



# The Psychology of Negativity in the workplace

What causes it and how do you fix it?

Heather Carter, MPS, LVT, VTS (Anesthesia & Analgesia)



# About me!



Brand new  
Montreal  
Canadiens fan  
for the playoffs



Dear Heather,

On behalf of the 2026 WVC Vegas Education Conference planning team, it is my honor and pleasure to congratulate you on being named our **2026 WVC Vegas Veterinary Technician Continuing Educator of the Year**. This award recognizes educators who empower veterinary technicians through high-quality education and meaningful professional development opportunities.

Your sessions and hands-on labs were among the top attended sessions in the Veterinary Technician track. Attendees praised your engaging teaching style and your ability to build practical skills with confidence.



# Summary of Content

- Definitions
- Psychology
- Complications
- Communication
- Feedback
- Accountability

## What is negativity?

- The peer who complains incessantly about perceived injustices
- The colleague who rallies coworkers against real or perceived threats
- The RVT/LVT, VA, doctor, or CSC who perceives every request or suggestion as a criticism, or an attack- rather than an opportunity



## What negativity can look like

- How you come into the hospital to start your shift
- Not assuming positive intent
- Coming into work, wrapping yourself in a blanket, and staying on your phone
  - (can you tell how much I can't handle this)

### ■ Example:

- Assuming someone is doing something wrong with a patient
- Not asking if they need help
- Judging or complaining about their patient care
- General malaise



## What is included in negativity?

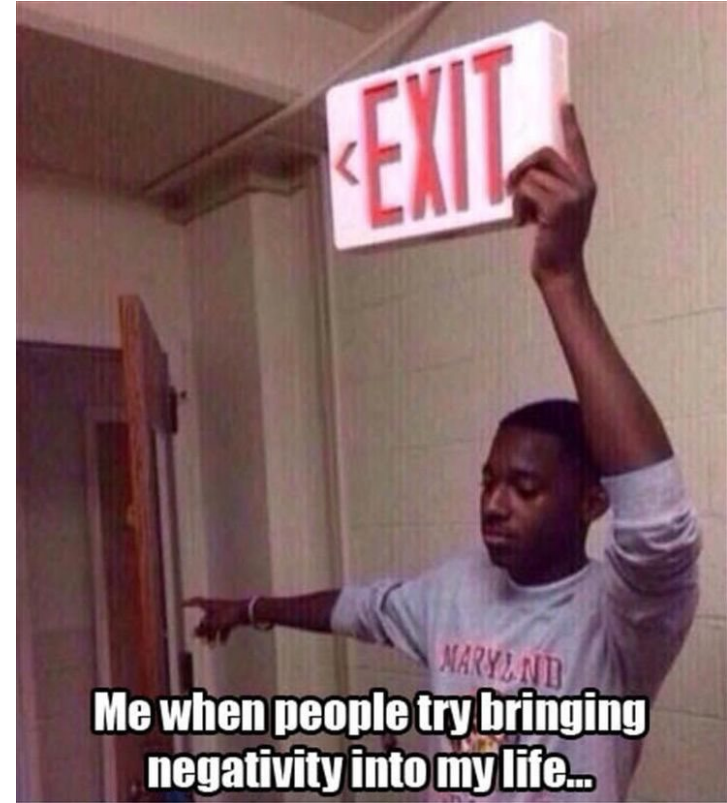
Incivility, poor communication, conflict, and negative interactions

It is not always overt and can be subtle and cumulative

Small, repeated negative interactions have a meaningful impact over time

## What I-O Psychology says about negativity

- Psychological researchers Dick Rapson and Elaine Hatfield studied the causes, effects, and outcomes of emotional contagions



