

Review

That one time when ...: Reframing negative experiences with storytelling

Richard D. Truncellito^{1,a} and Eric M. VanEpps²**Abstract**

Many experiences in life are physically or emotionally negative in the moment, but worthwhile after the fact, yielding such instrumental benefits as self-improvement or lessons learned. One relatively unexplored benefit of negative experiences, however, is the ability to derive humor and other storytelling benefits from the experiences later on. We review literatures on emotional (re)appraisal, affective forecasting, storytelling, and humor to discuss how individuals can apply the skill of mining comedy out of tragedy to finding the stories in their own experiences. By leveraging a storytelling mindset, such individuals may find themselves even eagerly anticipating future negative experiences because of the meaningful personal and social benefits those experiences stand to yield them in both memories to come and stories to share.

Addresses¹ San Francisco, CA, United States² Vanderbilt University, United StatesCorresponding author: VanEpps, Eric M. (eric.m.vanepps@vanderbilt.edu)^a Independent researcher.**Current Opinion in Psychology** 2023, **54**:101697This review comes from a themed issue on **Humor (2024)**Edited by **Maurice E. Schweitzer** and **Thomas Bradford Bitterly**For complete overview about the section, refer [Humor \(2024\)](#)

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Introduction

Consider an opportunity to go skydiving. In prospect, you might imagine a variety of negative outcomes: the terror of struggling to open your parachute, the pain of breaking your leg in a bad landing, the embarrassment of peeing your pants during your ~5000-foot free-fall descent In retrospect, however, you might recount the experience positively, as one now hilarious story: the terror of struggling to open your parachute, the pain of

breaking your leg in a bad landing, the embarrassment of peeing your pants during your ~5000-foot free-fall descent.

The notion that we can transform upsetting or even brutal moments from our lives into valuable stories may seem counterintuitive. Memories are simulations that reinvigorate the past, warts and all, for us to experience again [1]; and we generally prefer to disengage from rather than return to such past blemishes [2].

However, this paper highlights an alternative emotional trajectory, one that comedy often demonstrates: Storytelling can redeem the past, even one like wetting your pants while skydiving. This redemption in value can occur through humor, through interpersonal connections, through lessons learned, or through emotional reappraisals of the originally negative experience. These forms of value already attract the adventurous to experiences that look negative in prospect but provide positive utility in retrospect, like skydiving and mountaineering [3,4]. The purpose of this paper is to draw a clearer connection between those negative experiences and their potential positive utilities for the rest of us.

In this paper, we review research regarding how remembered negative experiences can be transformed through storytelling to generate positive value for storytellers, and we propose that a storytelling mindset can facilitate more positive appraisals of future events. We project that, when this mindset inverts the anticipated value of a potential experience from negative to positive, decision-makers will opt into negative futures they might otherwise have rejected and may even come to seek out other superficially negative experiences as new storytelling fodder.

Repackaging past experiences

Bringing up the past can be a sore subject for anyone with a less-than-positive view on the relevant history. Remembering painful experiences (e.g., embarrassing accidents, regretted misadventures, devastating losses), even years after they originally occurred, can mean renewing the psychological pain of those experiences for the people affected.

However, the pain of remembering a negative past experience isn't inevitable. With distance [5], through the work of the "psychological immune system" [6,7], once painful memories can lose their sharp edges, dulling into details of personal histories that may feel even comical to later recall. As Walker and Skowronski [8] suggest, this "immunological" process, which fades the intensity of painful memories faster than it fades the intensity of joyful memories, may even be adaptive.

By engaging the psychological immune system deliberately (e.g., in therapeutic contexts, aimed at recovery), the benefits of neutralizing the painful past can be achieved intentionally, through active reappraisal [9–11]. Reframing the original event, a reappraiser purposefully shifts the emotions thinking about it otherwise inspires, from persistently negative to primarily harmless.

While canonically a deliberate reappraisal works to neutralize past pain [9,12], it is nevertheless possible to approach past pain humorously (e.g., by making a joke of a past embarrassment) and thereby go beyond its neutralization, into its redemption as a present pleasure [13]. The humor literature suggests that this step beyond neutralization, into a celebration of the negative past, is a natural extension of deliberate reappraisal: The reframing of a past misfortune is a standard pathway for generating laughter, particularly whenever the audience is sufficiently far (in time, space, probability, or identity) from the direct impact of that misfortune [5,14,15].

