The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions

Central to many existing theories of emotion is the concept of specific-action tendencies—the idea that emotions prepare the body both physically and psychologically to act in particular ways. For example, anger creates the urge to attack, fear causes an urge to escape and disgust leads to the urge to expel. From this framework, positive emotions posed a puzzle.

Emotions like joy, serenity and gratitude don’t seem as useful as fear, anger or disgust. The bodily changes, urges to act and the facial expressions produced by positive emotions are not as specific or as obviously relevant to survival as those sparked by negative emotions. If positive emotions didn’t promote our ancestors’ survival in life-threatening situations, then what good were they? How did they survive evolutionary pressures? Did they have any adaptive value at all?

Barbara Fredrickson developed the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions to explain the mechanics of how positive emotions were important to survival. According to the theory, positive emotions expand cognition and behavioral tendencies. Taking issue with the view that all emotions lead to specific action tendencies, the theory argues that positive emotions increase the number of potential behavioral options. Instead, emotions should be cast as leading to changes in “momentary thought-action repertoires” – a range of potential actions the body and mind are prepared to take.

The expanded cognitive flexibility evident during positive emotional states results in resource building that becomes useful over time. Even though a positive emotional state is only momentary, the benefits last in the form of traits, social bonds, and abilities that endure into the future. The implication of this work is that positive emotions have inherent value to human growth and development and cultivation of these emotions will help people lead fuller lives.

You can learn more at: http://www.unc.edu/peplab/broaden_build.html.