## Research has demonstrated that negativity:

“

Spreads from person to person in the same way happiness spreads

– Mood contagions

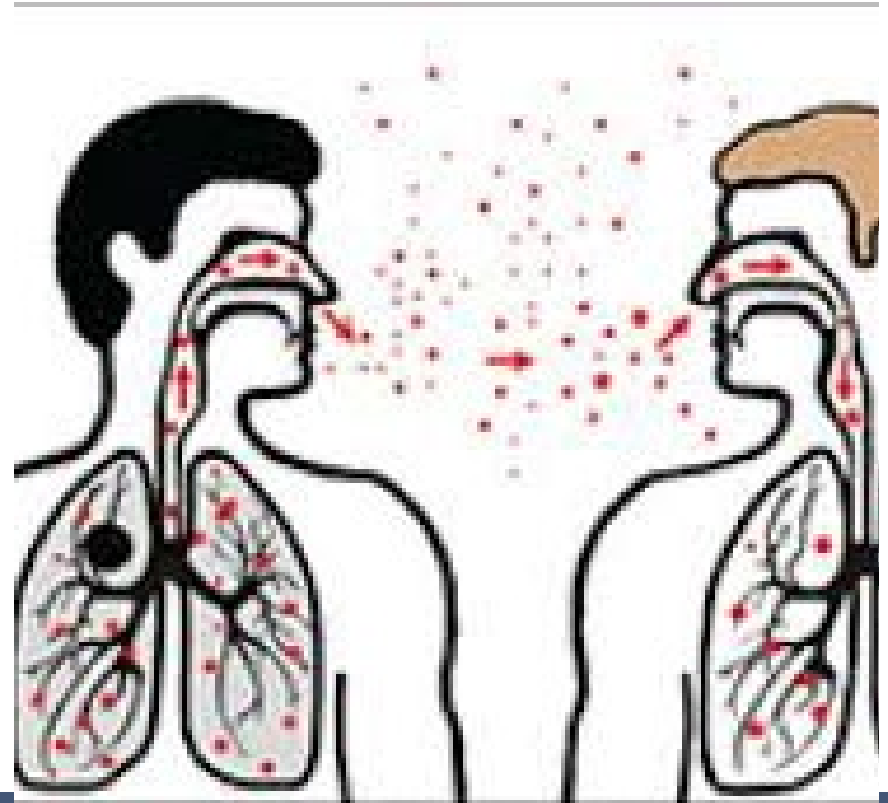
Can lead to job dissatisfaction, lack of motivation, and increased attrition

Creates/causes emotional exhaustion



## Mood or Emotional Contagions

- People often “catch” emotions before they fully process what was said
- How fast this happens

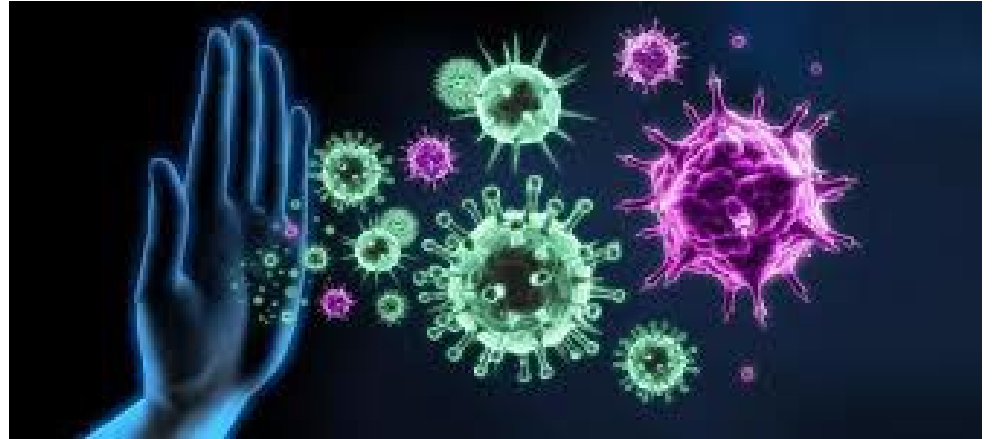


## Why this is important

Negativity does not stay contained to one interaction

It spreads across the team through emotional contagion

It shapes how individuals experience their work environment



## Effects of Negativity

- Negativity is not isolated to one person
- It becomes embedded in team interactions and culture
- Left unaddressed, it can normalize negative behavior

**When you are around highly negative people**



## Hidden Costs of Negativity

- Negativity has both visible and hidden costs
- Hidden costs include decreased morale, reduced collaboration, and emotional strain
- These effects often go unrecognized but impact daily performance



## Sources of workplace negativity

- A psychologist noted that sources of negativity include
    - The self, circumstances, and the organization
    - Chronic idiopathic negativity
  - Workloads?
  - Boredom?
- Conservation of resources theory
    - My favorite
    - Recognition?
    - Time off?
    - Equipment?



