

The Emotional Fitness of A Soldier - Balancing Positivity and Negativity in the Military

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Abstract:

It is an unspoken fact that negativity and cynicism are damaging to many of the activities conducted within the military. The author, with examples from psychological studies and various cognitive experiments, claims that positivity can improve one's mental prowess—stating how important this is for commanders when it comes to training their men and especially out on the battlefield to lead their men to safety. Conversely, a case is also made that negativity threatens the mutual respect between soldiers and their peers, as well as between commanders and their soldiers. The author feels that the contagiousness of both positivity and negativity has an important implication for the military—that the emotional fitness of every serviceman now becomes the responsibility of his fellow comrades. Hence, this essay seeks to use empirical evidence for psychological science to make a case for increasing positivity and decreasing negativity in the military.

Keywords: Positivity; Case Study; Emotional Fitness; Psychological Resilience; Social Resource

INTRODUCTION

Why do we sing songs, in unison, during route marches? To keep the troop morale high, of course. If we do not keep singing, the fatigue built up as the route march progresses takes its toll and the comrade trudging beside us may well be cursing the sweltering heat, complaining about his sore legs and swearing at the ridiculously long distance left. Soon, we start to feel the same ourselves. Almost no one would disagree that this situation is far from ideal. In fact, the proliferation of negativity and cynicism is not just critically damaging to the success of route marches, but also to that of many other activities we conduct in the army. Positivity is essential for the man on the ground and this essay seeks to make a case for increasing positivity and decreasing negativity in the military.

The present essay does not belong to the self-help genre and hence does not tell you how to move towards a happier life. Rather, it seeks to use the empirical evidence from psychological science to make a case for increasing positivity and decreasing negativity in the military. Towards this end, I will explain specifically how positivity can enhance (and how negativity can impede) our soldiers' operational effectiveness, by (a) broadening their minds and (b) building their psychological and social resources. I will also expound how these points are related to our vision of being a 'Respected Army'. In addition, I will talk about the infectious nature of positivity and negativity and the implications that this would have on the military. Then, I will posit a nuanced view about the importance of negative emotions under certain specific, restricted circumstances. I will also



SLTC(NS) Ng (right) pinning the epaulette on his son LTA Ng at his commissioning parade. He added happily: "Of course I was very proud. To see Russell graduating from OCS and to have encouraged him through the nine months and finally (getting to) pin on the epaulette, it's a very memorable process."

seek to address the concerns that the reader may have about the judicious balancing of positive and negative emotions. However, I will briefly argue that it is not unreasonable to posit that this plan can be conceptualised, owing to progress in psychological science.

POSITIVITY, NOT NEGATIVITY, BROADENS MINDS

Positivity broadens our minds and helps us absorb as much information from the environment as we can. Negativity, on the other hand, constricts our minds and limits what we take in from the external world.¹

Out in the field, an appreciation of the battlefield situation is crucial for a commander. He needs to be on the lookout for information and note down as many relevant details as possible. He needs to be

able to piece the incoming information together in a meaningful way, connecting the dots to form a coherent whole. Creative thinking, a critical skill in the conceptual thinking competency domain in the SAF Leadership Competency Model, is also needed to achieve mission success.² In peacetime, as an instructor goes about planning and conducting training, he needs to exercise creativity so training does not get too repetitive and his trainees are able to learn more effectively. He also needs to be receptive to the beliefs, desires, aspirations and fears of his trainees to better leverage on their intrinsic motivation. When a staff officer works on a paper, he needs to go out and understand the needs and concerns of all the different stakeholders. The staff officer then needs to integrate them and represent them accurately, cogently, and sometimes creatively.



At the graduation ceremony for SAF's 'Continuing Professional Education Programme', COL Ng Wai Kit, Deputy Commandant, SAFTI Military Institute / Commandant, Goh Keng Swee Command and Staff College, spoke about how the programme enabled trainers to teach the right things, the right way.

In this section, I will argue that there is psychological evidence to suggest that an army leader can achieve the aforementioned needs better when his mind is broadened under the influence of positivity. The needs are:

- (1) receptiveness to information;
- (2) integration of information;
- (3) creativity

I will then explain how this, in turn, relates to our vision of being a 'Respected Army'.

ENHANCING RECEPTIVENESS TO INFORMATION

Positivity is said to broaden our minds because, evidently, it makes us more receptive to information.

