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The psychological processes that attenuate distress can also have costs (Lazarus, 1985; Pennebaker, 1989; Richards & Gross, 2000; Wegner, Erber, & Zanakos, 1993), and thus they tend to be triggered only when the severity of that distress passes a critical threshold, then they may mistakenly expect the longevity of distress to be a monotonic function of its initial intensity. In a sense, people may think of themselves as spoons. We sought to demonstrate that people do indeed expect intense distress to last longer than mild distress (Study 1), but that because of the region-β paradox, this expectation can be precisely wrong (Studies 2 and 3).

**STUDY 1: PREDICTING DURATION FROM INTENSITY**

**Method**

Fifty-seven male and 41 female students completed a questionnaire that asked them to imagine (a) that they asked someone for a date and were politely turned down, (b) that a person whom they had recently met failed to recognize them later, (c) that their roommate borrowed their boots without permission, (d) that their classmate failed to show up for a scheduled study session, (e) that an old friend of theirs joined a neo-Nazi group, (f) that they were denied use of a restaurant’s restroom because they were not a customer, (g) that they caught someone trying to break into their gym locker, (h) that their best friend had a romantic encounter with their former girlfriend or boyfriend, and (i) that a careless driver dented their car in a parking lot and then sped away. Participants estimated the intensity of their initial reactions to the transgression by indicating how they thought they would feel about the transgressor “at the moment this happened,” using a scale whose endpoints were labeled dislike very much (-4) and like very much (4). Participants estimated the duration of each reaction by indicating on the same scale how they thought they would feel about the transgressor “1 week later.”

**Results**

Table 1 shows the mean intensity and duration estimates for each transgression. The correlation between intensity and duration estimates across participants was significant, \(r = .38, p < .01\), and there was no evidence of a curvilinear relationship between these variables (i.e., adding the square of intensity to a regression equation resulted in a trivial and nonsignificant increase in the amount of variance explained). We also correlated each participant’s intensity estimates with that participant’s duration estimates, thereby producing a correlation for each participant. (One participant who made the same numerical

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1 There are many ways to measure the predicted duration of any event (such as an affective reaction). One way is simply to ask people how long they expect the event to endure, but research suggests that people have considerable difficulty making estimates in temporal units (Zakary & Block, 1997). Another way is to ask people to predict whether the event will or will not still be occurring at some point in the future, which is what we did. This method is conservative inasmuch as it risks Type II errors (e.g., two events may have different predicted durations and yet may both have abated by the particular time about which the experimenter has inquired).
The Peculiar Longevity of Things Not So Bad

TABLE 1
Intensity and forecasted duration of disliking of transgressor in study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transgression</th>
<th>Immediate disliking (intensity)</th>
<th>Disliking 1 week later (duration)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>1.07 (1.37)</td>
<td>0.14 (1.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not recognized</td>
<td>1.10 (1.37)</td>
<td>0.35 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borrowed boots</td>
<td>1.78 (1.64)</td>
<td>0.62 (1.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stood up</td>
<td>1.94 (1.26)</td>
<td>0.07 (1.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neo-Nazi</td>
<td>2.05 (1.68)</td>
<td>1.88 (1.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restroom</td>
<td>2.46 (1.51)</td>
<td>1.13 (1.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym locker</td>
<td>2.97 (1.42)</td>
<td>2.13 (1.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic betrayal</td>
<td>3.22 (1.47)</td>
<td>2.24 (2.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dented car</td>
<td>3.47 (1.10)</td>
<td>2.51 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses. The original scale values were recoded so that larger values indicate greater disliking of the transgressor.

