



Staying

positive

Protect yourself from negative emotional contagion and develop a positive new outlook (without faking it), says **Anita Chaudhuri**

Photographs by **Andrew Borthwick**

'MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES', suggests an ancient Chinese proverb. For most of us, life may have just got a little too compelling. On the one hand we have an epidemic of unparalleled hopefulness triggered by the election of Barack Obama, on the other we find ourselves facing the spectre - real or imagined - of unemployment, repossession and possible starvation. All right, maybe not actual starvation, so long as Aldi and Lidl are still in business, but our collective psyche is in survival mode.

Competitive frugality is everywhere, from the office canteen to kids' birthday parties and Saturday nights in. Sainsbury's has reported a 36 per cent increase in sales of lunch boxes, DVD club LoveFilm has announced a 40 per cent boost in memberships and tea rooms are reporting a mini-boom from people discovering that sharing a pot of tea and a scone is a fraction of the price of a round of drinks. Never mind that some of us are better off than we were this time last year, thanks to cheaper mortgages and high street discounts. There is nothing as contagious as financial panic, and we're all feeling it.

The sheer scale of the financial crisis means that the endless gloomy predictions resonate powerfully with most of us. But while our concerns may be valid, there is also a large element of mob thinking, of becomingeo

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, When you become happy; friends who live within a mile of you become happier too'

As we've invested in a collective drama, our thoughts and conversations may be heavily influenced by the economic situation, and it's becoming hard to escape conversations about the recession, yet research suggests that frequently discussing problems and fears is not necessarily beneficial.

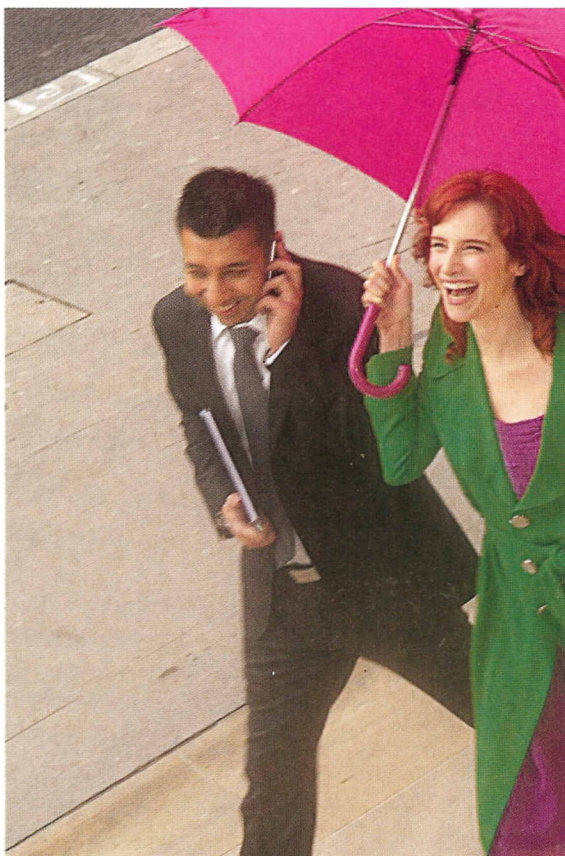
PUSH YOUR 'MENTAL RESET BUTTON'

A study conducted by the University of Missouri indicated that female friends who indulged in 'co-rumination' - excessively talking about problems and concerns - were more likely to experience anxiety and depression. But if reading that is beginning to get you down, reflect on this - it's not just anxiety or other unhappy emotions that are contagious, joy is too. An example is the collective euphoria

surrounding the election of President Obama. Jonathan Haidt, an American psychologist, has gone so far as to identify a new emotion

to define this rush of good feelings. 'Powerful moments of elevation sometimes seem to push a mental "reset button", wiping out feelings of cynicism and replacing them with feelings of hope, love and optimism, and a sense of moral inspiration,' he says. 'Elevation evokes in us a desire to become a better person, or to lead a better life.'