This means that we can take in more information from the external environment. Evidence for this comes from an experiment, in which cutting-edge eye-tracking technology was used to capture the eye movements of participants who were presented with pictures on a computer screen. The pictures were grouped in threes, with one in the centre and two at the periphery. Participants were told to view the slide show passively. When positive emotions were induced in participants, they moved their eyes around more and spent more time looking at periphery photos.³

This finding suggests that positivity helps us take in more information. It allows us to observe more than what we can normally observe in a neutral or negative state. This heightened receptiveness to information

will allow the commander to be more effective in intelligence gathering; the instructor to be more attentive in observing the behaviour of his trainees; and the staff officer to be more cognisant of what the various stakeholders want.

Out in the field, an appreciation of the battlefield situation is crucial for a commander. He needs to be on the lookout for information and note down as many relevant details as possible. He needs to be able to piece the incoming information together in a meaningful way, connecting the dots to form a coherent whole.

There is a physiological explanation for how our minds are broadened with positivity. In one study, an electrical recording technique was employed to measure the activity of two muscles, which are activated in tandem to produce genuine smiles that express true positivity: the *zygomaticus major* which pulls your lip corners up and the *orbicularis oculi* which crinkles the skin beside your eyes. The researchers found that when both muscles were activated simultaneously, attention span (measured by precise computerised tests) was broadened. In a sense, one's mind is literally opened up by his smile.⁴

CONNECTING THE DOTS - SEEING THE FOREST AND THE TREES

While we know now that positivity may allow a SAF commander to take in more information, we are also familiar with the concept of information overload, a feature of this interconnected world. This phenomenon is believed to impede decision-making processes vital for mission success.⁵ As such, it is

reasonable to question if an increased receptiveness to information brought about by enhanced positivity would necessarily impair the sense-making process. However, contrary to this, evidence reveals that individuals seem to become better at integrating information coherently, when positivity is boosted.

Such evidence comes from a study, in which physicians articulated the steps leading to their diagnosis aloud, as they worked on the case of a patient with liver disease. It was found that by giving the physicians a bag of candy, they became more effective in integrating case information and were less likely to be stuck with their initial ideas. With positivity, they were less prone to arriving at premature closure in their thought processes and making diagnostic errors.⁶ Another study of business

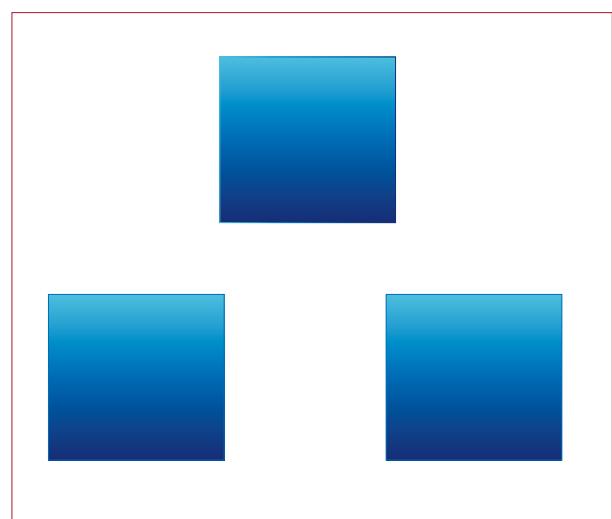


Figure 1

leaders arrived at a similar conclusion: managers who were more positive were more careful in making decisions and made less mistakes.⁷ These results, taken together, provide convergent evidence for the claim that enhanced positivity does not impede, but rather, improves integration of information. As such, it is plausible that positivity will lead to better sense-making on the part of the commander, better holistic understanding of trainees on the part of the instructor

and better synthesis of divergent stakeholder concerns on the part of the staff officer.

How does positivity help one to integrate different sources of information? One, but not necessarily the only potential explanation for this is that positivity helps one to connect the dots by preventing him from missing the forest for the trees. Look at *Figure 1*. Do you see a triangle? Or do you see a group of squares? There is no correct or wrong answer. The figure can be both. Psychologists sought to crudely measure the scope of their subject's attention by presenting similar arrangements of shapes to them. The participants reported if they saw an arrangement as being more similar to a triangle composed of smaller triangles or a square composed of smaller squares. The psychologists found that the participants' ability to see the big picture (for example the triangle for the case of

Figure 1) was dependent on their emotional state. The peripheral vision of their participants expanded or shrank depending on whether positivity or negativity was injected into them, respectively.⁸ The researchers concluded that by broadening one's mind, positivity allows one to see both the forest and the trees.⁹

A heightened receptiveness to information will allow the commander to be more effective in intelligence gathering; the instructor to be more attentive in observing the behaviour of his trainees; and the staff officer to be more cognisant of what the various stakeholders want.



Ms Salizawati and her children welcome her husband, Captain (CPT) Rudie Imran Masih, home from long periods of training. "That's how we help him maintain a positive mindset at work - by supporting him in his work."