## Characteristics of the negative person(s)

- Gossip
  - Pessimistic
  - Disrespectful towards peers, doctors, and leadership
  - Emotionally exhausted
- May present themselves as problem solvers or “crusaders”
  - Quick to point out problems and shortcomings



## How does it effect individuals?

- Reduced motivation and engagement
  - Requires emotional resources
- Increased stress and burnout
- Turnover
- Lowered self-esteem, health issues
- Negativity increases emotional exhaustion
- Emotional exhaustion reduces capacity to engage



## What effect it has on the culture

- Medical mistakes
- Delays in patient care
- Lack of idea sharing/innovation





Complicating Factor- No  
psychological safety



# Psychological Safety

## What is it?

- The ability to comfortably ask questions, offer suggestions, and be vulnerable within a group without fear of humiliation or retribution
- Trust, mutual respect, and care and concern for their teammates

## Negativity & PS

- People withhold ideas and concerns
- Criticism and fear reinforce silence
- Fear-based environments reduce training/learning



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### What Is Psychological Safety and Why Do You Need It in Your Hospital?

Research has demonstrated that a psychologically safe workplace positively influences work engagement, team learning, collaboration in efforts to improve patient care quality, and patient safety.

March 11, 2024 | Issue: [Spring 2024](#)

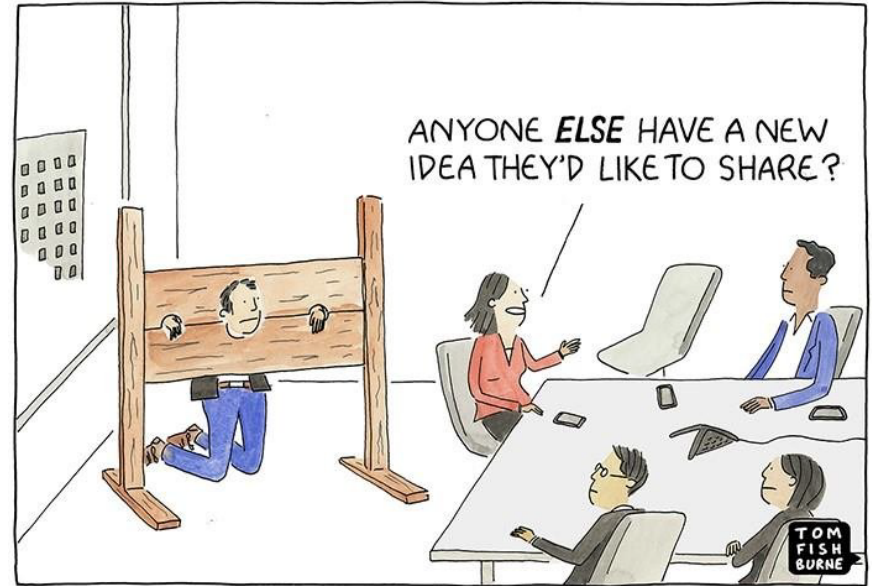
 **Heather Carter**  
MPS, LVT, VTS (Anesthesia & Analgesia) ▾

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# How to address and resolve – as a leader/manager

- Admit mistakes
- Respond productively to bad news
  - example
- Curiosity vs. judgement



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# Complicating Factor- Lateral Violence



# Lateral Violence

## What is it?

- Overt or covert behaviors
- Examples
- The soap box I am on everyday

## Negativity & LV

- Amplifies negativity through emotional/mood contagions
- Very much associated with a lack of psychological safety



## How to address and resolve

- Create a zero-tolerance environment for bullying and hazing
  - How?
- Accountability and consequences
  - Examples
- Create/foster a culture of knowledge and learning
  - How?





# Complicating Factor- You

Or maybe us?



## What if we are the source of negativity?



- Impact from a leader's mood?
- Impact from subtle cues?
- The role of assumptions
- How to fix?



Questions so far?



