
Review Article



Strategies to mitigate negative emotions

Korngleng Sear *

Western Training Center, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Received: October 15, 2025

Revised: April 12, 2026

Accepted: May 28, 2026

Abstract

In daily life, people experience a blend of positive emotions, such as enjoyment, love, and interest, as well as negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, and regret. Drawing on secondary data, this article discusses how to mitigate negative emotions. It begins with a discussion of three common types of people after they face a miserable life event: those who were knocked down and permanently dispirited by the event; those who rose above the roadblock and got their life back to normal; and those who overcome adversity, bounce back to their normal lives, and become stronger. The article then discusses the impact of positive and negative emotions on people. Next, it raises several insights into managing negative emotions, ranging from basic to more challenging strategies. Finally, the article concludes that when confronted with major life challenges, people can rise above the difficulties and return to their normal lives not weaker, but stronger.

Keywords: Emotional capacity; positive emotions; negative emotions; strategies; life challenges

Introduction

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche reputedly said, “Whatever does not kill me, makes me stronger.” (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 5). Most people feel thrilled and motivated when they come across this saying for the first time. However, not everyone who goes through acute adversities, major life challenges, and a series of failures can be resilient and ultimately become stronger. Research by the International Committee for the Study of Victimization reported that people who suffered severe adversity, such as prisoners of war, cancer patients,

* Korngleng Sear ✉ korngleng@gmail.com 📍 Western Training Center, #66, St. 217, Russey Village, Sangkat Steung Mean Chey, Khan Mean Chey, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

accident victims, and the like, would generally fall into the following three groups ([Stearns, 1988](#)).

1. Those who were knocked down and permanently dispirited by the event
2. Those who rose above the roadblock and got their life back to normal
3. Those who overcome adversity, bounce back to their normal lives, and become stronger

People in Group 1 experience what is known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which refers to negative consequences, including anxiety, depression, trouble sleeping, and difficulty focusing after a major difficulty ([Ben-Shahar, 2021](#)). For example, under the Khmer Rouge regime from April 17, 1975 to January 7, 1979, almost all Cambodian citizens suffered physically, mentally, and emotionally from torture, malnutrition, overwork, and diseases ([Chandler, 2000](#)). Twenty years after the end of this notorious regime, research conducted with 586 Cambodian refugees who relocated to California in the U.S. revealed that a majority of them had experienced PTSD and depression ([Marshall et al., 2005](#)). Due to the negative reinforcement from the regime, many Cambodian people decided to move to other countries because they were afraid of the recurrence of the regime.

In Group 2, people are resilient. Resilience is the inner strength that make people rebound from hardships, including chronic illness, job loss, or the death of a loved one ([Mayo Clinic Staff, 2023](#)). In fact, resilience originally comes from an engineering term ([Ben-Shahar, 2021](#)). Any substance or material is resilient when it returns to its original shape after enduring pressure. On the other hand, it is worth noting that what marks a quick or slow recovery depends largely on individuals' experience. People are most likely quick to bounce back to their normal lives if they had experienced several intense predicaments in the past, such as heartbreak, poverty, job loss, and severe illness ([Grant, 2013](#)).

Finally, people in Group 3 could go one more step beyond resilience, which is called antifragile by author and statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb ([Taleb, 2014](#)). Antifragile, according to Taleb, occurs when a substance or material endures stress or pressure but does not return to its original state ([Taleb, 2014](#)). Instead, it grows stronger as a result. The same holds true for people. These people never let setbacks and shortcomings knock them down. They also suffer

from physical, mental, and emotional challenges, but they remain tough, persistent, and strive to overcome every roadblock in their lives. They are in no way different from the group of over 400 people in a study by Victor Goertzel and Mildred Goertzel. [Goertzel and Goertzel \(2004\)](#) discovered that brilliant people, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Albert Schweitzer, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein, had experienced profound hardship in their lives.