There are a number of ways we can go about pushing this mental reset button. 'Focus on those things that the economy can't take away from you, such as your own talents and resources,' suggests Robert Biswas-Diener, an expert in the field of positive psychology. 'Everyone has strengths: some people are funny, courageous or kind;



Fast ways to beat the recession blues

Robert Biswas-Diener, co-author of *Happiness: Unlocking The Mysteries Of Psychological Wealth* (Blackwell), has the following advice:

1. **Go on a complaint fast** When you hear someone start up with the misery, tell them that you are on a special diet that means you can't stomach complaining. Or if you think that's a bit much, just walk away when you come across a mass complaining session.
2. **Read only the sports pages** This is where the good news is - people winning, getting paid millions and being recruited. Even if you think you're not interested in sport, give it a try because it's full of success stories and will uplift you.
3. **Join a group** During history's darkest hours people got through it by adopting the Blitz spirit. But in this downturn a lot of people find themselves competing against each other and feeling isolated. Reach out to your immediate community and get support even if it's just a regular coffee club.
4. **Share your resources** In days gone by, people used to pool their assets during times of economic stress. Start by sharing tools and car-pooling with neighbours or offer to trade or barter skills.
5. **Volunteer** It's important to find meaning during these times and studies have shown that people are happier when they are reaching out and helping others who are less fortunate.



others are good leaders. We often ignore those things but they are the very traits that will help us to thrive now. People who identify and use their strengths are less prone to depression and more prone to happiness.' He also suggests that we spend what spare cash we do have on experiences rather than things.

Cynics may mutter that when we're down, we may not relish experiences in the same way. Even when we're in a cinema, surrounded by people laughing, we can remain resistant to positivity. 'We need to be conscious of what we're thinking, and make an effort to pick up the goodwill around us,' says Dr Michael Sinclair, director of City Psychology Group. When we're feeling low, our mind will be rigid and it's easy to spiral into worrying about the future. 'If we can focus on being more relaxed and happy, our mind opens up, our thoughts ease off and we become more accepting of ourselves and our experience,' says Sinclair.

Imagining our future selves being given the opportunity to relive present pleasures - be it a partner's youthful body or a toddler's joyful smile - can put into stark relief what we really value. 'I've been making a conscious effort to want what I've got now,' says Stephen, 43, a financial advisor. 'If I imagine what life will be like in 10 years' time,

Always look on the bright side

Research shows happiness is contagious

when my kids have left home, it makes me appreciate my teenage daughter's after-school banter a little more.'

RIPPLE EFFECT

Making an effort to explore new environments can also help us boost our positive narrative. 'The current climate means the workplace is one of the most contagious areas for negative energy,' says Sinclair. When we're familiar with those around us, we're more likely to share our grievances with them. Instead, meeting new people can force us to be positive. 'Sharing our experiences with those in a gym or evening class will allow us to have different conversations.'

Admittedly, forcing ourselves or others to look on the bright side isn't always helpful. 'If someone's lost all their money and has no job, it can be annoying simply to tell them it could be worse,' says Sinclair. 'Instead, if we really listen to that person, without minimising their problems, we can provide them with a sense of relief, and perhaps even a more positive approach.'

It may be a tall order, that we might be able to lift not just ourselves but those around us out of the national gloom. Should we even bother trying? The answer is a resounding yes. Major research based on the Framingham Study data in the US has revealed that happiness is highly contagious. The findings showed that when you become happy, any friend of yours who lives within a mile becomes 25 per cent more likely to be happy too. And a friend of that friend becomes 10 per cent more likely to be happy, and a friend of that friend's friend has a five per cent increased chance of being happy. In other words, by being happy, you are creating a tangible ripple effect on the lives of others.

Putting this into practice presents a challenge, however. How do you go about spreading joy without appearing insufferable? 'Be honest first, then be positive,' says Robert Holden, director of The Happiness Project. 'If you just barge into a room chirping with happiness, it will annoy everyone. Acknowledge the bad stuff as well and people will respond better. Also, when people around you are talking about doom and gloom, try saying, "I agree, but I'm bored with talking about how awful everything is". Then gently nudge the topic to something more positive. Often we are lazy in our conversations and agree with others just for the sake of it. If you want to create change, you have to dare to go out on a limb.'