CREATIVITY

Positivity is known to enhance creativity. In one study, participants were required to perform a task that measured their scope of attention and another that measured their creativity, using the Remote Associates Test. When positive emotions were induced in the participants, the broadness of their attention and level of their creativity were both enhanced significantly. This shows that positivity broadens the mind in multiple, interrelated ways.¹⁰

As such, it is reasonable to assert that enhancing positivity levels can help our commanders engage their creative thinking capacities better, help our instructors innovate to make training more effective and help our staff officers arrive at original proposals that stakeholders would be more amenable to. As our soldiers become more competent in the functions they perform, they can evaluate themselves in a more favourable light, and hence gain more self-respect. Moreover, when the enhanced competence and operational effectiveness of our soldiers are showcased in public events and bi/multilateral exchanges, confidence in the SAF will be reinforced and our already strong deterrent effect will increase.

POSITIVITY, NOT NEGATIVITY, BUILDS RESOURCES

Social Resources

In a POINTER monograph, former Chief of Defence Force, Lieutenant-General (LG) (RET) Neo Kian Hong, emphasised the importance of ‘interpersonal effectiveness’ and ‘communicating to influence’, as he shared his reflections on leadership in the 3G SAF.¹¹ These are vital skills in the domain of social competency, as articulated in the SAF Leadership Competency Model and they are deliberately developed in our leaders.¹² A necessary precondition for the effective deployment of the aforementioned two social skills is the existence of strong, positive relationships between the leader and the led. Such relationships

can be construed as a resource that can be built. In the present section, I will argue that positivity builds a social resource; one which fosters mutual respect amongst our soldiers.

There is evidence that by opening up and sharing his genuine positivity with others, one can strengthen the connections he shares with the latter. Fredrickson cited a study involving new college roommates, who were encouraged to express their appreciation to each other. It was found that by expressing the positive emotion of gratitude, these roommates became closer friends.¹³ According to Fredrickson, positivity allows individuals to perceive more overlap between others and themselves.¹⁴ As a result, they feel more connected to and are more trusting toward people that matter in their lives. It is not unimaginable that, through such a process, positivity can enhance camaraderie between new platoon mates in Basic Military Training and enrich the social capital present in the Army’s departmental offices. Arguably, trust goes hand in hand with mutual respect.¹⁵ This means the more our soldiers trust each other, the more respect they will tend to have for each other. As such, it is reasonable to posit that positivity would engender mutual respect. Conversely, it is plausible that negativity and cynicism would threaten the mutual respect between our soldiers and their peers, as well as, between commanders and their soldiers.

By building up a leader’s social resources, positivity allows him to attain the ‘interpersonal effectiveness’ that LG (RET) Neo spoke about. Evidence for this comes from a study conducted in the corporate world.¹⁶ Managers with greater positivity were found to infect their teams with greater positivity as well. This produced better coordination among team members and reduced the effort required to complete their assigned work. In other words, these managers

were more effective interpersonally. In the SAF context, this can be translated to higher operational effectiveness.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR RESILIENCE

"To be resilient means to bend without breaking and to quickly rebound from adversity".¹⁷ Resilience is required for a soldier to deal with intensely stressful situations that arise from protracted deployments, secondary duties or even conscription. As such, it is undoubtedly perceived, by the organisation, to be essential for operational effectiveness. In this section, I will argue that positivity may yet enhance our Army's efforts towards this end, by building the psychological resources needed for the aforementioned 'rebound' process.

First, I will review evidence that individuals use positive emotions to cope with adversity in life. In a series of experiments, Tugade and Fredrickson provided evidence that the experiencing of positive emotions mediated the 'rebound' process by helping individuals to achieve efficient emotion regulation, as assessed by accelerated cardiovascular recovery from negative emotional arousal.¹⁸ Beyond this 'rebound' process, the authors demonstrated that positive emotions contributed to the individuals' discovery of positive meaning under stressful circumstances. The role of positivity in mediating resilience is not just limited to dealing with laboratory-induced stressors. Indeed, Fredrickson and colleagues showed that positivity accounted for reduced depression and increased post-crisis growth in the face of the September 11th terrorist attacks, a real-world tragedy.¹⁹

Positivity is not just important for enhancing resilience in the present moment. There is good evidence to suggest that the psychological resources built by frequent experiences of positive emotions are

lasting and hence can potentially be useful for dealing with adversity in the future. One study showed that an exercise that enhanced positivity resulted in gains in such psychological resources, which persisted over a 15-month period, even when the exercise ceased to be practised.²⁰

This means the more our soldiers trust each other, the more respect they will tend to have for each other. As such, it is reasonable to posit that positivity would engender mutual respect. Conversely, it is plausible that negativity and cynicism would threaten the mutual respect between our soldiers and their peers, as well as, between commanders and their soldiers.