The effects of humor as an active redemption of a painful past include both personal and social benefits that may supersede those of a strictly neutralizing reappraisal. Personally, humor reduces both the negative emotions and the arousal that remembering the negative past would otherwise provoke [13] and helps individuals cope more effectively with distressing stimuli than a non-humorous reappraisal does [13,16,17]. Socially, humor relieves the kindling of pain otherwise present in sharing the negative past with others, by signaling that the sharer wants to entertain (rather than aggrieve) [18]. Both personally and socially, humor prompts individuals to acknowledge the present harmlessness of the negative event or experience in memory [14,15,19–21] and may therefore be an accelerant to the ultimate neutralization of a past pain. Consequently, laughing at negative experiences in one's past [22], openly sharing comic (if cringeworthy) stories about those experiences with others [23], and reinforcing in any recollection of a painful past how far away that past now is [24] may be especially effective strategies for confronting the negative past both personally and socially.

Forecasting future experiences

Cognitively, the machinery required to reappraise or redeem the past happens to be the same machinery required to simulate and evaluate the future [1,25]: A person conjures a mental sense of the given past or future experience and then uses that sense to (re)visit and (re)evaluate its content. As long as the conjured sense is accurate to the reality of the experience (i.e., is a perfect restoration of the past or forecast of the future), the simulator can then make a straightforward preferential choice (e.g., whether to take that skydiving trip, whether to reorder the pork).

The problem is, mental simulations of past or future events are rarely accurate or complete. Due to focalism and other limitations on human cognition (e.g., retrieval errors), mental simulation is typically an imperfect representation of the experience's reality. Common errors omit details that fall outside the focus of the event being simulated (e.g., the weather, the presence of certain others), so that only the most salient features of the focal experience tend to remain [26–30].

Downstream, imperfect simulations of focal experiences result in predictably inaccurate impressions of the values of those experiences and, in turn, misinformed choices that accord to those impressions. Ultimately, a person's memory or forecast of a given experience may be just a rose- or mud-colored essentialization of the real way events transpire(d), one that leads the person into disagreement with people who really experience the events (e.g., missing a train, going on vacation, becoming physically impaired [27,31,32]) and into dissonance when personal experiences defy related expectations.

One common imperfection in estimating the value of an experience may be the omission of the secondary value of that experience as a story. Telling others about prior experiences is valuable, whether it be as information (e.g., a warning [33]), a point of connection (e.g., bonding over shared misfortune [33]), entertainment (e.g., comic reframings of past events [14,15]), or personal relief (e.g., confession [34]). However, a lack of this value's salience may keep it mistakenly out of estimations of a focal experience's total utility: Rather than try to rationally incorporate all the cumulative costs and benefits of having (and having had) the experience over time (viz., all the warnings, connections, laughs, and/or relieving confessions that could result from describing the experience to others), estimations of utility essentialize and focus on only those salient features of the event itself for the estimator. Consequently, the salient terror of struggling with a parachute may come to dominate any projection of utility a decision-maker has regarding a skydiving experience, effectively

vanishing any appropriate consideration of the same experience's benefits as a story later on.

