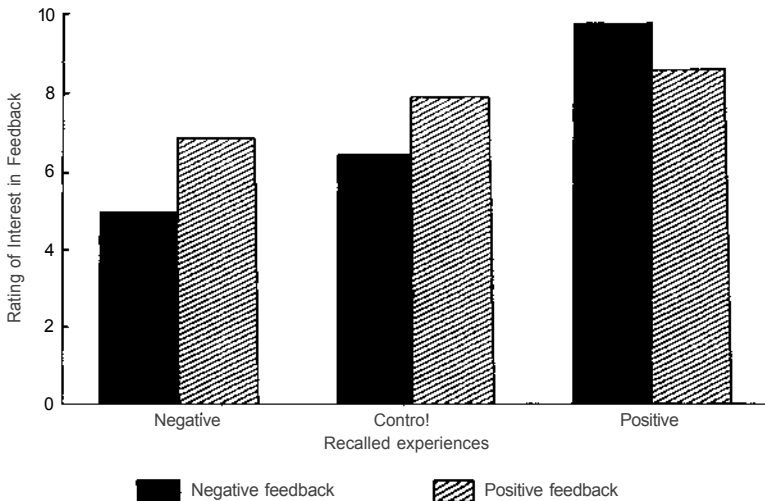


FIG. 12.2. Interest in detailed positive or negative feedback as a function of prior engagement in recall of positive or negative events (Experiment 2).

In this research, mood influenced the perception of the offered feedback. Specifically, both the positive and negative feedback were perceived as more positive by the positive mood participants than by the neutral and negative mood participants. Consistent with extant models of mood effects on judgment, this finding indicates an assimilative effect of mood (Forgas, 1995; Forgas & Bower, 1987; Schwarz, 1990). However, positive mood did not diminish the perceived distinction between positive and negative feedback. That is, participants in a positive mood still viewed the positive feedback as quite positive and the negative feedback as quite negative. It seems that the offered feedback was sufficiently unambiguous to prevent more pronounced distortions. Therefore, the results cannot be explained by the negative feedback being construed as positive by those in a positive mood. Instead, these data suggest that positive mood acted as a resource in enabling participants to give more weight to the long-term benefits of negative feedback than to its short-term emotional cost in selecting feedback.

### **Self-Induced Positive Mood**

The two feedback-seeking studies by Trope and Neter (1994) demonstrated that positive mood enhances individuals' ability to accept new negative feedback. The question is whether individuals will try to self-induce a positive mood when new negative feedback is made available to them. The mood-as-a-resource hypothesis would predict that when the offered feedback is useful for improving future decisions and performance, individuals may try to self-induce a positive mood in order to cope with the anticipated emotional costs of the feedback.

In order to test this prediction, Trope and Neter offered participants feedback regarding their intelligence, and unobtrusively measured how much time they spent reading positive personality feedback while waiting for the intelligence feedback. It was assumed that the amount of time spent reading the positive personality feedback reflects the degree to which participants' attempted to self-induce a positive mood prior to receiving the intelligence feedback. As predicted, the results showed that the more negative the anticipated intelligence feedback, the more time participants spent reading the positive personality feedback. Positive intelligence feedback was apparently easy to accept because it was both informative and emotionally gratifying. Individuals may feel capable of accepting such feedback without having first to boost their affective resources. As the anticipated feedback becomes more negative, the emotional threat increases and individuals may

try to overcome this threat by attending to information that can improve their mood. This pattern of strategic mood regulation provides additional support for the idea that people use positive mood as a resource in coping with negative but useful information.

### **MOOD AS A RESOURCE AND MOOD AS A GOAL**

Trope and Neter's finding that positive mood promotes search for negatively valenced information appears inconsistent with mood maintenance theories (e.g., Isen, 1984, 1993; Wegener & Petty, 1994). These theories suggest that people strive to maintain their positive moods and ameliorate their bad moods. People in a good mood attempt to avoid negative information or any information that might jeopardize their positive feelings. Furthermore, people in a bad mood attempt to focus on information or situations that might potentially rid them of their bad feelings and replace them with positive ones.

