

Luck-y Lessons

“Good luck!” That’s a phrase or wish that we all use from time to time, and the last time I heard it, it got me started thinking about the whole idea of luck.

If you win the lottery, we call that lucky. Other than buying the ticket to enter the lottery, you didn’t do anything to force your number to win; you just got lucky. On the other hand, if something unpleasant happens to you, through no fault of your own, we call that bad luck. For example, while you are stopped at a red light, the person in the car behind you accidentally hits the accelerator instead of the brake and plows into your car. Bad luck, right? Yes, because bad luck happens.

Our Brains Look for Predictability, Not Luck

As much as we’d all like to have lots of good luck, the human brain actually resists the idea of pure luck. We tend to explain things that happen to us in terms of the effort we have made. We like to see cause and effect in operation, and we naturally look for patterns that reinforce our expectation for it. We spend a fair amount of time trying to be in control of our lives and what happens to us.

This expectation for control leads us to try to make sense of what may actually be random events in our lives. For example, if I usually win a little in the scratch-off lottery tickets I buy from my neighborhood vendor, and never win when I buy them elsewhere, it is easy for me to conclude that I should buy them only from my neighborhood vendor. This gives me the illusion that I have some control over a random outcome that it is actually more attributable to luck than to my ability to outsmart the lottery system. In effect, I think that I have learned from my good luck.

Trying to Learn from Bad Luck

A more problematic example of confusing randomly occurring events with those over which we have some control comes about when we try to learn from our bad luck. Aided by the human brain’s inclination to look for patterns in *everything*, we run the risk of looking for lessons in everything that happens to us, and especially in the bad or unpleasant things that we want to avoid.

While there are legitimate lessons to be learned from events that we have, in fact, set in motion through our own actions, there is a danger in turning everything that happens into a learning opportunity.

Avoid the Wrong Lesson

If you automatically interpret everything that happens to you as your fault, even things that are randomly occurring events, you run the risk of destroying your self-confidence, of making yourself unwilling to try new things, or to look for different ways to solve problems.

Maybe you could benefit from a more balanced view of how much you control what happens to you.

Control vs Luck

The first step is to recognize that there is an element of luck in everything that happens to you. The next step is to ask yourself, “What do I have control over in this situation?” You’ll probably need to ask yourself that several times until you isolate the factors you can control from the ones you can’t.

If you are looking backwards at something unpleasant that happened, ask yourself, “What did I do that contributed to the unpleasant outcome?” If your answers include things like, “I should have known my boss was in a bad mood and that saying something to him about the weather would make him angry,” then you need to think hard about how much control you have over your boss’s mood. But if you realize that you made matters worse by becoming offended because your boss was having a bad day, then you need to make amends for *your* reaction.

Random vs Reason

Good luck is perfect weather on the day that you impulsively, at the last minute, decide to go on a picnic. Bad luck is when you ignore the weather forecast for a blizzard on the day you set out on an automobile trip across the Great Plains. Or, in the words of the Israeli business consultant Eliyahu Goldratt:

“Good luck is when opportunity meets preparation.
Bad luck is when lack of preparation meets reality.”