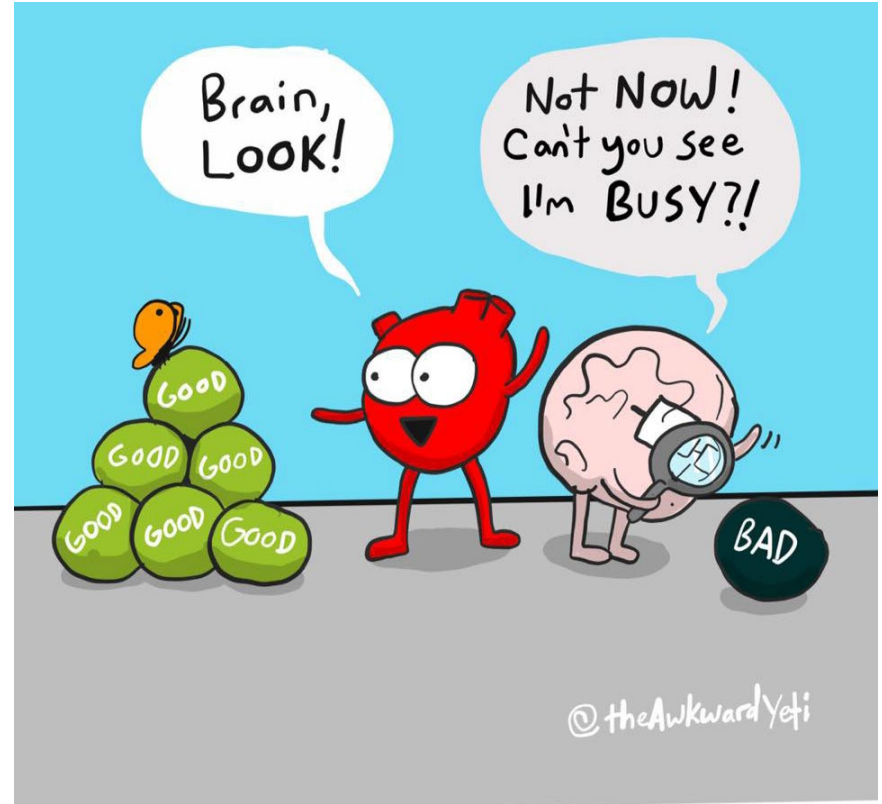


Bias



## What about bias?

- Negativity bias has been shown to be more potent than positive events
- It takes about eight or nine positives to overcome the effects of the negativity bias
- Why is this?

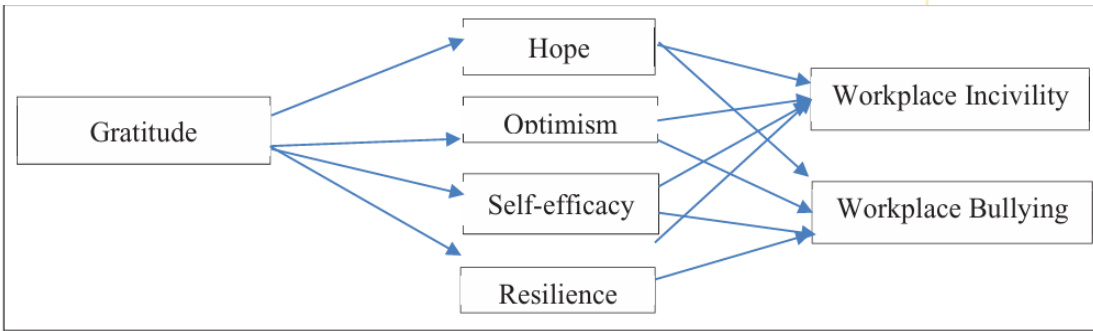


## How to Combat Negativity Bias

- Ask questions focused on the what, why or how - and less on the who
  - How airlines manage this
- Augment learning from errors or mistakes with lots of acknowledgement of what people have done well
  - Patient safety reports vs. incident reports
- Delay submissions of incident reports until after you speak with the person who is identified in the report



# The Role of Gratitude



- 2022 study on the role of gratitude to combat negativity in hospitals
- It was observed that gratitude is positively and statistically significantly correlated with all four dimensions