The mood-as-a-resource hypothesis entails a resolution of this apparent disagreement. According to this hypothesis, people compromise their good moods in order to learn something about themselves with the assumed aim of improving their deficits. Therefore, they should only care about feedback that is accurate and reliable, and about feedback that addresses a domain that is important to them. For instance, if someone has a particular penchant for mathematics and finds out that she has the chance to receive some feedback about her weaknesses in the area of constructing proofs, she might be more interested in that feedback compared to hearing about an activity for which she does not care. She may not bother listening to negative feedback about her cross-country skiing ability if she does not plan on doing that activity in the future, or if she does not care about whether she is skilled at it. If feedback concerns a domain about which a person does not care, the person may well try to maintain her good mood by selecting positive versus negative feedback. In short, when there are no long-term learning benefits, people may adopt the goal of mood maintenance, which in turn may determine the search and processing of self-relevant information (see Aspinwall, 1998).

Similarly, the degree to which negative feedback can enable one to improve one's weaknesses in some area is contingent on the accuracy and reliability of the feedback. If feedback is unreliable, it may be unwise to incorporate the information into one's decisions about future choices and behavior. For example, when one is planning on going away for the weekend



and listens to the weather channels for the prognosis of weekend weather, one will likely only make decisions about going away if the information is reliable and accurate. If one knows that local television channels are often inaccurate, one may decide to ignore the outlook. Likewise, if one knows that the boss is tired and stressed due to personal problems, one may not regard the boss's evaluation as diagnostic, accurate, or reliable. A realization of potential inaccuracy may lead one to forsake long-term learning goals in the interest of maintaining or repairing one's mood.

Whereas mood-maintenance and mood-repair theories do not make differential predictions on the basis of accuracy, reliability, and importance of domain, the tenets of the mood-as-a-resource hypothesis suggest that these variables will moderate the pattern of results. In particular, when the domain specified by the feedback is unimportant to the person, or when the feedback itself is unreliable and inaccurate, people are expected to regulate their behavior such that they attempt to maintain their positive mood and accordingly avoid negative feedback. However, when the domain is important and the feedback is reliable and accurate, people in a positive mood should have a buffer that allows them to select negative feedback in order to learn about their weaknesses. Such a positive mood should diminish the immediate affective costs of listening to negative feedback and increase the learning benefits of receiving this feedback.

### **RESEARCH ON MOOD AS A RESOURCE VERSUS A GOAL IN FEEDBACK- SEEKING BEHAVIOR**

Research by Trope and Gervy (2000) tested these claims in a series of four studies. The first study manipulated the accuracy and reliability of the feedback, whereas the second study manipulated the importance of the domain that the feedback addressed. The third study recorded the amount of time that people exposed themselves to feedback as a function of their mood and the importance of the feedback. The fourth study introduced either a learning goal or a mood-maintenance goal within the experimental setting. The methodology and results from these four studies is discussed below.

In the first study, participants filled out a similarity judgment task if they were in the neutral mood condition or recalled positive memories if they were in the positive mood condition. After completing this task, they were told that they had completed a social sensitivity test as part of the battery in which all participants took part in the beginning of the semester. They then were told that the test was either highly reliable and accurate or rather new

and untested in terms of its predictive value. Then they were given a sample of the feedback concerning liabilities and assets and were asked to indicate which types of feedback they would be interested in receiving at the end of the experiment.

