

Research Digest



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How To Be A Good Negotiator, According To Psychology.

(<https://digest.bps.org.uk/2021/01/19/how-to-be-a-good-negotiator-according-to-psychology/>).

By Emma Young (<https://emmayoung.net/>).

Good negotiators are more likely to secure a pay rise, get the house or job they want, and keep the peace at home. No end of psychological studies have explored which attitudes, behaviours, and settings will help a negotiation go your way. Here, we take a look at some of the key findings:

What's the best way to prepare for a negotiation?

Plenty of studies have found that people in positions of low power tend to do worse in a negotiation than people with high power. A job interviewer or someone with a desirable house to sell falls into the high-power category. So if you're about to walk into an interview, or start negotiating over a house or car, say, it would help if you first engaged in a little self-affirmation (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0146167215577365>), according to a study on MBA students. Before going into a meeting in which they were acting as the would-be buyer of a biotech plant, some of the participants spent five minutes writing about their most important negotiating skill. In the subsequent negotiation, for this group, the typical high-power advantage of the "seller" was significantly reduced, and they secured lower sale prices.

Rather than going into a negotiation with the view that a gain for one side is a loss for the other (a so-called "win-lose mindset"), it's worth remembering that, depending on the terms of the deal, it could be win-win. That's according to the authors of a study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2019. The team found that people in a position of financial vulnerability were more likely to hold the win-lose mindset (<https://doi.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037/apl0000427>) by default, and less likely to capitalise on any opportunities for both sides to gain. "By holding this win-lose mindset, financially disadvantaged people may continue to make poor deals, perpetuating their situation," says Marko Pitesa at the Singapore Management University, who was involved in the research. But being aware of this mentality might help to stop it happening.

How do I kick off a negotiation in the right way?

A work-related negotiation doesn't have to happen in the office, of course. In fact, a far better location would be a restaurant that serves food on sharing platters... This, at least, was the "shared plates, shared minds" (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0956797619830633>) finding of a study published in *Psychological Science* in 2019. Pairs of participants who'd shared a single bowl of crisps and salsa went on to require, on average, nine rounds of negotiation to resolve a theoretical wage dispute, four rounds fewer than pairs who'd eaten the same snack from their own bowls. The shared eating promoted cooperation, the team thinks. "Basically, every meal that you're eating alone is a missed opportunity to connect to someone," says co-author Ayelet Fishbach at the University of Chicago. "And every meal that involves food sharing fully utilizes the opportunity to create that social bond."

A small alcoholic drink could be a helpful addition to the meal, too (<https://digest.bps.org.uk/2016/06/17/a-small-alcoholic-drink-could-benefit-business-negotiations-study-finds/>). When both participants in a bargaining game had one 350ml glass of beer, they became more collaborative, compared with those who'd drunk juice. "In settings in which skepticism can lead to a breakdown in negotiation, alcohol consumption can make people drop their guard for each other's actions, thus facilitating reaching an agreement," the team explains.

Will anger help me get what I want?

The idea that you should add a bit of grrr to your negotiations (<https://digest.bps.org.uk/2006/05/11/why-you-should-add-a-bit-of-grrrrr-to-your-negotiations/>) has a long history. While some studies have found that it isn't a good idea, others have suggested that pretending you are angry can be helpful, especially if the person you are negotiating with is in a pretty weak position. However, the effect of anger does depend on the cultural context (<https://digest.bps.org.uk/2010/07/09/effect-of-anger-on-negotiations-depends-on-cultural-context/>): a 2010 study found that while it could help in a negotiation with someone from a European background, it backfired in negotiations with someone from an East Asian background, where traditionally such behaviour is regarded as inappropriate.

And the effect of getting angry on the negotiation will also depend at least partly on what you *expect* it to be. A 2017 study (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-29279-001>) published in *Emotion* found that participants in a negotiation task who'd been led to believe that anger would be helpful and who felt more angry during the task did make more money (<https://digest.bps.org.uk/2017/10/20/the-effect-of-emotions-on-your-behaviour-depends-partly-on-your-expectations/>). But for those who had not been guided in this way, whether they felt angry or not made no difference to how much money they made. As the team wrote: "At least in some cases, what we expect emotions to do may determine what they actually do."

Is face-to-face negotiation always best?

Well, that depends... If you have Dark Triad tendencies — if you'd score highly for narcissism, psychopathy or Machiavellianism — then yes, you'd be much better off negotiating in person (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0191886915300738?via=ihub>), according to a study of 200 Canadian students. The team asked the participants to negotiate for concert tickets, as a buyer or seller, either face-to-face or via text on a computer. Those who ranked higher on the Dark Triad spectrum did better in face-to-face negotiations than negotiations via the computer, whereas those who'd ranked low in these traits did better online compared to in-person. In fact, when negotiating via computer, those who'd placed higher on the Dark Triad spectrum were significantly less successful than the others. Whatever the ability of such people to charm, manipulate or intimidate others in person, they lose this edge when negotiating online, the team concludes. This also implies, of course, that if you think your boss might have Dark Triad tendencies, it could be better to conduct a negotiation over a pay rise by email rather than face-to-face.

When it comes to negotiations via text, there are a few other things to consider. For instance, a negotiating pair is more likely to reach mutually agreeable terms in an online discussion when they think of each other as being physically distant, rather than physically close (<https://digest.bps.org.uk/2011/01/07/physical-distance-boosts-the-success-of-computer-based-negotiation/>). In this study, two people did the negotiating. But what if you used an Artificial Intelligence agent to do your negotiating — a task that AI agents, or bots, are tipped to take over? This does affect our negotiation strategies, according to a recent study in the US. Among other things, the team found that less experienced negotiators are more likely to be deceitful if they assign an AI agent to do their dirty work for them (<https://digest.bps.org.uk/2020/10/27/were-more-willing-to-use-deceitful-tactics-when-a-bot-does-the-negotiating/>).

What about negotiating at home?

If you don't like a job offer, or a bid for your house, you don't have to take it. But if you're in a relationship, and want to stay in it, you will have to find ways to negotiate your way through all kinds of disagreements, from the minor — such as plans for the weekend — to the major (whether to take a job in another country, say.)

In all these situations, it would be worth bearing in mind the results of a recent analysis of data on more than 32,000 people from nine different countries: if you feel that you would in theory be willing to make a sacrifice for your partner, there are benefits for you both (<https://digest.bps.org.uk/2020/08/25/how-making-sacrifices-for-a-partner-or-saying-you-will-affects-wellbeing/>). However, when one person actually makes a sacrifice (not just *says* that they would), it's a different story. The data suggests that in these situations, the person actually making a sacrifice tends to feel the burden of it. Gaining a major concession from your partner could clearly, then, end up being a case not merely of win-lose, but lose-lose.

So what if you've just agreed to make a significant sacrifice for your partner, or you're weighing one up? The researchers have some advice: "Being willing to sacrifice may be valuable for individuals and couples but when people actually perform this behaviour, they maximise their wellbeing when they focus on the gains rather than the losses."

Emma Young (<https://emmayoung.net/>). (@EmmaEYoung (<https://twitter.com/EmmaEYoung>)) is a staff writer at **BPS Research Digest** (<https://digest.bps.org.uk/>).

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