



When ignorance is not bliss: How feelings of discomfort promote the search for negative information

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Abstract

Recent decision-making research established that the experience of regret leads to post-decision information search [Shani, Y., & Zeelenberg, M. (2007). When and why do we want to know? How experienced regret promotes post-decision information search. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 20, 207–222]. It has been argued that people search information in hope to alleviate their negative feelings by excluding the possibility that unfavorable decision was made. Paradoxically, by seeking information people expose themselves to information that may confirm their negative feelings. The willingness to seek out potentially painful information was examined in three studies. Experiment 1 demonstrated that the tendency to seek definite knowledge about the attractiveness of a forgone opportunity is mediated by the emotional discomfort associated with remaining ignorant, and influenced by the probability that the search will uncover aversive information. This finding was replicated in Experiment 2 in a lab setting. Experiment 3 demonstrated that definite knowledge is less-aversive than uncertain ignorance, even when one finds out that one had missed a superior opportunity.

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1. Introduction

The famous English poet Thomas Gray suggested that ignorance is bliss and that it is folly to be wise, because knowledge may be emotionally painful (Gray, 1891). Is this true? Consider for example a person who practiced unprotected sex with a number of partners and is now considering taking an HIV test. Would ignorance still be blissful or would it be a haunting purgatory? As painful as it is to find out that one is HIV positive, not having this information is also not without costs. In the domain of potential negative outcomes, uncertainty which is unpleasant (Loewenstein, 1994; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002; Wilson, Gilbert, & Centerbar, 2002). Thus, people might prefer to seek out potentially negative information, not because they welcome exposing themselves to an unpleasant experience, but because the state of ignorance is in itself disconcerting.

Nowadays, with the extensive developments of the internet, we have an abundance of available opportunities as well as an easier access to information about these opportunities (Schwartz, 2004). We can easily log on the internet and make investment decisions. We can also easily find out if our decision not to invest in a specific stock was in fact a big mistake. Knowing that we have missed an attractive opportunity is unpleasant and is likely to trigger feelings of regret and disappointment. The realization that an attractive action opportunity was missed is likely to influence our future judgments, decisions, and actions. For example, research on the 'Inaction-Inertia' effect demonstrated in many choice situations that individuals are less likely to act on an attractive opportunity, if they know that they had missed a similar opportunity that could have guaranteed superior outcomes (Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998; Tykocinski, Pittman, & Tuttle, 1995; Zeelenberg, Nijstad, Van Putten, & Van Dijk, 2006). Instead, people will sometimes switch brands of consumer goods in an attempt to disassociate current opportunities from those which were already missed (Zeelenberg & Van Putten, 2005).

Weighed against the cost of knowing of a failure is the cost of ignorance. In general, people are uncertainty averse (Loewenstein, 1994; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002; Wilson et al., 2002) and loss averse (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Hence, they are likely to experience discomfort when they believe that they have missed an opportunity. Without definite knowledge about what would have been, they are left to entertain the nagging thought that our circumstances could have been better if only they had acted on past opportunities. This is particularly true, in view of the affective forecasting literature which suggests that people tend to over-estimate the intensity and duration of the emotional distress they expect to experience as a result of negative events (Sieff, Dawes, & Loewenstein, 1999; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003).

Recent research established that the experience of regret triggers post-decision information search (Shani & Zeelenberg, 2007). The authors argued that this search represents an attempt to gather information that would hopefully eliminate the possibility that an inferior decision was taken, thus relieving the nagging suspicion that one made a mistake.

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