- Three-fourths of them grew up in abject poverty and broken homes with difficult parents who were domineering.
- Seventy-four of the eighty-five fiction and drama writers surveyed, and sixteen of the twenty poets, lived with parents who possessed psychological drama.
- More than one-fourth of them did not have adequate physical condition. Some were blind, deaf, or crippling ([Goertzel & Goertzel, 2004](#)).

According to psychologists, people who faced major life challenges are more likely to experience post-traumatic growth (PTG) than PTSD ([Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006](#)). Their sharp ability to leverage their willpower and inner strengths sets them apart from the rest and propels them to endure hardships, bounce back, and thrive to become stronger. They are roses growing from the concrete, lotuses blossoming in the mud, and extremophiles living and growing in temperatures either below 0 °C or over 100 °C. As leadership expert John C. Maxwell beautifully wrote in his 2025 book, *The Charismatic Leader*, “And I’ve seen a lot of people who grew up with few advantages rise above their situation and become winners in every sense of the word” ([Maxwell, 2025, p. 14](#)).

Negative emotions are a common part of life and can significantly affect our well-being; therefore, it is essential to address them effectively. Furthermore, understanding the root causes of negative emotions and practicing appropriate coping strategies can help individuals manage these emotions, regain control of their lives, and emerge not merely restored to their normal state, but as stronger and more resilient individuals.

This article aims to discuss how to mitigate negative emotions. Drawing on secondary data, the article begins by explaining the impacts of positive and negative emotions on humans. It then highlights insights to mitigate negative emotions, confront major life challenges, and become stronger. The article

concludes that people will eventually rise above difficulties and become stronger by embracing science-based insights and perseverance without giving up on themselves.

Positive and negative emotions

We all experience a blend of positive and negative emotions in our day-to-day activities. According to Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, there are approximately 20,000 moments in an individual's waking day (Rath & Clifton, 2004). This discovery indicates that each moment of an individual's life will be filled with either positive or negative emotions. Upbeat emotions may help people calm their minds, perform better tasks, interact well with others, and bolster their level of happiness. A survey conducted by Gallup, a global analytics and advisory firm, with 15 million employees found that when employees experienced elevated positive moods through recognition and praise, they became more productive, engaged more with their colleagues, were less likely to leave the organization, and contributed to higher customer satisfaction (Harter et. al., 2003, as cited in Rath & Clifton, 2004). Similarly, another study found that leaders who consistently display positive emotions could establish a team filled with positive moods, enhance job satisfaction, and increase group performance (George, 1995).



Figure 1. The Feeling Wheel (Wilcox, 1982)

Negative emotions, on the other hand, can drain people's energy, hinder their thinking, distract their focus, and, more severely, threaten their overall well-being. Studies have suggested that employees who work with a boss they dislike may experience significantly higher blood pressure ([Bhattacharya, 2003](#)) and face an increased risk of coronary heart disease by one-sixth and stroke by one-third ([Fieldman, n.d., as cited in Rath & Clifton, 2004](#)).

As shown in Figure 1, the Feeling Wheel is composed of a mixture of positive and negative emotions. At the center of the wheel lies the six major emotions: fear, surprise, anger, sadness, disgust, and happiness. Each of these six emotions then makes up the other 24 emotions.

Positive emotions

Positive emotions profoundly affect people's overall well-being. Praise and recognition are the critical components to elevate positive moods ([Rath & Don, 2004](#)) and predict higher employee engagement ([Clifton & Harter, 2023](#)). In fact, the wisdom of good and kind words was uncovered by some wise people centuries ago. King of Israel Solomon wisely said, "The tongue has the power of life and death." ([Chapman, 1992, p. 4](#)). Likewise, American writer Mark Twain once remarked, "I can live for two months on a good compliment." ([Chapman, 1992, p. 4](#)). According to [Helliwell et al. \(2025\)](#), laughter, enjoyment, and interest play a huge role in positive emotions for promoting people's well-being.