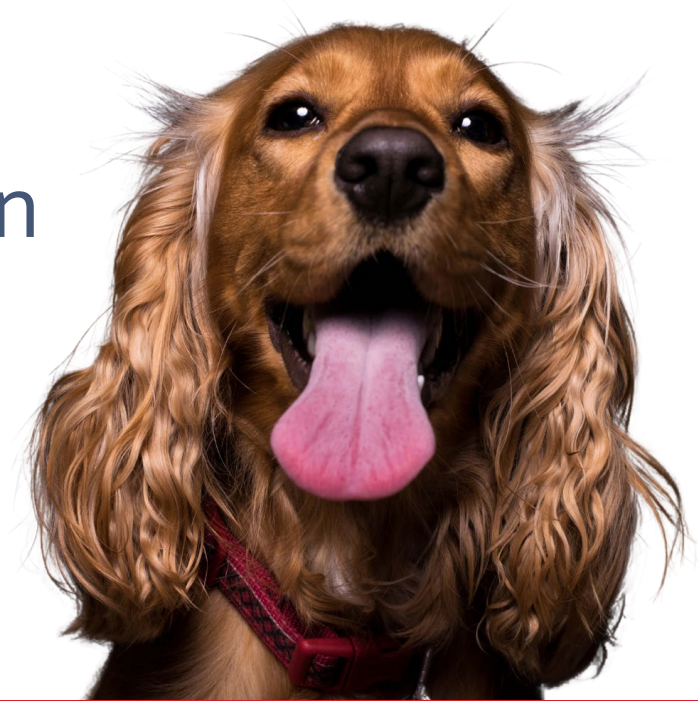
## What about empathy?

- Cognitive empathy
    - Taking the perspective of the other person
  - Emotional empathy
    - Responses to the other person that are similar to the other person
- Research on empathy shows:
    - It promotes a healthier workplace
    - It reduces impulsive and negative behaviors





