It may be over-exercising, eating a favourite dish too often or being on a long boat cruise – we know and feel it when we have “too much of a good thing”. This is the experience of something good becoming bad when the amount is excessive or whenever we do too much of it. Too much of a desirable thing that is otherwise enjoyable or beneficial can end up in unpleasant experiences, even harmful consequences. Not just in exercise, food and rest, but also in daily situations. Keep making your password more complex to increase security and you end up having difficulty accessing your computer. Or think about what happens when you spend too much time with your partner.

In these situations, the unpleasant experience is personal and immediate, although others interacting with us may know it only indirectly, or we will tell them about it.

But there is another set of actions that we engage in, with excessive good becoming bad, which others see immediately. And they see it much more clearly than we do, if we eventually realise it at all. These are actions we exhibit from having too much of a positive attribute, or a positive attitude. Put simply, when our virtue becomes vice.

**POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES BECOMING NEGATIVE**

We cultivate personal attributes into good virtues. We value self-confidence and discourage self-doubt. We say: be confident, not conceited. Andrew takes pride in courage and despises cowardice. But when confidence, self-confidence or positive overflows, we become maladapted. When people are overconfident, they often do too much. Someone overconfident about his or her speaking skills will overestimate the audience’s interest in what he has to say, and their positive impression of his delivery. The speech then goes on longer than necessary, offering more arguments than needed, with more illustrations than planned. The overconfidence is self-defeating – the goal to persuade or awe the audience is not achieved. It may even backfire.

Conversely, someone is another positive attribute we can have too much of. A conscientious person not only puts in effort, he attends to details and perseveres despite slow or even no progress. But when someone is excessively conscientious, what should be a meritorious action becomes obsessive-compulsive behaviour. In this case, there are reasons to step his dogged determination to pursue the same course is stubborn failure, a behaviour to adapt.

The courage to speak the unpleasant truth or speak up against unfairness is a positive attribute. Courage is all the more precious when the cost of speaking up is high, and we know we may have to suffer more than we can. It can help cause someone to speak up or are at least less likely to remain silent.

Conversely, too much courage hurts more than helps. It can cause someone to have no or no inhibition in expressing and expounding where it is not in one’s interest. It becomes impulsivity, maladaptive forthrightness and poor situational judgment ability.

Now and then, we may be too conscientious or too courageous. But it is overconfidence that everyone should pay more attention to, because it is the most prevalent.

**OVERCONFIDENCE AND OPTIMISM BIAS**

Overconfidence is ubiquitous when people make judgments and decisions.

In numerous studies on confidence, conducted in different cultures using diverse tasks, participants were asked how good they think they are, either in absolute terms or relative to others. Invariably, it is driving skills or predicting future events. Studies show that the large majority of participants – often close to 60 per cent – believe they are better than average. The median. This is statistically impossible because objectively only 50 per cent of the sample are above the median score.

Research also shows people are overconfident about the accuracy of their forecasts, whether it is predicting the stock market performance or their firm’s profits. There is a substantial gap between what people think they know and what they actually know.

Research shows that this disconnect between self-belief and reality is larger for people with higher academic achievements, experts in various fields, and those in positions of authority and power.

Confirmation bias is the human tendency to selectively seek out information to confirm one’s preconceived belief or position. It is the mother of all biases. When overconfidence is the father. Together, these biases have given birth to a host of other cognitive biases that pervade human judgment and decision-making.

For example, overconfidence produces optimism bias. This is the tendency to expect positives futures regardless of evidence and logic. Optimism bias is maladaptive. It is an unrealistic belief and hope that a future will be positive, when such a future is impossible.

By self-reflection, we figure out what to do, and how and when to pursue a course of action. It involves asking ourselves what is the issue at hand and its practical context, when to apply which positive attribute or attitude, who are the people involved, and how we can do things better.

David Chan
For The Straits Times

Optimism bias in ramping can have serious negative consequences. Bad predictions and, therefore, decisions can lead to large investment losses, undermined public infrastructure or not-so-smart cities that are not resilient to cyber-security crises.

When a positive attitude is excessive, we can also be excessive in our positive attitudes towards others. Take trust, for instance. High trust can be mistrust – trusting when we should not.

The consequences can be disastrous when we have high trust in people who are not trustworthy, especially when you trust not just in someone’s competence, but also their integrity and responsiveness when these are absent. When trust levels are excessively high, we do not question claims and assumptions, nor ask facts and supporting evidence. And accountability and responsibility are not on our mind. All these make us highly vulnerable to exploitation when we mistrust manipulative characters.

Contrary to popular discourse on trust, distrust – which simply means low trust – is not always a bad thing. But the best antidote to being overly trusting is not to embrace destructive cynicism.

Instead, develop healthy scepticism. This is a mindset of critical thinking like that of a good scientist – rationally questioning assumptions and objectively evaluating claims, giving priority to facts and evidence.

Another positive attitude that can become excessive occurs when people work together in a team. We use the term “team player” to compliment a member who agrees with the rest of the team or compromise his position to achieve group consensus. And we call the one who does not go along with the team a disagreeable or dogmatic individual.

Normally, an agreeable attitude helps team functioning. It maintains harmonious relations among members and builds group cohesion, and helps contribute to team morale and performance.

But we know from the research on teams, and also many real-life examples in business and politics, that too much value placed on agreement and group consensus will be detrimental. This is the phenomenon where a highly cohesive team makes bad decisions because team members withhold dissenting views to go along with majority opinions.

In groupthink, members agree and do not express a different view due to pressures to conform or maintain social harmony. Groupthink happens often in teams that value consensus and cohesion, and also when the team climate either forces or nudges members to keep quiet, agree with the leader and senior team members or express only views that they think in line with group opinion.

The antidote is self-reflection. It involves asking ourselves what is the issue at hand and its practical context, when to apply which positive attribute or attitude, who are the people involved, and how we can do things better.

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Three keys to point out here:

1. When we do too much of it.
2. When the amount is excessive or even no progress.
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Conversely, someone is another positive attribute we can have too much of. A conscientious person not only puts in effort, he attends to details and perseveres despite slow or even no progress. But when someone is excessively conscientious, what should be a meritorious action becomes obsessive-compulsive behaviour. In this case, there are reasons to stop his dogged determination to pursue the same course is stubborn failure, a behaviour to adapt.

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