Negative emotions

Reinforcement of regular negative emotions definitely results in devastation to people's lives. U.S. Army's chief psychiatrist William E. Mayer conducted a fascinating study with 1,000 American prisoners of war (POWs) who were caught and detained at North Korean camps ([Mayer, 1967, as cited in Rath & Don, 2004](#)). Mayer was eager to find the reasons why the North Korean captors did not use brutal punishment or unusual treatments on the inmates, but the result was staggering. The overall death rate in the North Korean camps was 38%, the highest death toll of POWs in U.S. military history. Meyer discovered that those North Korean captors employed what he called the "ultimate weapon" in order to impose psychological torture and deprivation on those soldiers. To achieve the "ultimate weapon," the captors used the following four approaches:

- Informing
- Self-criticism
- Breaking loyalty to leadership and country
- Withholding all positive emotional support (Mayer, 1967, as cited in Rath & Don, 2004).

According to Mayer (1967, as cited in Rath & Don, 2004), withholding all positive emotional support was considered the most malicious. To promote this tactic, the captors always withheld the good and supportive letters from the soldiers' family members. Conversely, negative letters, such as a relative's death or a wife's remarriage, were sent immediately to the soldiers. The impact was devastating: the soldiers lost hope and believed that they had nothing to live for. When the survivors were released, they could call their loved ones, but only a few made the call. Upon arriving home, a soldier isolated himself and did not keep in touch with others. He walked to the corner of his room, sat down, and covered his head with a blanket. Two days later, he was reported dead.

The bottom line is that emotions are the measure of an individual's happiness and sadness. The more positive emotions like pleasure, joy, fortune, and comfort people experience, the happier they are. Nevertheless, the more negative emotions such as pain, suffering, misfortune, and hardship people experience, the unhappier they are. In this regard, positive emotions and negative emotions play a significant role in increasing and decreasing the level of happiness, respectively. Research has shown that being depressed decreases life satisfaction by 1.3 points and being jobless decreases about 0.5 points on a 0–10 self-reported wellbeing scale (Plant et al., 2025). Conversely, a doubling of income increases life satisfaction by about 0.2 points, and getting married is about a 0.3-point increase (Plant et al., 2025).

An example of a major life challenge

I believe that every individual used to confront or is confronting or will confront at least one big life obstacle. That occurred to me when I was in my late 20s. I was facing an uphill battle with a common eye disease called dry eye. Five years after the diagnosis, the dry eye became intense and chronic. When I went to meet the optometrist for a regular checkup, the result consistently showed that it was just a dry eye. However, I suffered more hurtful day by day.

More seriously, the pain doubled when I entered the classrooms to teach my students because the cold temperature made by the air conditioners drastically impacted my eyes, and I had to teach five hours a day, five days a week.

Then, COVID-19 attacked and spread around the world. The government ordered the lockdown of all schools in the country. All teaching and learning must be done online. I had to sit in front of the computer screen to teach my students. I confessed that it was the most challenging event in my life. My eyes hurt so much that I dreamed about them even when I slept at night. Every day, I tried to find any possible solutions to heal and help myself. I encouraged myself by reading Jim Collins's best business book, *Good to Great*. In the book, he encouragingly wrote:

Life is unfair—sometimes to our advantage, sometimes to our disadvantage. We will all experience disappointments and crushing events somewhere along the way, setbacks for which there is no 'reason,' no one to blame. It might be disease; it might be injury; it might be an accident; it might be losing a loved one; it might be getting swept away in a political shake-up; it might be getting shot down over Vietnam and thrown into a POW camp for eight years. What separates people, Stockdale taught me, is not the presence or absence of difficulty, but how they deal with the inevitable difficulties of life. In wrestling with life's challenges, the Stockdale Paradox (you must retain faith that you will prevail in the end and you must also confront the most brutal facts of your current reality) has proved powerful for coming back from difficulties not weakened, but stronger—not just for me, but for all those who've learned the lesson and tried to apply it. (Collins, 2001, pp. 85-86)