When participants were told that the feedback was highly reliable and accurate, those in the positive mood condition, compared to those in the neutral mood condition, reported greater interest in receiving feedback concerning their weaknesses rather than their strengths. In contrast, when participants were told that the feedback was unreliable and probably inaccurate, those participants in the positive mood condition indicated greater interest in their strengths rather than their weaknesses. These data suggest that when the source of the feedback is not trustworthy, participants in a good mood adopted the goal of trying to maintain their positive mood by selecting positive feedback about themselves. Comparatively, when the source of the feedback was thought to be accurate, those in a positive mood seemed willing to withstand the immediate affective costs of receiving information about their weaknesses compared to their strengths. These data illustrate that people use their positive mood as a resource when feedback is accurate and reliable, and behave as though their positive mood is a goal in itself when the feedback is not very informative or trustworthy.

Data concerning participant's conceptions of the affective costs and informational value of the feedback were also collected in this study. Theoretically, the accuracy of the feedback and the mood of participants are expected to interactively determine interest in negative feedback through the change in the affective costs of the feedback and the perceived informational value of the feedback. A path analysis confirmed this prediction. When the feedback was accurate and participants were in a good mood, the affective costs of the negative feedback decreased and the informational value of the feedback increased. Also, the more the affective costs were diminished and the more the feedback was viewed as valuable, the more participants were interested in receiving negative feedback. When these changes in affective costs and informational value of feedback were controlled for, the interactive effect of positive mood and accuracy of feedback on interest in negative feedback vanished. That is, positive mood no longer increased interest in accurate negative feedback, nor did positive mood decrease interest in inaccurate positive feedback. The joint influence of accuracy of negative feedback and mood seemed to be mediated, then, by the perceived costs and informational benefits of this feedback. This process analysis lends support to the idea that positive mood enhances interest in accurate negative

feedback by decreasing the impact of the immediate affective costs of this feedback and increasing the weight of its long-term learning benefits.

The second study was similar in methodology to the first study, except that participants were told that the feedback concerned a domain that was important or unimportant for future life satisfaction and success. When participants were told that the feedback was important, participants in a positive mood condition, compared to those in the neutral mood condition, indicated greater interest in receiving feedback concerning their weaknesses compared to feedback concerning their strengths. In contrast, when the domain was described as unimportant for future life satisfaction, those participants in a positive mood reported greater interest in receiving feedback regarding their strengths compared to their weaknesses.

It seems, then, that when the feedback was unimportant, participants behaved in a way that would have maintained their positive mood. Again, these results demonstrate the circumstances in which mood is a goal versus a resource. When feedback concerns an important domain, people seem to use their positive mood as a resource for helping them learn about themselves. In contrast, when feedback is irrelevant for the person's long-term interests, people seem to regulate their behavior in order to maintain their positive mood.

The methodology for the third study was very similar to that of the first and second studies, except that all participants viewed actual feedback about their strengths and weaknesses concerning their relationship abilities. Some of the aspects of the feedback were described as important, whereas others were described as unimportant. Participants then had the opportunity to see a sample of the feedback from the test. Participants had to indicate when they were finished reading each feedback item in order to get to the next item. The critical dependent measure for the third study was the time spent reading each feedback item.

For those feedback items that were described as important, those participants who were in a good mood spent more time reading about their weaknesses rather than their strengths. In comparison, for those items that had been identified as unimportant, those in a good mood spent more time reading about their strengths compared to their weaknesses. These data suggest that people process information about their weaknesses more carefully when the feedback is important, and they have the resources needed to diminish the affective costs of hearing negative self-relevant information. In contrast, people who are in a good mood and who have the opportunity to view either positive or negative feedback about a domain

that is unimportant process the positive feedback more carefully, thereby maintaining their good mood.

Theoretically, we are proposing that people adopt a learning motive and use their positive mood as a resource when the feedback is accurate, reliable, and important to them. Otherwise, people should adopt an affective goal and try to maintain their good mood when the feedback is not reliable, accurate, or important. The purpose of the fourth study was to test this assumption by experimentally inducing either a learning or an affective goal. If the pattern of results mimics the patterns of results from the first three studies, it would constitute support for the theoretical explanation for these self-regulatory behaviors.