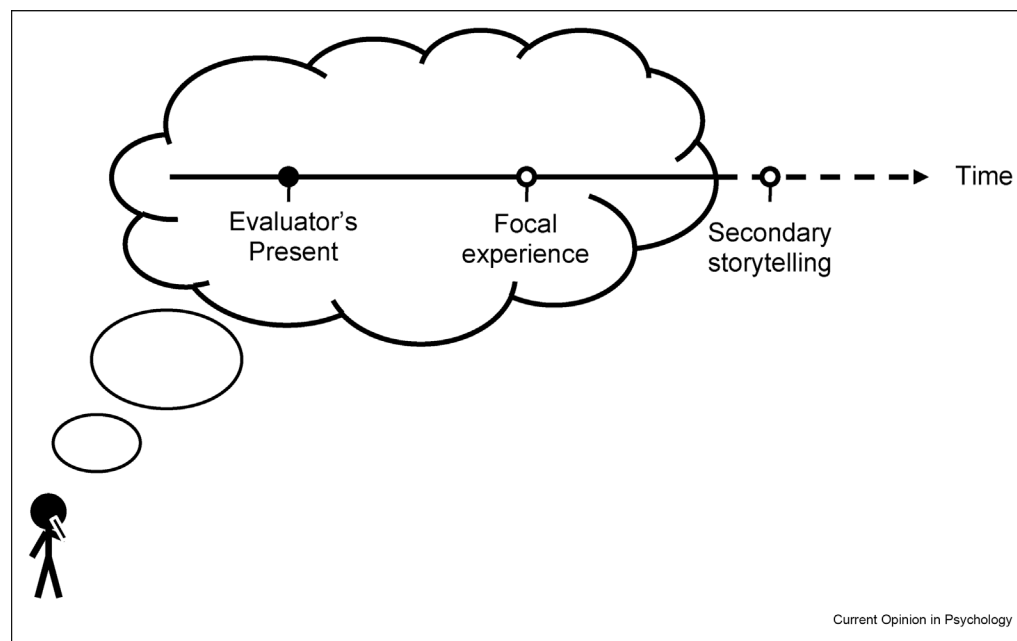
The omission of this value—what we term “storytelling utility”—may be especially common in evaluations of the future. Because secondary storytelling futures are necessarily farther away in time from the evaluator than the primary experiencing future (Figure 1), an evaluator must simulate futures beyond the focal event's in order to incorporate the storytelling utility of a future experience into evaluations of that experience's total utility. This need to consider futures beyond the focal experience's may make it especially unlikely that forecasts of a future experience's utility include the experience's subsequent value as a story.

When a future experience's storytelling utility is positive, its omission may be especially consequential for focally negative experiences (i.e., experiences whose salient features indicate they'll feel negative in the moment; e.g., skydiving, mountaineering). Unlike focally positive experiences, focally negative experiences could undergo reversals of valence whenever sufficient positive storytelling utility factors into their evaluations. These reversals in valence could then precipitate reversals in preference. For example, while my initial impression of a possible skydiving trip may focus so heavily on my salient fears around skydiving (e.g., heights, failed parachutes) that I unambiguously prefer to avoid the experience, attention to the pride of

accomplishment and adventure I could accumulate afterward by recounting the experience to others may be enough to alter my initial outlook on the overall value of the skydiving experience from not worthwhile to rewarding.

The asymmetric impact of focalism on evaluations of future negative experiences (and on the decisions to pursue or avoid those experiences that follow) marks an underacknowledged error in forecasting (and related decision-making). This error suggests that decision-makers, when confronted with the prospect of a future negative or risky experience, tend to systematically undervalue the cumulative utility that experience could have for them, specifically if they were to reuse the experience as a story later on. We take this suggestion as both an incentive to personally opt-in more often to experiences that at their outset look focally negative (e.g., skydiving) and a prediction that, were the benefits of storytelling made more salient to decision-makers facing especially negative experiences, more people would similarly decide to opt into such focally negative experiences than currently do. Finally, we consider that, because the incorporation of storytelling utility into evaluations of future experiences may reverse preferences more for negative- than positive-looking experiences (whose initially positive evaluations likely remain positive including storytelling), the number of additional people who opt into negative-looking experiences may also be higher than the number of additional people

Figure 1



Many simulations of the focal experience neglect the secondary storytelling utility that can come after the focal experience.

who opt into their positive-looking counterparts after considering the value those future experiences hold as stories.

Directions for future research

So what kinds of stories do people want to tell? And what kinds of experiences are people willing to have, to gather good storytelling fodder? In a series of pilot studies,¹ we find that what people prefer to experience and what people believe makes a good story often differ. People generally prefer experiences that avoid the tension and conflict they believe would make good stories, and so they tend to believe that the best stories will come from the experiences they don't want to have. This disconnect between what people prefer and what people believe makes a good story suggests that a "storytelling mindset" may be effective at, if not necessary for, motivating people to pursue negative-looking experiences. Therefore, an exciting line of research could investigate whether people who, for example, are reminded of a potential experience's future storytelling utility choose to pursue negative or risky experiences more frequently or more confidently than they would otherwise.