Are there are real benefits of building up one's psychological resources to deal with traumatic events? The United States (US) Army seems to think so and hence dedicate a section in their Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme: a resilience-training programme, to the development of emotional resilience. Their belief is grounded by cutting-edge science, which reveals that such emotional resilience will significantly reduce rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide, improve mental health, boost empathic accuracy, enrich interpersonal relationships, enhance problem solving skills, as well as promote wound healing, among other benefits.²¹

THE CONTAGIOUS EFFECTS OF POSITIVITY AND NEGATIVITY

Positivity and negativity are not experiences that are limited to specific individuals. Indeed, there is evidence to indicate that they are contagious.

While a previously mentioned study has suggested that a manager's positivity affects his team, there is more formal evidence for the contagiousness of positivity.²² Fowler and Christakis conducted a study that demonstrated the spread of happiness among connected individuals.²³ They showed that individuals connected to many happy individuals can be reliably predicted to become happier in time to come; an effect that is limited to three degrees of separation and is observed in the form of clusters of happy and unhappy people in the social network. In addition, the researchers' use of longitudinal statistical modelling provides support to the view that these clusters of happiness are a corollary of the spread of happiness and not merely due to the tendency of similar individuals to seek out one another's company.

As our soldiers become more competent in the functions they perform, they can evaluate themselves in a more favourable light, and hence gain more self-respect. Moreover, when the enhanced competence and operational effectiveness of our soldiers are showcased in public events and bi/multilateral exchanges, confidence in the SAF will be reinforced and our already strong deterrent effect will increase.

Moreover, another modelling study that used the same data set provided formal evidence for the spread



2LT Arshaq all smiles as his brothers put his new rank on his uniform.

of negative emotions within social networks, which was likened to an ‘infectious disease’.²⁴ In the light of such evidence, one can imagine how a soldier’s negativity could undermine the beliefs of his fellow soldiers, especially those of the full-time national servicemen (NSFs), that they are serving their country in a meaningful way and hence harming the latter’s commitment to defence. As the NSFs share their negative experiences with their friends outside our Army, the respect that our citizens, defence partners and potential adversaries have for our Army would be adversely affected. Moreover, it is also wholly possible that any cynicism displayed by our seasoned regulars could easily poison the minds of those who have just joined the service, brimming with passion. If cynicism were to be pervasive in our Army, the nobility of our profession would be greatly undermined and we would then have scant self-respect as soldiers. Arguably, just as positivity can spread and boost team performance, so persistent negativity can over time, erode our operational effectiveness, as well as, impede our path towards becoming a Respected Army.²⁵

The contagiousness of positivity and negativity have an important implication for the Singapore Army: within the tightly interconnected social unit, the emotional fitness of every serviceman also becomes the responsibility of his fellow comrades. To the extent that positivity broaden one’s mind and builds vital resources and that the extent that negativity works against this, the Singapore Army could reap compounding benefits, in terms of operational effectiveness and respect, by providing soldiers with emotion-based skills training.

THE NECESSITY OF NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

This essay seeks to make a case for ‘decreasing negativity’ in the Singapore Army. It is important to note that this essay advocates for the reduction, but not the elimination, of negative emotions. Indeed,

negativity and negative emotions do not mean the same thing.²⁶ Granted, negativity narrows our minds and does not help us build our social and psychological resources. Nevertheless, negative emotions are not detrimental under certain conditions.

Scientists believe that negative emotions have evolved because they have been functionally useful for our survival.²⁷ Fear is associated with the urge to flee, anger with the urge to attack and disgust with the urge to expel, to name a few. One can easily imagine how the aforementioned emotions could have been adaptive in our evolutionary history. Indeed, they would have been useful for determining our response to spotted predators, perceived transgressions and accidentally consumed toxic foods respectively; all these responses would have been vital for our continued survival.

The value of negative emotions is not just limited to our evolutionary history; it also extends to military operations. Negative emotions generated in the face of danger have been associated with important physiological changes. Indeed, under such circumstances, the cardiovascular system directs more oxygenated blood to skeletal muscles, while the adrenal glands release more cortisol to activate more sources of energy by increasing glucose in the blood stream.²⁸ These physiological changes might ostensibly allow a soldier to move faster, act more aggressively and perform better in the heat of the battle.