The methodology of the fourth study was similar to that of the other three studies, with the exception that the accuracy and importance of the feedback was not manipulated. Instead, the feedback was described to all participants as important. Participants were instructed either to feel good about themselves or to learn about themselves. It was expected that those who had the learning motive and who were in a positive mood would be more interested in feedback concerning their weaknesses compared to their strengths. Participants who were instructed to feel good and who were in a positive mood were expected to express greater interest in their strengths versus their weaknesses, in line with maintaining their positive mood.

Of those participants who were instructed to learn about themselves, those who were in a positive mood reported greater interest in their weaknesses compared to their strengths. In contrast, of participants who were instructed to feel good, those who were also in a positive mood indicated greater interest in their strengths compared to their weaknesses. These results suggest that when a learning goal is adopted, positive mood serves as a resource in enabling people to cope with the emotional cost of negative feedback and focus on its long-term learning benefits of improving their deficits. When feeling good about oneself is the goal, people try to maintain a positive mood and avoid negative information about themselves. These results parallel those of the earlier studies and suggest that when people are offered diagnostic and important feedback, people who are in a positive mood adopt a learning goal (rather than an affective goal), which in turn leads them to engage in mood-incongruent (rather than mood-congruent) information search.

Together, the Trope and Gervy studies suggest that the degree to which a positive mood produces mood-incongruent versus congruent feedback seeking depends on people's goals. When the offered feedback is diagnostic and important, positive mood acts as a resource for attaining learning goals.

The weight of affective cost of negative feedback is diminished, and the weight of its informational benefits is enhanced, thus enabling people to accept negative feedback about themselves. When the offered feedback is nondiagnostic or unimportant, positive mood becomes a goal in and of itself, and negative feedback is avoided.

### **MOOD AS A RESOURCE VERSUS A GOAL IN PROCESSING PERSUASIVE MESSAGES**

Ragunathan and Trope (2000) tested the mood-as-a-resource hypothesis by examining participant's reactions to persuasive appeals concerning a self-relevant or irrelevant topic. It was predicted that when the persuasive appeal concerns a self-relevant (rather than irrelevant) topic, participants who are in a positive mood (rather than negative mood) would show greater elaboration of negatively valenced material. Positive mood is thus conceptualized as a resource because it is expected to enable people to process relevant, negative information extensively. Participants in a negative mood, however, do not have the affective resources to handle the negative information and therefore should process the positively valenced information extensively in order to ameliorate their bad moods. In a series of three studies, Ragunathan and Trope explored different aspects of participant's reactions to reading an essay on the effects of caffeine consumption that was adapted from research by Liberman and Chaiken (1992).

In all three studies, participants were told that the essay had appeared in a prestigious medical journal to ensure that they regarded the essay as credible. Also, the essay described positive, negative, and neutral consequences of ingesting caffeinated products. Finally, the self-relevance of the essay was determined on the basis of participant's reported level of caffeine consumption. For participants who reported a relatively large level of caffeine consumption, the essay was presumably of high self-relevance, whereas for participants who reported a relatively low level of caffeine consumption, the essay was presumably of low self-relevance.

#### **Mood-Incongruent Recall**

In the first study, Ragunathan and Trope examined participants' recall of the information contained in the essay. Participants were initially given positive, negative, or no feedback on a "Lateral Thinking Ability Test." Participants who were given positive feedback reported being in a positive mood compared to those who did not receive feedback; participants who

heard negative feedback reported being in a negative mood compared to those who did not receive any feedback. All of the participants then read the essay, which contained an equal number of positive and negative pieces of information about caffeine consumption (i.e., some pieces of evidence suggested health benefits, whereas other evidence reported suggested health risks due to ingesting caffeine). Participants were then asked to recall as many of the pieces of evidence as possible.

