

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY DISTINGUISHING WANTING FROM LIKING

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What we want, and what we end

up liking when we get it are two different things. They each involve different parts of our brain, and different states of mind.

Understanding this difference and bringing more consciousness to what you *think* you want can save you a huge amount of time, effort... and money.

This last bit is important, the amount of money we spend on things that we want, but then end up not liking, can be huge. It can make the difference between financial ease or financial stress; a sense of abundance or a sense of desperation. It can make it possible – or impossible – to save and invest.

I've had clients who, though they make plenty of money to live very well, end up feeling desperate and on edge financially – because they spend more than they make, buying things they want.

This doesn't need to happen. It's a simple enough math problem, easy to solve on paper – just don't spend more than you make, right? But desire is a powerful motivator, and our emotions can mislead us hard with this one.

What happens is that we focus too much on what we want, thinking (and feeling strongly) it will bring us comfort or relief or happiness. But what we end up with is things we don't even like very much, plus the significant stress of sustained financial anxiety and regret.

The difference between what we want, and what we will like when we get it is what researchers Dan Gilbert and Tim Wilson call "Miswanting." We have a strong bias toward what we want, and we often aren't very good at predicting how we'll feel once we get it.

We focus too much on the wanting – which is exciting and offers the promise of satisfaction, joy, or relief – and

not enough on the reality of having whatever it is. When we have something that we've wanted, it might be nice, but it's usually a quieter, less emotionally revved up feeling. Which is different from what the higher rev of our wanting leads us to expect.

The antidote, as with many things, is to bring awareness to the part of the experience we haven't been looking at.

My wife and I really *want* a dog. We've both had dogs before we met and for most of our over 30 years together, and we've loved our dogs. Our last dog passed away about 3 years ago. Since then we think and talk often about wanting another dog.

And yet...

They're a lot of work. Training a dog well, cleaning up, taking the time for walks and building our relationship with a dog. It's all wonderful and enriching – if you're ready for it and able to commit fully.

But our kids are grown, we're able to easily take off on a trip if we want to, and we both have lots of other things we're doing.

We really *wanta* dog, but we also know that we won't *like* having a dog right now; the time isn't right for that commitment. It's not worth the trade-off.

This is *not* an easy thing to stay conscious of. When we see an adorable dog, we both want a dog, and the feeling is strong. We wish we had one. We think of all the wonderful things that would go with that. But at some point one of us (we take turns) makes sure that we look at the reality of actually *having* a dog more closely. Within a few minutes, we both know it's not time... yet.

Take a few minutes to think back to some of the things you've really wanted and worked to get. I'm sure you've been very happy with many of them once you had them. I'm also certain you really weren't that happy about some of them, once you had them.

Focus on those things you've been disappointed with, and notice how hard it can be to acknowledge that you regret buying them. We don't like to feel regret, and we *really* don't like to feel shame. When we have a habit of spending more than we should on things we don't end up liking, regret can grow into shame, and avoiding these emotions can keep us from re-assessing our spending habits – intensifying a vicious cycle.

See if you can face the regret, or the shame, and take stock of the things you've gotten that you weren't actually very happy with. Be as honest as you can with yourself, but don't get bogged down in negative feelings about it, don't ruminate about it. Just acknowledge it, learn from it, and allow it to be part of your awareness going forward. The more matter of fact this can be, the better.

Credit cards and other easy financing can make it much too easy to buy something we want without really considering whether we'll like it. We can end up with something we aren't happy with, plus the additional burden of a high interest rate on money we wish we hadn't spent in the first place.

The way to counter this bias is, first, take in the information of this column: know that we can want things that we won't end up actually liking when we get them. We can find it hard to face the disappointment, regret, or even shame of that afterward, but facing the truth of it is essential.

Then, take a step back from the powerful, dopamine powered urge to get what you want now. Let go of imagining how great it will be, and instead take a step forward in time to when you would have it.

Be sure to include the cost, any interest payments, the work you will have put into it, and the things you won't

have because you got this. Also, purposefully go against the momentum of your rosier scenario, and look at what will be more difficult once you have it. What will you be trading for this new thing that you want.

Then decide whether it's really worth the trade.

I don't mean to be a killjoy here. You may find that you're pretty sure you'll be really happy with it. Great!

Take that seriously, it can be good to want things. But also step back from your emotions and do the hard work of bringing the potential downside into consciousness, and do the honest calculations about the trade-offs.

Achieving what we want *and* like can be a tremendous addition to our quality of life. But if we invest in things we don't end up liking, that can cost us. Some honest reflection that goes against the current of excitement beforehand can make a big difference.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. You can get it now with a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

Joel F. Wade, Ph.D., is the author of The Virtue of Happiness, Mastering Happiness, his new course, Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions, A Master's Course in Happiness, and The Mastering Happiness Podcast. He is a marriage and family therapist and life coach who works with people around the world via phone and video. You can get a FREE Learning Optimism E-Course if you sign up at his website, www.drjoelwade.com.

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