Meaningful Misery

Sadness is something most people avoid, often spending a considerable amount of money on self-help books and thinking that there must be something “wrong.” All moods, even negative ones, serve a useful evolutionary purpose. With advanced brain research and imaging, scientists are learning that mild, temporary states of sadness are beneficial in managing various aspects of our lives:

- Sadness can improve your memory. Studies indicate that positive mood impairs, and negative mood improves attention and memory for incidental details in our environment. Research consistently finds that negative moods improve attention to detail and results in better memory.

- Sadness can improve judgment. People who are down in the dumps are less gullible than people who are happy, a University of New South Wales study found. Additionally, sad people are better at detecting deception and are less likely to make judgmental errors.

  Why better memory and judgment? According to the study, "As humans evolved, moods came to be used as unconscious signals to inform people of the most appropriate way to process information. A positive mood signaled, 'all is well', while a negative mood signaled, 'be alert and vigilant'. Therefore a negative outlook promoted a more attentive and externally focused, information-processing style."

- Sadness can increase your motivation. Studies indicate that sad people are able to persevere longer at difficult tasks than happy people.

- Sadness can improve social interactions. People who are feeling sad produce more effective and persuasive arguments than those in a positive frame of mind. Research has also found that sad people are generally more fair and less likely to stereotype.

- Sadness can improve gratitude. It makes people more appreciative of what they have.

Sadness is just one of the emotions in our repertoire that make us not only human, but “better.” So, while you may seek ways to increase your happiness, don’t push away your sadness—grab a tissue box and embrace it!