People expect that the more intense their hedonic reactions are, the longer those reactions will last. But if the psychological mechanisms that attenuate such reactions are triggered only at critical levels of intensity, then the region-β paradox suggests that there should be instances in which more intense reactions abate more quickly than mild reactions. In Study 2a, participants were insulted by a person with whom they expected to interact (a prospective partner) or with whom they expected not to interact (a prospective nonpartner). Because people trust their interaction partners to make special efforts to be polite (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990), they should feel worse when insulted by a partner than by a nonpartner and thus should expect to dislike an insulting partner more than an insulting nonpartner over time. Yet, just as a severe injury triggers the actions that will attenuate it, the intense distress caused by a partner’s insult should trigger the psychological processes that attenuate it (Barley & Berscheid, 1967; Finkel, Ruschult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Therefore, we predicted that (a) people would initially feel more distressed when insulted by a partner than by a nonpartner, (b) they would therefore expect that a few minutes after receiving the insult they would dislike a partner more than a nonpartner, but (c) because intense distress triggers the processes that attenuate it, people would actually dislike an insulting nonpartner more than an insulting partner a few minutes after receiving the insult. We tested the first of these predictions in Study 2a and the second and third predictions in Study 2b.

Study 2a

Method
Twenty-one female and 5 male students completed a baseline measure of their hedonic state (“How are you feeling right now?”) by drawing a slash at the appropriate locations on continuous 125-mm lines that corresponded to different emotions. Seven lines corresponded to specific emotions: excited, good, happy, hostile, insulted, proud, and upset. The endpoints of these lines were labeled with the phrases not at all and extremely. In addition, the endpoints of an eighth line were labeled with the phrases extremely negative and extremely positive.

Participants were then told that another participant (the rater) was already seated in an adjacent room, that they and the rater would each write an autobiographical story that the other would read, that on the basis of those stories they would assess each other's personalities, and that each would then learn how he or she had been assessed. Participants in the partner condition were told that they would ultimately meet the rater and discuss their experiences in the experiment, whereas participants in the nonpartner condition were told that they would never meet the rater. In fact, there was no rater.

After participants wrote their autobiographical stories, the experimenter gave them a handwritten story that had ostensibly been written by the rater and a written description of three personality types (adapted from Gilbert et al., 1998) that differed in their positivity. Participants indicated which of the personality types best described the rater and reported their confidence in that assessment on a 125-mm continuous line whose endpoints were labeled with the phrases not at all and extremely. Next, participants estimated the extent to which their assessment had been influenced by several factors (e.g., their current mood, the rater's handwriting) and estimated which of the personality profiles best described the rater.

Participants were given a handwritten sheet indicating that the rater had assessed them with relatively high confidence as the worst of the three personality types. After placing the sheet on the desk, the experimenter asked participants to complete the same scales they had completed at baseline.

Results
We expected participants to feel more distressed when insulted by a partner than by a nonpartner. We averaged separately the eight measures taken at baseline (z = .82) and the eight measures taken after participants received the insult (z = .81) and then subtracted one average from the other to examine changes in the participants’ hedonic states. As predicted, participants experienced a greater change in their hedonic state when insulted by a partner (M = –28.3) than by a nonpartner (M = –13.5), t(24) = 2.075, p < .05. In Study 2b, we examined how participants thought they would feel about the rater and actually felt about the rater 5 min after being insulted.

Study 2b

Method
Twelve male and 17 female students were randomly assigned to play the role of an experimenter or a forecaster who was insulted by a partner or a nonpartner.

The procedure for experiencers was identical to the procedure used in Study 2a with two exceptions. First, participants made no ratings of their hedonic states. Second, after receiving the insult, experiencers were left alone in their cubicles while the experimenter ostensibly went to make a
made on a scale whose endpoints were labeled with the words confidence as the worst of the three personality types. These ratings were 

after learning that the rater had assessed them with relatively high 
experiencers with one exception. Instead of actually receiving an insult, 
positively 

min after learning that the rater had assessed them with relatively high 

than bystanders do! If victims are unaware of the psychological 
processes that will attenuate their distress, then they should expect 
precisely the opposite. Study 3 tested this prediction.