# The role of accountability in addressing negativity

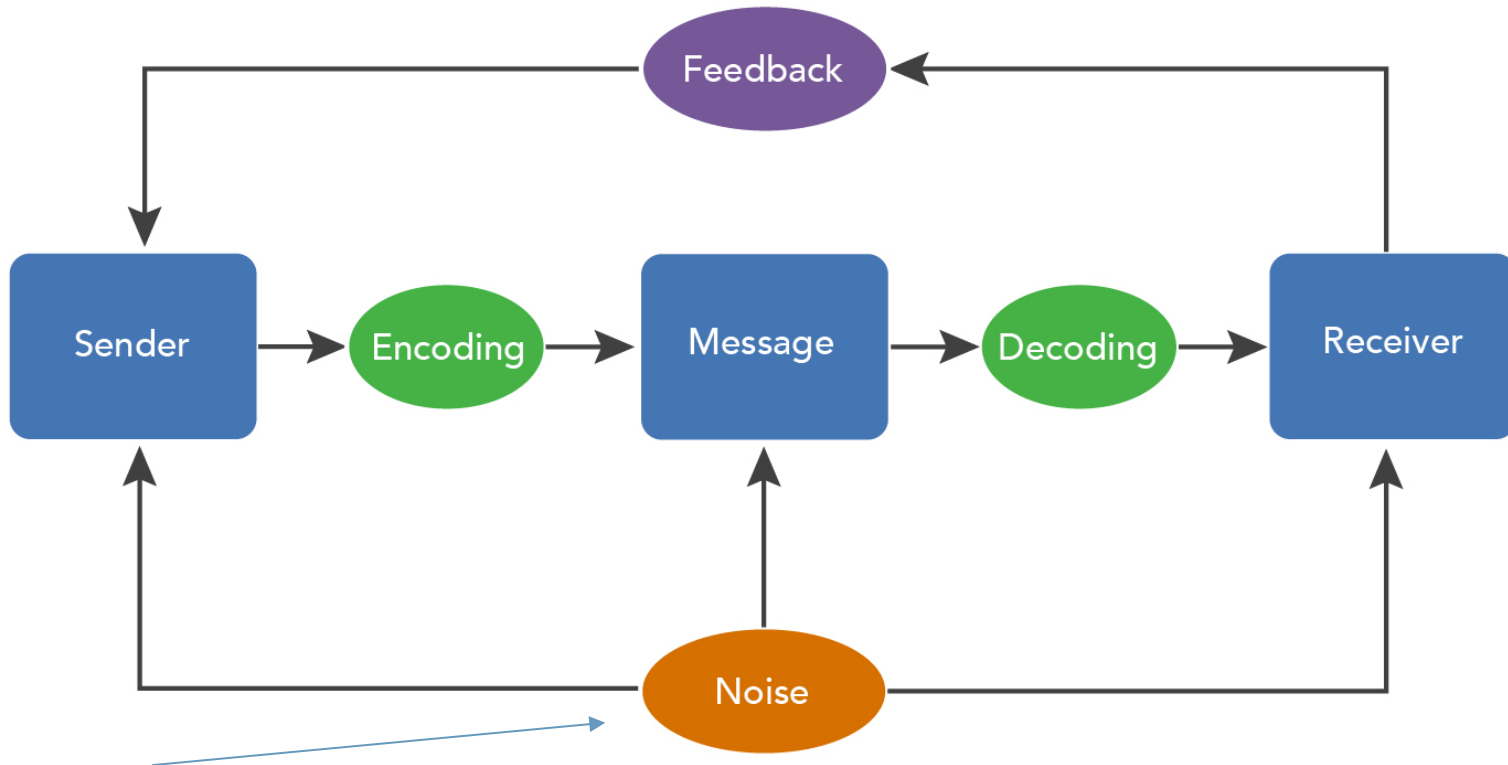




But first, a quick overview on  
the science of communication



# The science of communication



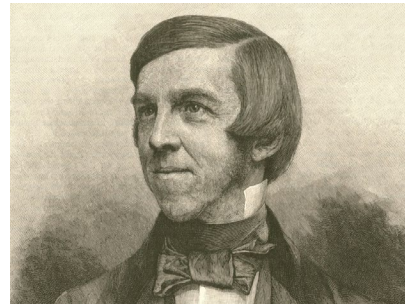
## Fundamentals of effective communication

- Does not happen by accident
- It requires careful planning & comprehension of how people behave
- Also requires a selection of physical facilities, mechanical or electronic instruments, and an understanding of the organizational environment
- Two-way street

## (Maybe more important) The science of listening

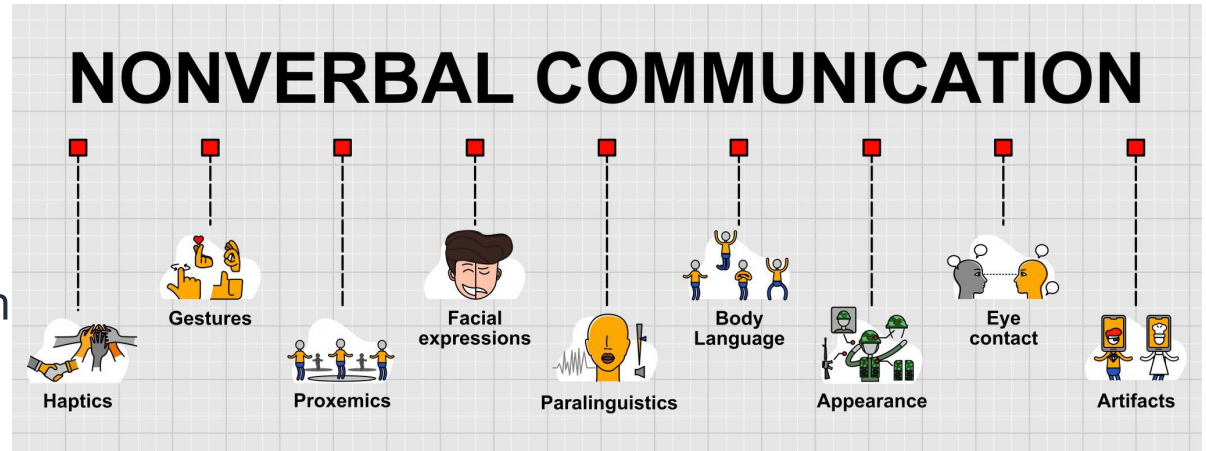
- Intrinsic to human relationships
- Active listening is associated with improved rapport
- Associated with interpersonal chemistry and safety
- Reduces burnout and increases well-being
- The ONLY way we learn new information and understand
- NO interrupting
  - I mean it

*It is the province of knowledge to speak, and  
it is the privilege of wisdom to listen.* - Oliver  
Wendell Holmes



# How to listen

- Nonverbal cues
- Paralinguistic signs
- Paraphrasing
- Requests for clarification
- Ask follow up questions
- Don't interrupt
  - I'm so serious, don't