Although I have argued that negative emotions are important for the success of military operations, it should be noted that modern armies, in general, spend much of their time in mission planning and preparation (in theatre), or in peacetime training, both of which are situations that comes with the risk of injury. Moreover, if the reader is worried that positivity may generate an unrealistically optimistic view of the

battle situation (that may be detrimental to mission success), then he should take comfort in the widely-replicated finding that people integrate information more objectively under the influence of positivity (as described previously). As such, it is apparent that the Singapore Army still has much to gain by increasing positivity and decreasing negativity under many circumstances.

THE RIGHT BALANCE OF NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE EMOTIONS

At this juncture, the reader may be rightly concerned about whether the Army would, by focusing on increasing positivity, necessarily neglect important negative emotions (described in the preceding paragraph). While this is a valid point, it is not one that matches up with the bulk of empirical evidence.²⁹ For instance, Diener and Emmons found that positive and negative effects are relatively independent in the long run. This means that it is entirely possible for one to be high on positive emotions and high on negative emotions at the same time.³⁰ As positive and negative emotions vary in a relatively independent way, we should not worry about neglecting vital negative emotions when we seek to increase our positivity. Moreover, even if certain psychological interventions may increase positivity and decrease negativity at the same time, they probably do not pose a real threat because most people are higher on negative affect and lower on positive affect, than desirable (see later part of section).

The reader may also worry if the focus on decreasing negativity might become excessive, and hence result in the neglect of the negative emotions that serve us so well in the heat of the battle. Such concern is justified. However, it should not stop us

from seeking to reduce negativity, which is defined as the frequent and gratuitous experiencing of negative emotions. While the excessive consumption of vitamin A is potentially lethal, this, in no way, prevents us from attempting to consume foods containing moderate amounts of vitamin A for our visual health. Along the same line of reasoning, the possibility that vital negative emotions might be neglected due to excessive decrement of negativity should not warrant us throwing it out completely.

Now, we know that we should decrease negativity, but not eliminate negative emotions. The next question will be: to what extent should we decrease our negative emotions? Fortunately, there is an answer to this question. Convergent evidence from mathematical modelling, correlational studies and experimental research have revealed that the benefits of positivity occur when the ratio of positive-to-negative emotions that we experience is greater than or equal to 3:1.³¹ Moreover, extensive surveys have demonstrated that most individuals fall below such a ratio and hence could potentially benefit from increasing their positivity and decreasing their negativity.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

How then can we go about increasing positivity and decreasing negativity? Fortunately, just like there is good psychological evidence for the benefits of positivity and costs to negativity, there is also strong empirical evidence for the effectiveness of several psychological interventions aimed at modifying positivity and/or negativity.³² Owing to the relative independence of negativity and positivity, one should not reasonably expect every single intervention to be effective in increasing positivity and decreasing negativity simultaneously.

TO HAVE POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE EMOTIONS HERE AND NOW?

"A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don't want to be at mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them."

~Oscar Wilde³³

Positive and negative emotions are both adaptive under different conditions. How can our servicemen decide whether positive or negative emotions are beneficial for them here and now? While this question falls out of the ambit of this essay, it is probably a burning question in the reader's mind. As such, I will seek to provide a short and hopefully satisfactory answer: the development of emotional intelligence.³⁴ This allows the generation of insight about where/when to have positive/negative emotions and the subsequent flexible deployment of emotions accordingly. The former will require a meta-cognitive element. Towards this end, the US Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme teaches soldiers to improve their capability to differentiate among emotions and to label them, so that they will learn what emotions reveal about themselves and others.³⁵ In doing so, soldiers would be more adept in identifying patterns of gratuitous negativity and in capitalising on opportunities to cultivate positivity. They would also know when negative emotions are necessary.

CONCLUSION

In the essay, I have used empirical evidence from Behavioural and Cognitive Science to advance a case for increasing positivity and decreasing negativity in the military. We need to bear in mind that emotions play a functional and adaptive role in our lives and is not inconsistent with a tough warrior ethos. Only then can we enjoy the benefits of an enhanced operational

effectiveness and command (all three pillars of) respect as an Army, brought about by increased positivity and decreased negativity. 

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Although the exposition of such psychological interventions lies beyond the scope of this essay, I choose to describe one such intervention that is targeted at increasing positivity. The gratitude visit is an intervention, in which individuals compose and then deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but whom they had yet to properly thank. Empirical evidence demonstrates that the gratitude visit results in a lowered negative affect and heightened positive affect one month from the implementation of the psychological intervention (Seligman et al., 2011).

33. Oscar Wilde, "The Picture of Dorian Grey," Wikiquote, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_Picture_of_Dorian_Gray
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