Raghunathan and Trope predicted that for participants for whom the essay was relevant, those in a positive mood (vs. negative mood) should recall more negative (vs. positive) pieces of evidence. Participants in a negative mood, however, were expected to recall more positive (vs. negative) pieces of evidence. Consistent with these predictions, it was found that when the essay was personally relevant, participants who had a negative mood recalled more positive pieces of evidence compared to negative pieces. Participants who reported being in a positive mood, however, recalled both positive and negative pieces of evidence with a tendency to recall more negative than positive pieces of evidence. When the essay was personally irrelevant, positive mood and negative mood participants did not recall different proportions of positive and negative evidence.

These results suggest that for participants for whom the essay was relevant, a positive mood enabled a careful analysis of all information contained in the evidence rather than just the positive evidence. Such an impartial analysis of the essay might serve those participants well because they are attending to both health-affirming and health-harming information about a personally relevant topic. This suggests that their positive mood allowed an analysis of information that might benefit them in the future. After all, one would presumably want to know whether a daily habit might be injurious. Participants in a negative mood, in comparison, did not have the resources to process the negative evidence about the personally relevant issue. Instead, as indicated by their recall, they paid more attention to the positive evidence, perhaps in an attempt to alleviate their negative mood.

### **Affective Consequences of Processing**

The second study examined whether participants' moods changed after reading the persuasive appeal. If positive mood produces elaborate processing of negatively valenced self-relevant arguments, then positive mood should be attenuated after reading the essay. Thus, Raghunathan and Trope predicted that when the essay was self-relevant, participants in a positive mood should report less of a positive mood after reading the essay

compared to before reading the essay. Likewise, if participants in a negative mood are trying to alleviate their bad moods by concentrating on positive evidence, they should report more positive moods after reading the essay compared to before reading the essay.

Participants reported memories of either sad or happy events in their lives and then reported their moods. They then read the essay and were again asked to report their moods afterward. The results showed that in the positive mood condition, reading the essay decreased positive mood, whereas in the negative mood condition, reading the essay increased positive mood. Importantly, however, this pattern of mood changes was more pronounced when the essay was high rather than low in self-relevance.

Along with the results from the first study, this pattern of results suggests that when the essay was self-relevant, participants in a positive mood may have used their mood as a resource in order to manage processing the negative information. Participants who started with a positive mood felt worse after reading the essay, apparently because they attended to the negatively valenced information. In contrast, participants who started with a negative mood felt better after reading the essay, apparently because they attended to the positively valenced information.

### **Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions**

The third study assessed the degree to which participants changed their attitudes and behavioral intentions regarding caffeine consumption after reading the essay. This study was conducted to provide substantive evidence that the different strategies of information processing identified in the earlier studies in fact yield different degrees of attitude and intention change. In addition, this study was also conducted in order to rule out an alternative explanation for the previously mentioned findings. Namely, those participants who were in a positive mood might have processed the negative information more effortfully in order to refute it (e.g., Isen & Simmonds, 1978).

The design of the third study was similar to that of the second study, except that participants' attitudes and intentions toward caffeine consumption were measured 1 month prior to the study and then again immediately after participants read the essay. It was predicted that when the essay was self-relevant, participants in a positive mood should demonstrate less favorable attitudes toward caffeine consumption and weaker intentions to ingest caffeine in the future. Participants in a negative mood, however, should

report a more favorable attitude toward caffeine consumption and stronger intentions to ingest caffeine in the future.

The results showed that the effect of the essay on participants' attitudes and intentions depended on the induced mood state and the self-relevance of the essay. When the essay was self-relevant (rather than irrelevant), positive-mood participants developed less favorable attitudes and intentions toward caffeine consumption than did negative-mood participants. When the essay was self-irrelevant, there was no difference between positive and negative mood participants in their attitude toward caffeine consumption. Thus, positive mood (compared to negative mood) enabled high caffeine consumers to become less favorable toward caffeine consumption after reading the essay. These results argue against the interpretation that positive mood participants were merely trying to counter-argue self-relevant, negatively valenced arguments. Instead, as suggested by the mood-as-a-resource hypothesis, positive mood enhanced unbiased consideration and integration of various arguments in the essay into attitudes and intentions regarding caffeine consumption.