Method
Sixteen male and 42 female students were randomly assigned to play the 

roles of victim or bystander and of experiencer or forecaster.

Victims
Victims were randomly assigned to play the role of experiencer or 

forecaster. The procedure for victims was identical to the procedure used 

for experiencers and forecasters in the partner condition of Study 2b.

Bystanders
Bystanders were told (a) that the rater and the victim were reading each 

other's stories and would soon be assessing each other's personalities, (b) 

that the victim and the rater would later interact and that both of them 
knew this, and (c) that the bystanders themselves would later interact 

with the victim but not with the rater. Bystanders read the three 

personality profiles used in Study 2 and were then given the handwritten 

story written by the victim. Bystanders were also given a handwritten 

story that had ostensibly been written by the rater but that had actually 

been written by a participant in the partner condition of Study 2b. 
(A different story was randomly selected for each bystander.) Next, 

bystanders were shown the victim's assessment of the rater as well as the 

victim's self-assessment. Thus, bystanders had precisely the same 

information that victims had.

Each bystander in the experiencer condition was given a handwritten 
sheet indicating that the rater had assessed the victim with relatively 
high confidence as the worst of the three personality types. After placing 

the sheet on the desk, the experimenter explained that he needed to print 
a copy of the next questionnaire and left the bystander alone in the 
cubicle. The experimenter returned 5 min later and asked the bystander 
to report how he or she felt about the rater by marking a scale whose 
endpoints were labeled with the words negatively (1) and positively (7).

STUDY 3: VICTIMS AND BYSTANDERS

Participants experienced more intense distress when insulted by a 
partner than when insulted by a nonpartner (Study 2a), and yet, contrary 
to their own predictions, they ended up liking an insulting partner more 

than an insulting nonpartner (Study 2b). Presumably this happened 
because intense distress triggered the psychological processes that 
attenuated it. This reasoning makes a counterintuitive prediction. If 
victims of insults experience more intense distress than do bystanders, 
then the psychological processes that attenuate distress may be more 
likely to be triggered for victims than for bystanders. Therefore, after a 
few minutes, victims may actually like a person who insults them more 

than bystanders do! If victims are unaware of the psychological 
processes that will attenuate their distress, then they should expect 
precisely the opposite. Study 3 tested this prediction.

Results
We expected that forecasters would predict that they would like a partner 
less than a nonpartner 5 min after being insulted, but that experiencers 
would report feeling precisely the opposite. A weighted contrast analysis 
(as recommended by Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985) confirmed this 
prediction, \( t(27) = 3.17, p < .005 \). As Table 2 shows, the rater's role had 

opposite effects on forecasters' predictions and experiencers' reports. 
Although participants expected to dislike a partner more than a 
nonpartner 5 min after being insulted, they actually disliked the partner 

less than the nonpartner.

| TABLE 2 |
| Liking of rater in Study 2b |
| Participant's role and statistic | Rater's role | | |
| | Partner | Nonpartner | Differencea |
| Forecaster | Mean liking | 2.83 | 4.57 | -1.74* |
| | SD | 1.17 | 1.51 | |
| | n | 7 | 7 | |
| | Contrast weight | -1 | 1 | |
| Experiencer | Mean liking | 4.57 | 3.33 | 1.24* |
| | SD | 0.78 | 1.30 | |
| | n | 7 | 8 | |
| | Contrast weight | 1 | -1 | |

Note. Higher values indicate greater liking.

An asterisk (*) indicates that the difference between cells is different from zero, 
\( p < .05 \).

photocopy. The experimenter returned 5 min later and asked 
experiencers to report how they felt about the rater on a scale whose 
endpoints were labeled with the words negatively (1) and positively (7).

The procedure for forecasters was identical to the procedure for 

experiencers with one exception. Instead of actually receiving an insult, 
forecasters were asked to estimate how they would feel about the rater 5 

min after learning that the rater had assessed them with relatively high 

confidence as the worst of the three personality types. These ratings were 

made on a scale whose endpoints were labeled with the words negatively 

(1) and positively (7).