Additional investigations could build upon existing theory and research regarding how people become better storytellers [35], identifying exactly what stories people enjoy telling and what stories audiences enjoy hearing and, importantly, calling out predictable areas of overlap or disjunction between the two. For example, one consistent theme from our pilot studies is that, although people both enjoy telling and believe that others enjoy hearing stories about conflict and standing up for oneself (e.g., confronting a rude person at the DMV), many are understandably reluctant to opt into conflict themselves, creating an opportunity deficit in their storytelling abilities. Future research along this line could not only investigate how many people initially reluctant to engage in conflict are swayed by later storytelling opportunities to "become the hero," but also explore how knowing what kinds of story people enjoy telling can help them determine what kinds of experience they want to have.

We finally call for research to deepen our understanding of evaluations of the future, specifically evaluations of multiple futures to yield estimates of both the experience utility and the storytelling utility of taking a potential action. We see a need to integrate otherwise disparate streams of JDM research on anticipated regret [36], delayed gratification [37,38], and sequential strategy [39–41], all of which involve decisions necessarily made after evaluating utility at multiple future points in time. To us, much as past research on focalism

and affective forecasting has shown how people often fail to consider contextual factors around a future experience's utility [42,43], there remain interesting avenues for studying gaps in consideration of that future experience's ongoing utility (e.g., as a story). Just as anticipating regret can be a cautionary foresight dissuading decisions away from future actions people would later resent, so too can anticipating storytelling utility be a galvanizing reminder that negative-looking experiences may yield positive-feeling utilities (e.g., a sense of accomplishment, applause from audiences) in retrospect. We are not only excited by future research to unite an explanation for such parallel yet complementary decision pathways, but also interested in seeing expansions on the fundamental idea that forecasts commonly neglect storytelling utility.

Limitation

While the act of storytelling can heal past wounds and improve considerations of once painful experiences, we are aware that there are likely (1) boundary conditions on the type, severity, duration, and distance of reappraisable past pain and (2) drawbacks to even successful reappraisals. Certain events (e.g., traumatic experiences) may resist redemption by storytelling, just as certain individuals struggle with reappraisal [44,45]; and storytelling sometimes may undermine negative emotions that are functionally protective (e.g., the guilt that would otherwise lead someone to work harder to avoid making the same mistake again [10]). Even comedians, who are professionals at deriving storytelling utility from their own negative experiences, can't or won't tell stories about everything in life — and perhaps for good reason. In his 2023 special, comedian John Mulaney tells the story of purchasing a new Rolex watch just so that he could immediately pawn it off for cash to buy drugs, and then quips, "And, as you process and digest how obnoxious, wasteful, and unlikely that story is, just remember, that's one I'm willing to tell you [46]." So, despite our enthusiasm for considering storytelling utility and its impact on decision-making, we recognize that storytelling and related reappraisal techniques might not, in practice, serve as cures for every possible negative experience.

Conclusion: The stories we tell

In her 2012 film *Stories We Tell* [47], Sarah Polley recounts her own personal family history, unpacking a potentially messy set of questions about her true parentage through the storytelling structure of a narrative film. Though initially these past experiences might have been painful, frustrating, or otherwise negative for Polley to consider and share with others, she nevertheless finds several beautiful, funny, and charming moments in telling her story that make the telling of it rewarding for both Polley and her audience.

¹ Data and materials available at https://researchbox.org/1864&PEER_REVIEW_passcode=WTGHXM.

Polley's example is just one demonstration that storytelling can benefit all kinds of experiences, by allowing us to repackage even our negative memories into something positive for ourselves and others. Recognizing this benefit gives us the freedom to explore more experiences that look unpleasant in the moment, because we know that even they can generate pleasant stories in the future. Much of the negative in our lives therefore need not stay negative; with storytelling as a tool, we can find more relief, connection, and humor in our experiences.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data and materials are available at the following link: https://researchbox.org/1864&PEER_REVIEW_passcode=WTGHXM.

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