His observation is true. The external factors do not matter. What truly matters is our response to those crushing events. I saw no good rationale for sitting down and ruminating on the negative or feeling sorry for myself. Instead of dwelling on the uncontrollable aspects of this incurable disease, I direct my focus on the positives of my life. My family helps me concentrate on what could be done. I applied the Stockdale Paradox by having an unwavering belief that my painful situation would not be permanent, and simultaneously, I disciplined myself to do whatever it takes to confront that major life challenge. At a crucial moment, the care of my family, coupled with my personal optimism

and self-discipline, had a significant influence on my recovery.

How to mitigate negative emotions

In early 1995, *Emotional Intelligence*, written by psychologist Daniel Goleman, was published. The book was a big hit and became a bestseller. Since its publication, it has helped many people deal with their emotions globally. To live better and accumulate our well-being, we must learn to build our emotional capacity. The good news is that emotional intelligence (EI) can be developed and strengthened. As Daniel Goleman asserted, “It is fortunate, then, that emotional intelligence can be learned. The process is not easy. It takes time and, most of all, commitment.” (Goleman, 2011, p. 83). The following are strategies that help to mitigate negative emotions.

Having faith that an adverse condition is temporary

It is important to realize that a difficult condition is never permanent. The recovery relies heavily on the cut we suffer from. If the cut is very deep, then it requires a longer period of time to recuperate. But no matter what the rough situations are, they are temporary. We can go through and overcome them. Psychologists found out that more than half of people, by six months, are past what they call “acute grief” (Bonnano et al., 2002). Furthermore, people can recover from their setbacks quickly if they can overcome the three Ps, which stunt resilience: personalization (the belief that people themselves committed a mistake), pervasiveness (the belief that the event will impact other areas of their lives), and permanence (the belief that the aftershocks of the event will internalize the rest of their lives (Maier & Seligman, 2016; Seligman, 2006). Many studies showed that children and adults recover from their grief quickly when they believe that hardships are not their own fault, have no effect on other aspects of their lives, and will not follow them for the rest of their lives (Sandberg & Grant, 2017).

History suggests that people, no matter what the external circumstances are, can overcome them. For instance, Cambodian people have been in the Khmer Rouge era for over three years. Many still could make it, receive full freedom, and reunite with their relatives (Chandler, 2000). Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years and was eventually released and elected to be the first president of South Africa (Finzel, 2017). He then became an exemplary leader whom people want to emulate and learn from across the globe. Remember, it is our choice to be proactive or reactive to the situation.

Cultivating hope

Just like plants, which need water and sunlight to survive, people need hope to continue their lives. Without hope, people will find it difficult to continue their life journey. As conventional wisdom asserted, “A person can live forty days without food, four days without water, four minutes without air, but only four seconds without hope” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 93). Scientific research demonstrated that employees who possess high hope tend to be 28 percent more likely to be successful at work and 44 percent more likely to have good health and well-being (Reichard et al., 2013). A study conducted with students from two universities in the United Kingdom found that hope played a better role in academic achievement than intelligence and personality (Day et al., 2010). Current research on leadership by Gallup reported that followers desire hope, trust, compassion, and stability from their leaders (Clifton & Vigers, 2025).

It is satisfying to have leaders who bring hope to us. However, it is more important to cultivate hope by ourselves, especially when we are facing a tragic event. Harvard professor Arthur C. Brooks and global media leader Oprah Winfrey provided three steps for takeaway (Brooks & Winfrey, 2023). First, envision that our future will be better. Say, for example, we will live with our family in a cozy and comfortable house, or we will achieve a life career that we truly wanted many years ago. Second, imagine that we are taking actions to make hope become reality. Picture small actions or a step-by-step process that we need to do to make hope within our reach. Third, execute the actions in our mind. Plan ahead, practice, follow through, make adjustments, and then implement again (Brooks & Winfrey, 2023).