3To avoid creating suspicion, we then asked forecasters to predict how they 

would feel about the rater if the rater assessed them as the other two personality 
types.
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GENERAL DISCUSSION

When Ovid wrote two millennia ago that “small things affect small minds,” he was apparently unaware that when small things fail to trigger one’s defenses, they may attain a peculiar longevity that even great minds do not anticipate. Contrary to their own predictions, participants in our studies disliked least those who had hurt them most. This paradox arises because intense hedonic states are especially likely to trigger the psychological processes that attenuate them. Because people are unaware of these processes, they mistakenly expect more intense states to last longer than less intense states.

It is easy to imagine how such errors of prediction could become errors of action. An employee who is told that he must either relinquish a file cabinet or move to a smaller office may be correct in believing that the minor inconvenience of losing some furniture will be less distressing than the major inconvenience of moving to smaller quarters. What he may fail to realize, however, is that the major inconvenience may be so distressing that it will trigger the psychological processes that attenuate it (“Now that I’m downstairs, I realize how much I like being close to the coffee machine”), whereas the minor inconvenience may not be quite distressing enough to trigger such processes (“Now that I have to stack my files on the floor, I realize how much I hate my boss”). Therefore, the employee may choose the option that is initially the least distressing but that is ultimately the least satisfying. The present studies join others (e.g., Gilbert & Ebert, 2002) in suggesting that when people make decisions without regard for the psychological processes that different outcomes will trigger, they may do so at the expense of their ultimate satisfaction.

The region-β paradox provides a simple, unifying framework within which this and a host of otherwise disparate phenomena may be similarly understood. For instance, Trope and Fishbach (2002) have shown that people who are scheduled to undergo medical procedures are more concerned about “chickening out” when they expect the procedure to be extremely painful than when they expect it to be slightly painful. Therefore, they tend to use counteractive self-control strategies (e.g., making social commitments, agreeing to pay large cancellation fees) only for extremely painful procedures. The ironic consequence is that people are ultimately more likely to chicken out of slightly painful than extremely painful procedures. This interesting phenomenon exemplifies the region-β paradox. Because self-control strategies are triggered by critical levels of anticipated pain, the normally monotonic relation between anticipated pain and the likelihood of chickening out is reversed, and a more painful procedure can actually induce greater compliance than a less painful one.

Many other phenomena take the same form and produce the same sort of paradoxical consequences. For instance, people may buy small rather than large amounts of forbidden foods because they believe that the amount they consume will be a monotonic function of the amount they keep in their kitchen cabinets. And yet, when one opens the cabinet, a full-sized Hershey® bar may trigger concerns about health and diet that a single Hershey’s Kiss® does not. The paradoxical consequence is that people may actually eat more chocolate when the kitchen cabinet contains one Kiss® than when it contains a full-sized bar—a violation of the normally monotonic relation between availability and consumption. Or consider the fact that drivers may avoid long trips because they believe that the odds of being involved in an accident are monotonically related to the time they spend on the road. If a trip to another state triggers the decision to wear a seat belt and a trip around the block does not, the paradoxical consequence is that people may be more likely to sustain injuries in automobile accidents when they are taking short rather than long trips. Similarly, partygoers may limit their alcohol consumption because they believe that their blood alcohol levels are monotonically related to the likelihood that they will cause an automobile accident on the way home. If becoming thoroughly inebriated triggers prophylactic interventions (“We hid your car keys and called you a cab”) and becoming slightly tipsy does not, the paradoxical consequence is that partygoers may be safer when they consume a pitcher of martinis than when they consume two glasses of Chardonnay. The ease with which examples such as these are generated highlights the ubiquity of the region-β paradox in everyday life, as well as the potential dangers of ignoring it.

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