

# When being a happy worker may be counter-productive

By Michael Mai

SHOULD you always be happy at work? Happy employees are often thought to be more productive ones. We all often pursue activities that make us happy too. Just recall when you had a fun conversation with a friend, played a prank on someone, or browsed social media to entertain yourself with small doses of comedic acts by others. Isn't being "in a good mood" conducive to being productive at work?

Unfortunately, as intuitive as it might be, this may not hold true for everyone. Our research found that happy service professionals suffer more when they encounter customer mistreatment. Published in the *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, our results showed that service professionals in a good mood feel more depleted, perceive more mistreatment, and want to detach from their work more after they have been mistreated by customers.

The reason is that employees in a good mood subconsciously expect good things to happen to them. This is, however, disconfirmed when employees encounter mistreatment from customers, a clear violation of the social code of conduct. We term this as positive expectancy disconfirmation. In contrast, when employees are in a neutral state, they are able to take the mistreatment more in their stride and react less intensely compared to their happy counterparts.

We conducted a total of 4 experimental studies. In the first online experiment, we randomly assigned participants to one of 4 conditions where they either listened to a piece of joyful music while recalling a happy event, or listened to a piece of calm music while recalling what they did yesterday, followed by listening to a voice recording of either a customer making a regular request or a customer making rude and insulting remarks at them. After this, participants responded to a survey asking them questions such as "I feel drained" and "My mind feels unfocused right now".

The results showed that participants who listened to the joyful music while recalling a happy event felt significantly more depleted after hearing the customer abusing them than participants in any other groups.

We then followed up with a field experiment with several e-commerce employees based in Asia. This time, we randomly assigned participants to either a condition where they either watched a comedy and viewed 3 happy pictures, or watched a silent clip and viewed 3 normal pictures. All participants then went through a mock customer service training where we presented 4 live chats of a customer making abusive remarks at them.

In addition to measuring participants' depletion after this training, we also measured at the end of the participants' work day, how much they felt mistreated over the work-



**Employees in a good mood expect good things to happen to them. But they may face mistreatment from customers. When they are in a neutral state, they are able to take the mistreatment more in their stride and react less intensely compared to their happy counterparts.** IMAGE: PIXABAY

day and how much they would like to detach from work.

Again, our results showed that participants who watched the comedy and viewed the happy pictures felt more depleted after the training. These participants also reported experiencing more mistreatment over the work day and a greater need for detachment from work at the end of the work day.

## How can managers help?

Crucially, we also wanted to know what managers can do to reverse this finding. Since the positive expectations associated with a good mood are the key driving force behind participants not expecting the mistreatment, we believe that a gentle reminder that customer mistreatment may occur just before participants experience the mistreatment will eliminate its effect on depletion and its subsequent downstream effects.

In our third study, an online experiment, we again use an experimental design. To manipulate mood, we used the materials in Studies 1 and 2. Participants either watched the comedy and recalled a positive event or watched the calm silent clip and recalled what they did yesterday. Before all participants listened to the customer mistreatment voice recording, we told them to read an e-mail sent by their managers. In the expectation of customer mistreatment e-mail, the managers briefly mentioned about customer mistreatment on the rise recently and that employees should be psychologically prepared.

In the control e-mail, the managers briefly mentioned about some tasks to complete. Our findings showed that participants' depletion levels were significantly higher in the "positive mood and control e-mail" group than those in the

"neutral mood and control e-mail" group.

However, for those in the "positive mood and expectation of customer mistreatment e-mail" group, participants reported significantly lower levels of depletion than those in the "positive mood and control e-mail" group.

In our fourth study, we again replicated this experiment at an Indian hotel. With a design similar to Study 2, we again found support for our findings in Study 2, where we tested how much participants felt mistreated over the workday and how much they would like to detach from work, and Study 3, where we used a manager's e-mail to eliminate the positive expectations associated with a positive mood.

Our research cautions against generalising research findings without paying attention to what employees encounter at work. That is, for employees with a higher frequency of encountering negative events at work, encouraging positive mood may come at a cost. Managers should be aware of this and provide timely reminders and support to their subordinates.

## Implications for other industries

Keeping your employees happy and being happy with their job can be important for you, as a good manager and leader. Although we studied in the context of customer service, these effects can be held true to other industries as well.

Based on our study, it doesn't mean that one should prevent employees from seeking for joy during work breaks, but really, we would like the managers to be aware of such phenomenon and be prepared.

Our results also point towards being neutral as potentially beneficial, at least for service employees, who could have a higher chance of facing mistreatments. This is consistent with recent research suggesting that staying neutral may improve people's coping response and judgments making by signalling that things are normal.

One way of keeping on an even keel is through mindfulness meditation. Notably, past studies found that mindfulness meditation reduces emotional inferences in tasks. Therefore, such an exercise could potentially attenuate the negativity of customer mistreatment by reducing the negativity associated with the mistreatment.

Given that mindfulness has increasingly been suggested to be a positive recovery exercise during work breaks, our research adds to this growing body of work by suggesting an additional benefit of engaging in mindfulness meditation.

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