Expressing gratitude regularly

Emotions are like sea waves. We are overwhelmed when they crash against us, but the waves will finally pass over us to get to the shore (Smith, 2022). The same holds true for negative emotions. They never stay with us for the rest of our lives. They come and gradually fade away. One great way to free ourselves from negative emotions is to express gratitude regularly (Brooks & Winfrey, 2023). Research has shown that gratitude can boost resilience (Wilson, 2016), improve relationships (Lambert & Fincham, 2011), bolster friendships (Algoe et al., 2013), and create family bonds (Stoeckel et al., 2015). Gratitude enhances health indicators, such as blood pressure (Boggiss et al., 2020) and diet (Fritz et al., 2019). Moreover, it makes people treat others more generously (Desteno et al., 2010), stay patient (DeSteno et al., 2014), and be less materialistic (Tsang et

al., 2014).

An effective way to make gratitude work is by writing it in a journal. Each night before going to bed, take out a notebook, a pen, and reflect on three things we want to be grateful for (Brooks & Winfrey, 2023). The gratitude can vary from incremental to enormous, including interesting movies, a friend's small act of kindness, a colleague's help, a compliment from your spouse, and so on.

Even in a tough situation, we can show gratitude just like British author Matthew Henry. When he was robbed, he wrote this statement in his diary, "Let me be thankful first because I was never robbed before; second, although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed" (Maxwell, 2010, p. 220).

Giving ourselves permission to be human

As human beings, we naturally don't treat our emotions equally. We welcome joyful emotions, such as happiness, pride, serenity, and love. But we intentionally turn down negative moods like anxiety, fear, grief, and frustration. It is worth noting that rejecting painful emotions will undoubtedly intensify them (Ben-Shahar, 2021). Existing research demonstrated that people will fall into two groups when they go through grief, which is considered humans' strongest painful emotion (Wegner, 1989). According to Ben-Shahar (2021), in Group 1, people are known as tough. They mask brave faces and tell themselves, "I'm going to be strong. I'm going to get through this. I won't let this get to me" (p. 145). In contrast, people in Group 2 are perceived to be softer and less tough. They express their feeling, cry, and grieve, "This is the worst thing that ever happened to me, and I don't know how I'm going to get through it" (p. 145).

At first glance, we might think that people from the first group will overcome the grief and become resilient sooner, whereas people from Group 2 are weak and will be knocked down by the acute pain. Nevertheless, a year or more later, it has a reverse result. The second group is likely to have better results than the first group because they gave themselves the permission to be human by allowing grief to take its course. Due to the fact that resisting negative moods will actually escalate them, then it is probably better to let jealousy, worry, resentment, and irritation pass through you. If you want to give yourself

permission to be human, the following three practices might help you (Ben-Shahar, 2021).

Crying

Crying is beneficial to people in many ways. It reduces stress, improves sleep, and sharpens the social network (Panoff, 2025). Furthermore, it is healthy for the eyes through lubrication and clearness. Let tears fall out of your eyes in a quiet room alone if you prefer such a choice.

Talking about painful emotions

Find someone you can trust and who cares about you to talk about your personal struggle. This person can be your family, a close companion, or a mentor who is available for you in times of need and willing to listen to your stories. Expressing your difficulties and problems can help you release exhaustion and improve your feelings (Straker & Winship, 2019).

Writing about emotions

If you have nobody you can count on, then spend several minutes writing in a journal about the recent obstacles you are going through. Ignore vocabulary mistakes, grammar errors, or sentence incompletions, and express your emotions on paper. One large-scale study indicated that taking twenty minutes each day for four days to write about your hurtful experiences in a journal helps mitigate your anxiety (Pennebaker, 1997).