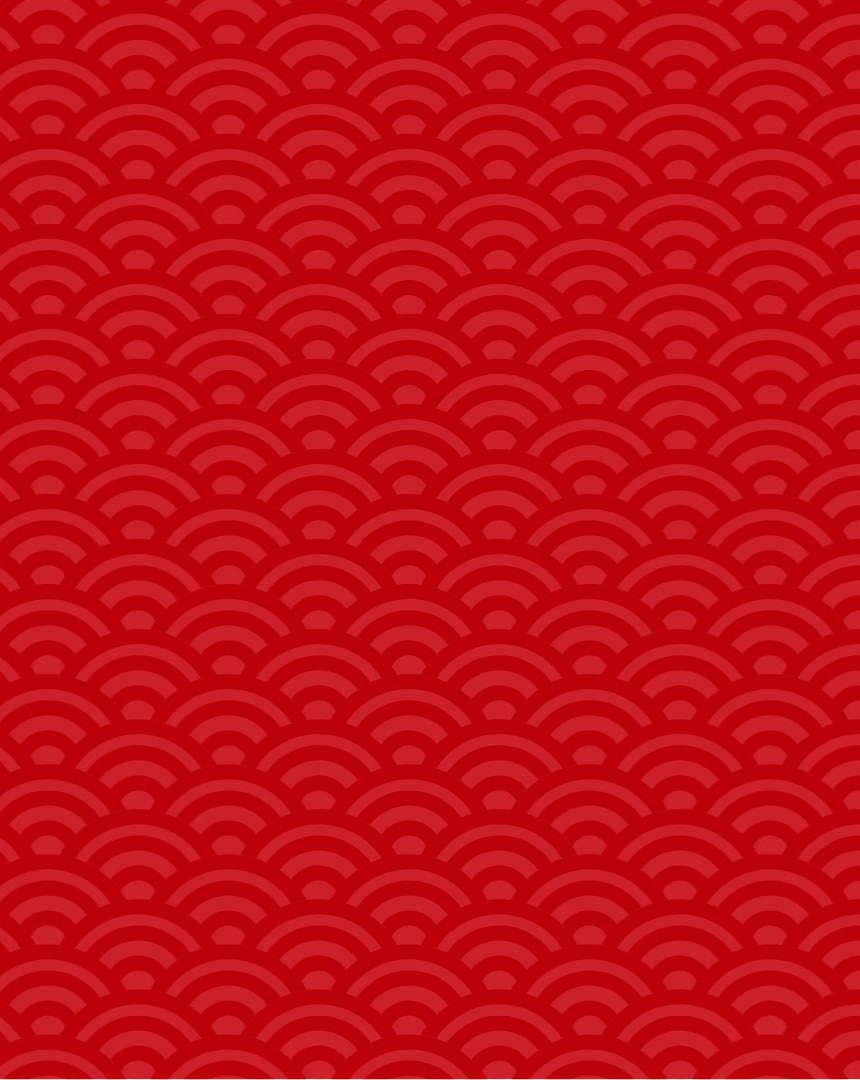


Addressing negativity requires  
giving feedback



## Feedback

- Defined as INFORMATION

- 
- Show of hands of who thinks feedback is confrontation?
  - Be honest

## Saying the Difficult Thing

- What a study looking at whether and why people give constructive feedback found

- Even in cases where people have little to lose, they withhold needed feedback from others who could use it
- Part of the reason why is that they underestimate how much other people crave feedback
- We all like to think of ourselves as someone who would give someone constructive feedback, but the study suggests that ... most people don't



## The MUM Effect

- Rosen, S., & Tesser, A. (1970). *On reluctance to communicate undesirable information (The MUM effect)*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*
- Key takeaway- people avoid difficult conversations to reduce personal discomfort



## Negative side effects of the MUM effect

- Medical errors
  - Resentment
  - Burnout
- Bias
  - Lack of equity among teams



## How to deliver feedback & say the difficult thing

- If you disagree, say so!
  - Use data, facts, and possible solutions
  - Know your goal
    - Change delivery based on this
  - Use “I” statements
  - Focus on solutions
- “I understand your point about [X], but I'm concerned about [Y] because of [Z]”
  - “I'm bringing this up because I want to ensure we achieve [shared goal]”





## Poll!

- Show of hands- who avoids feedback for fear of what the person might do?