The findings of the Raghunathan and Trope studies demonstrate the operation of positive mood as a resource in processing persuasive messages. A variety of factors may give positively valenced arguments a processing advantage when people are in a positive mood state. The wish to maintain a positive mood may act against processing negatively valenced arguments (Wegener & Petty, 1994). Positive mood may signal to people that "Everything is OK," so that there is little need to extensively process information indicating the health hazards associated with one's daily habits (see Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, & Strack, 1990; Schwarz & Clore, 1996). Positive mood may also bias processing by making positively valenced material in memory more accessible and thus more readily processed compared to negatively valenced material in memory (Bower, 1981, 1991; Forgas, 1995; Isen, 1984, 1993). The present research suggests, however, that when the message contains unambiguous arguments regarding a highly self-relevant health issue, positive mood serves as a resource enabling people to engage in extensive processing of negatively valenced arguments. This processing strategy has short-term affective costs and comes at the expense of people's positive mood, but it also enables people to adopt healthier attitudes and intentions.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter explores the role of mood states in the process of acquiring self-knowledge. Acquisition of such knowledge often requires seeking



and processing of negatively valenced information, and thus poses a motivational dilemma. On the one hand, information about one's weaknesses and vulnerabilities has long-term value for future choice and self-improvement. On the other hand, such information is associated with immediate emotional costs. The mood-as-a-resource hypothesis suggests that mood influences how this conflict is resolved. Specifically, positive mood states may enable people to focus on the long-term value of negative information and better cope with its immediate emotional costs. Therefore, to the extent that important self-attributes can be diagnostically assessed, positive mood should enhance search, processing, and integration of mood-incongruent negative information.

The research reported in this chapter provides strong support for the mood-as-a-resource hypothesis. The studies by Trope and Neter (1994) and Trope and Pomerantz (1998) show that positive mood increases people's interest in receiving feedback about their weaknesses and liabilities in important performance domains. Participants in these studies knew that the offered feedback was negative. Nevertheless, they preferred this feedback to more positive feedback regarding their strengths.

The studies by Trope and Gervy (2000) further demonstrate that this mood-incongruent information search is conditional on the usefulness of the offered feedback. When the feedback was diagnostic of an important ability, participants who were in a positive mood preferentially solicited and extensively processed feedback regarding their weaknesses. However, when the offered feedback was nondiagnostic or when it pertained to an unimportant ability, participants who were in a positive mood preferred to receive feedback regarding their strengths rather than their weaknesses. Apparently, when the offered feedback was not very useful, participants were primarily motivated to maintain their positive mood and, therefore, preferred to hear positively valenced rather than negatively valenced information.

Ragunathan and Trope (2000) extended the test of the mood-as-a-resource hypothesis to processing of health-related persuasive messages. Their studies demonstrate that people in a positive mood not only selectively seek, but also better remember and accept negatively valenced arguments—arguments that specify the health risks associated with caffeine consumption. As this research showed, this processing strategy diminished participants' positive mood, but at the same time enhanced their willingness to give up unhealthy habits (see Aspinwall, 1998).

It seems, then, that instead of trying to maintain a positive mood, people are willing to exchange their positive mood for useful information about

themselves. Research on mood as a prime (Forgas, 1995), as information (Schwarz & Clore, 1996), and as a goal (Wegener & Petty, 1994) suggests that positive mood often favors a “rosy view” of the available information—a view that acts to perpetuate positive mood through mood-congruent information search and processing. Without denying the importance of these mechanisms, we claim that they represent only one side of the coin. The other side of the coin is that positive mood may also serve the function of enabling people to overcome their defensiveness and engage in extensive processing of negatively valenced information when this information can help people achieve their long-term goals. It is this adaptive aspect of positive mood states that our present program of research sought to illuminate.

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