Taking time for recovery

Stress is how our body responds to any demand. It can refer to physical, mental, and emotional tension (Ben-Shahar, 2021). According to author Aditi Nerurkar, stress is a distractor to your focus, happiness, and self-care. More seriously, stress causes you to be doubtful about yourself, procrastinate your tasks, burn you out, and endeavour to compare yourself with others (Nerurkar, 2024). A large majority of people have a myth that stress has only a negative impact on people. How do you think if I tell you that stress gives people some benefits?

One plausible interpretation of stress is that we experience positivity from only a short-time stress. Interestingly, this type of stress helps you narrow your focus, enhance your environment, and respond to the requirements it demands of you. Most notably, stress itself doesn't matter. What truly matters is a lack of recovery (Loehr & Schwartz, 2005). Taking time from a busy schedule for

recovery provides you with a buffer against stress. The following three recoveries can help you reduce stress, particularly during intense situations.

Micro-level recovery

Micro-level recovery involves taking a short moment to pause and relax, such as a twenty-minute break after two hours of work to sip a glass of cappuccino or a cup of green tea (Ben-Shahar, 2021). Or you might block thirty minutes from busy work for jogging with friends, reading an intriguing book, listening to favorite songs, or having a small talk with a colleague. Micro-level recovery can be between a five- and a thirty-minute break.

Middle-level recovery

Middle-level recovery is to make your recovery longer than micro-level recovery. It could be a day off from unstopable jobs, camping in the woods, sightseeing at an art museum, visiting a cultural temple, or sleeping in. Evidence showed that taking a day off for recovery makes people happier, more productive, and more creative (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001).

Macro-level recovery

In line with micro-level and middle-level recovery, macro-level recovery needs a longer time. It is about spending several days visiting a country with your family. It might be taking a week off just to stay at home, throwing a party with neighbors, singing karaoke, watching a series of movies, doing gardening, sleeping longer, or just sitting and doing nothing (Ben-Shahar, 2021).

The bottom line is that real recovery is more about quality and less about quantity. Resisting bringing your work with you, replying to countless emails, or making phone calls to customers during the recovery time not only makes you more stressful but also wastes your time, energy, and effort. Overall, experts suggest we should take time off for recovery every ninety minutes or so, one day per week, and a few weeks on vacation per year (Loehr & Schwartz, 2005).

Conclusion

People's lives are not designed to be problem-free. Problems continue to come and go as long as we are still alive. Furthermore, there are many moments in our day-to-day lives that are filled with a blend of positive emotions, such as pleasure, enjoyment, interest, and love, and negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, regret, fear, and shame.

It is very appreciative when positive emotions come into our lives. However, negative emotions are inevitable. Thus, we need to learn the insights and practice them thoroughly to mitigate those negative emotions. Remind ourselves that in times of crisis and turbulence, we need to keep hope alive, and at the same time discipline ourselves to do whatever it takes to win over those difficulties. Every night, spend time expressing three types of gratitude to people and things we would like to. Give ourselves the permission to be humans by crying alone in the room, expressing our negative emotions to a trustworthy person, or scribbling those bad feelings on paper. Take a short time for micro-level recovery, a medium time for middle-level recovery, and a long time for macro-level recovery.

In wrestling with the endless difficulties of life, we have to acknowledge that life is unfair for us, and hardships are unavoidable. Instead of dwelling on the external factors that are impossible to fix, we should focus our energy and spirit on the controllable factors. Make a change each time we make a mistake. Get up each time we fail. Rise higher each time we are knocked down by a crushing event. Remember that no matter what life throws at us, we can, as long as we still survive, win over difficulties, rise above them, and become stronger.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his gratitude to Dr. Kimkong Heng, Editor-in-Chief of the *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research*, for his constructive feedback and edits. The author also wishes to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

The author(s)

Korngleng Sear has been an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher for 11 years. He has called himself a student of personal growth since 2018. He self-published a book, entitled *The 7 Lessons for Life* in 2025. His areas of interest are

leadership, education, business, psychology, and social relationships.
Email: kornleng@gmail.com

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