## Saying the difficult thing

- Five experiments (N=1,984) identify a possible reason for the lack of feedback
  - People underestimate how much others want to receive constructive feedback. We examine two reasons why people might underestimate others' desire for feedback:
    - Considerations about their own experience (e.g., anticipating discomfort giving feedback or a harmed relationship with the receiver)
    - And/or considerations about the receiver's experience (e.g., anticipating discomfort receiving feedback or the feedback not being valuable).

## Feedback facts

- Feedback influences performance
  - Depending on how it is delivered and perceived
- Feedback is more effective when focused on **future behavior vs. past mistakes**



## Feedback Facts

- People overestimate the negative consequences giving feedback for themselves, as well as underestimate the benefits for the other person
- This misunderstanding persists even when the feedback giver and receiver know each other well
- What if the person is resistant to it?

## Teams vs. Negativity

- Teams that work closely together begin to share similar emotional patterns
  - This can create either a resilient culture or a negative spiral
- High-performing teams regulate emotion, not eliminate it
  - Strong teams are not always positive
  - They acknowledge stress while maintaining stability and communication



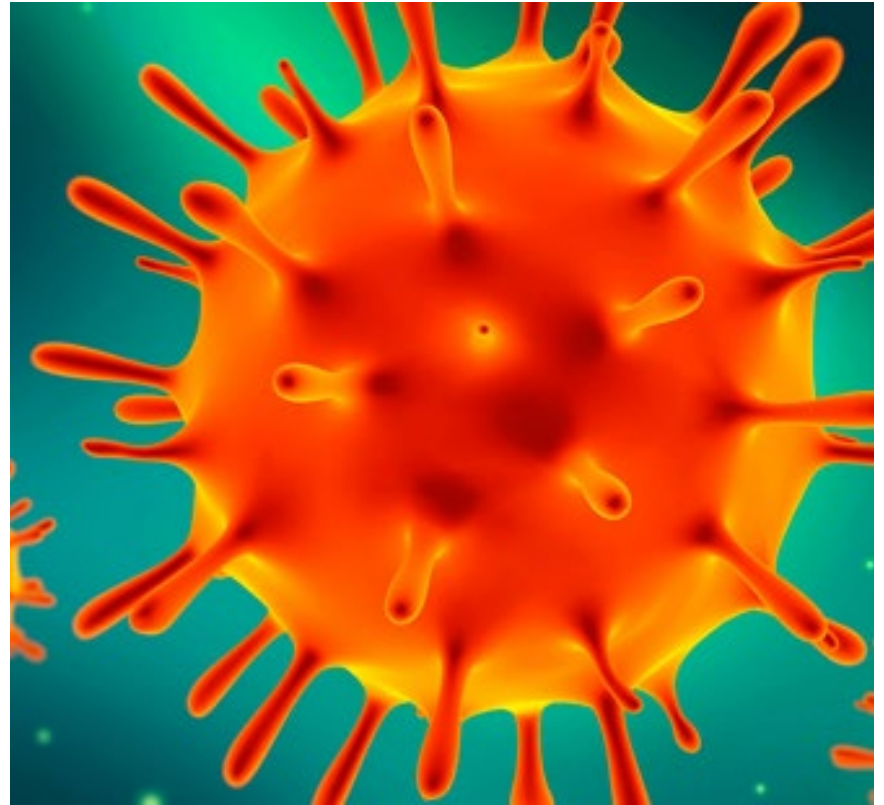


How do we fix it?



## What can we do?

- Don't get "hooked", don't respond or engage with negativity
- Don't reward the individual with an easier case load or lowered expectations
- Challenge or call attention to the negative behaviors
  - How do you even do this?
- Identify activities that "nurture instead of deplete"



## What else can we do?

- Cultivate an honest and open work environment
- Read the room & come with questions
- The need to make it someone's fault
- Challenge and interrupt negativity
  - How?
- Not toxic positivity



## More Solutions

- Set clear expectations for behavior and communication
  - Address negative behaviors early and consistently
  - Reinforce accountability while maintaining respect
- “Three good things” study
  - GRATITUDE





Thank you!

Questions?

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Also! Keep an eye out FOR MY  
BOOK!!!

How to Manage Healthy Veterinary  
Teams: An evidence- based guide

