

The Opposite of Schadenfreude Is Freudenfreude. Here's How to Cultivate It.

The joy we derive from others' success comes with many benefits.

By Juli Fraga

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When Eugenie George heard that her friend passed a financial counseling exam, at first her heart sank. She had failed the same test weeks earlier, and she needed the credential to advance her career.

“My inner child got upset,” recalled Ms. George, a financial writer and educator from Philadelphia. But then, instead of stewing, she called her friend: “I told her I failed and admitted I was jealous,” she said. Ms. George knew that being upfront would defuse her envy, but she was surprised when it shifted her attitude so she could share her friend’s happiness, and experience her own, in turn. “I congratulated her and told her she inspired me.”

Finding pleasure in another person’s good fortune is what social scientists call “freudenfreude,” a term (inspired by the German word for “joy”) that describes the bliss we feel when someone else succeeds, even if it doesn’t directly involve us. Freudenfreude is like social glue, said Catherine Chambliss, a professor of psychology at Ursinus College. It makes relationships “more intimate and enjoyable.”

Erika Weisz, an empathy researcher and postdoctoral fellow in psychology at Harvard University, said the feeling closely resembles positive empathy — the ability to experience someone else’s positive emotions. A small 2021 study

examined positive empathy's role in daily life and found that it propelled kind acts, like helping others. Sharing in someone else's joy can also foster resilience, improve life satisfaction and help people cooperate during a conflict.

While the benefits of freudenfreude are plentiful, it doesn't always come easily. In zero-sum situations, your loss might really sting, making freudenfreude feel out of reach. If you were raised in a family that paired winning with self-worth, Dr. Chambliss said, you might misread someone else's victory as a personal shortcoming. And factors like mental health and overall well-being can also affect your ability to participate in someone else's joy. Still, indulging in freudenfreude is worthwhile — and there are ways to encourage the feeling.

If freudenfreude is so great, why does schadenfreude get more attention?

To better understand freudenfreude, it can be helpful to demystify its better-known counterpart, schadenfreude: the pleasure we feel when witnessing someone's misfortune.

In a 2012 study, Dr. Chambliss and her colleagues examined freudenfreude and schadenfreude scores among college students, some of whom were experiencing mild depression and some who weren't. Freudenfreude scores were higher, and schadenfreude scores were lower, among those who were not depressed. The mildly depressed college students, however, had a harder time adopting a joy-sharing mind-set. "When you're feeling down, it's natural to puncture positive news with negativity," Dr. Chambliss explained.

Even when people aren't experiencing mental distress, moments of schadenfreude, like when a movie villain gets their comeuppance or a nemesis faces scrutiny, can be comforting and serve a purpose.

"Schadenfreude is one way we try to cope with jealousy and vulnerability," said clinical psychologist Emily Anhalt, co-founder of Coa, a mental health app. It's an "ego protector" that shields people from pain and reinforces social bonds within a

group, like when joy erupts among sports fans after their rival faces a humiliating loss.

Indulging in too much schadenfreude, however, can backfire. One study found that schadenfreude on social media can ice out empathy, making people less compassionate toward those who differ from them. Other research suggests that delighting in the mishaps of others can actually lower a person's self-esteem, especially when they are comparing themselves to high achievers.

Is it possible to experience more freudenfreude?

“Empathy isn't always an automatic reflex,” Dr. Weisz said. “It's often a motivated process.” To help people strengthen joy-sharing muscles, Dr. Chambliss and her colleagues developed a program called Freudenfreude Enhancement Training (FET), featuring two exercises. They found that depressed college students who used the practices for two weeks had an easier time expressing freudenfreude, which enhanced their relationships and improved their mood.

If you're interested in enjoying a little more freudenfreude, try some of the tips below, culled from FET and other experts.

Show active interest in someone else's happiness.

One way to summon good feelings for others is to ask questions. Dr. Chambliss and her colleagues call this FET practice “SHOY,” or sharing joy.

To start, invite the bearer of good news to discuss their experience. Even if your heart isn't in it, research conducted by Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California Riverside who studies happiness, suggests that happiness can flourish when you make a heartfelt effort to engage with a positive activity.

So when you speak with your friend, make eye contact and listen to their story. Doing so motivates you to keep going and makes you feel like your efforts will pay off.

View individual success as a communal effort.

“When we feel happy for others, their joy becomes our joy,” said psychologist Marisa Franco, author of “Platonic: How the Science of Attachment Can Help You Make — and Keep — Friends.” To that end, freudenfreude encourages us to look at success as a community achievement.

“No one gets to the top alone, and when we elevate others, we’re often carried up with them,” Dr. Anhalt said.

Jean Grae, an artist and self-identified “multipotentialite,” supports friends and colleagues by adopting this mind-set. When someone gets a new opportunity or reaches a milestone, she makes sure to celebrate them, she explained. As a nonbinary person of color, Grae said she is moved when anyone considered “other” succeeds. “It’s truly inspirational because it lifts us all up and makes us shine.”

Share credit for your successes with others.

Because emotions are contagious, showing appreciation can increase freudenfreude for both the gratitude giver and the recipient. In this way, you can think of freudenfreude as something you can spread when you’re experiencing personal joy.

To do this, try an FET exercise called “bragitude,” which involves expressing gratitude when someone else’s success or support leads to your own. Start by sharing your win, then tell the other person how they helped. If your friend’s accountant advised you to squirrel away more money, for instance, you might say: “My savings are growing, thanks for recommending your great accountant.”

Practicing bragitude is like sharing dessert: Both parties enjoy the sweetness of the moment, which enhances freudenfreude for them both.

Turn into a joy spectator.

“Too often, we think of joy passively,” Dr. Franco said. “We see it as something that comes to us, instead of something we can generate.” But you don’t need to wait for someone else’s good news to exercise freudenfreude, she explained.

Cultivate joy by inviting others to share their victories. You might ask: “What was the bright spot of your day?” or “I could use some good news. What’s the best thing that happened to you this week?” Asking about other people’s wins turns you into a joy spectator, giving you a chance to witness them at their best.

Experiencing more freudenfreude doesn’t mean you’ll never root against a villain again, but being able to reach for happiness is inherently beneficial. “As delicious as it is to delight in our enemy’s defeats, celebrating our friends’ success — big and small — helps us all triumph in the end,” Dr. Chambliss said.

Juli Fraga is a psychologist and writer in San Francisco.

A correction was made on Nov. 28, 2022: An earlier version of this article misidentified the origin of the word freudenfreude. The term is inspired by “freude,” the German word for joy. It is not a German word.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nynews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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