

LINE ON LIFE

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*"I almost made it!" **

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Suppose two people arrived late at the airport, so they missed their plane. However, one missed the plane by 5 minutes, while the other was 30 minutes late. Which would feel more upset?

The outcome for both people is the same. They miss their plane and have to take a later flight. When people hear this story, most would agree that the person who missed the plane by 5 minutes would feel more frustrated. It has been well documented that people feel higher levels of frustration, if they get very close to their goal but still do not achieve it.



The reason for the increased feeling of frustration is explained by the concept of **counterfactual thinking**. Rather than just looking at their frustration, they evaluate their situation in terms of "*what might have been*." For the passenger who only missed the flight by 5 minutes, it is easier to consider actually catching the flight. There was a better possibility that s/he might have made it!

In 1995, three social psychologists – Victoria Medvec, Scott Madey and Thomas Gilovich – applied the concept of counterfactual thinking to the **Summer Olympics** in Atlanta. Does counterfactual thinking explain the different responses to missing "*the gold*"? In other words, is it more frustrating to get a silver medal or a bronze medal? Logically, most of us would say we would be happier winning the silver medal. However, the researchers hypothesized the opposite.



Although a silver medal means people earned a very respectable second place, they may be looking at "*what might have been*." If they had won the gold medal, other rewards would follow – highest status, greatest prestige, making commercial endorsements, making lots of money, and so forth. However, these rewards are much rarer for silver medalists. When they focus on their loss to the gold-medal winner ("*If I had only won the gold....*"), silver medalists feel bad.



However, things are different for bronze-medal winners. There is not that much difference between the rewards that go along with the bronze medal and the silver medal. Bronze medalists are more likely to focus on "*what might have been*," if they had come in fourth. They would have received no medal at all and would not have been on the medal stand accepting honors. Because they are

making a downward comparison, they would feel relatively pleased with their bronze medals for third place.

To test their hypotheses, the researchers studied the actual reactions of silver and bronze medal winners in the Olympics. They obtained television tapes of the medalists at the moment they found out how they had finished. (For example, one video clip showed Jackie Joyner-Kersey when she learned she had earned the bronze medal right after her final long jump.) Also television footage was studied that showed the moment they received their medals during the awards ceremonies.

A group of college students rated the video clips as to the emotions expressed. They used a 10-point "*agony to ecstasy*" scale. In both situations, bronze medalists were judged significantly happier than silver medalists.

This was backed up by post-win interviews of the athletes. Bronze medalists were more likely to mention how they actually performed and how close they came to *not* winning. In contrast, silver medalists concentrated more on the gold medal they "*almost*" won. They also seemed less satisfied with their performance.

Not achieving a goal you *almost* reach is like reaching it, but having it snatched away from you at the last moment.

Of course, the implications of these results apply in other areas than athletics. Like many people, I play the lottery. Typically, I am nowhere close to winning the millions offered. However, would I be happier if I got 5 out of the 6 numbers? If I used counterfactual thinking, that may not happen. I would win several thousand dollars. However, I am more likely to be frustrated, because I *just* missed *millions* of dollars!

Final exams are coming soon. Many students will not earn the grade they want. However, the feelings of frustration will vary. Suppose two students get a "B" at the end of the semester. The one who was always in the "B" range, with minimal chances of getting an "A," will not feel very frustrated. On the other hand, what if the student had been improving and just missed an "A" by 1 or 2 points? That student will be more upset with the same grade.

We all will experience repeated frustrations in life. I hope that your frustrations are few. However, if you look at what you have rather than what you lack, you will not be as upset by the goals you do not reach. I hate to resort to clichés, but do you see your "*glass*" – your life – as "*half full or half empty*" ?

* Adapted from Robert S. Feldman's *Social Psychology*, Prentice Hall Publishers, 1998, pages 70-71.