

KEEPING YOUR SANITY WITH THE ANTIDOTE TO THE HEDONIC TREADMILL

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One of the often unspoken

expectations when we buy something is that it will, to some degree, make us happy.

We buy a new appliance, or a nice piece of furniture for our home, and it satisfies an idea we had that led us to buy it in the first place. Part of that idea is that the new oven, or couch, will make us happy.

We shop for a new piece of clothing, and we expect that we'll enjoy wearing it.

Even a trip to the grocery store is often accompanied with an expectation that the food we buy will make for a yummy meal that we'll savor.

We can buy gizmos like smart phones or Apple watches, and we expect they'll improve, to some extent, the quality of our lives.

And each of these purchases usually *does* bring us some degree of satisfaction or pleasure... for a little while.

But part of our strength as human beings is our capacity to adapt to a multitude of circumstances; from tremendous wealth and opportunities, to severe poverty or physical danger. We can expand into great flourishing, or we can make do, struggle, and muddle through rough times.

"Hedonic adaptation" is the term that researchers use to describe this capacity to adapt to different circumstances while staying within a range of overall happiness. This gift of adaptability is a wonderful advantage in a continually changing world, full of endless creativity, unanticipated events, and unpredictable possibilities, good or bad.

It also means that we adapt to good things relatively quickly, so the happiness we experience from them is often fleeting.

...then we need another good thing.

...and another.

And when we become used to the availability of good things, when we come to expect them as a regular experience of a good life, we enter what's called the "Hedonic Treadmill."

Needing more and more good things in order to feel what we've come to expect as a baseline of happiness can be exhausting. It can undermine the sense of happiness we enjoy with each positive experience.

And in that way we can undermine our sense of being happy *about* our life.

But there is an antidote; something we can deliberately practice and gets easier over time, and that can significantly affect our happiness: *Gratitude*.

Practicing gratitude – being actively grateful for what we have in life, whatever our circumstances may be – is one of the most important things we can do for our own sense of happiness and well-being.

Here's just some of what Robert Emmons, author of *The Psychology of Gratitude**, and researcher on the effects of gratitude and well-being at the Emmons Center at U.C. Davis, has found:

Gratitude strengthens our willpower, improves relationships, boosts creativity, enhances athletic and academic performance, and deepens our sense of spirituality.

People who keep a gratitude journal – a written account of the things we're grateful for – were more effective in reaching their goals, exercised more, ate 25% less fat, had fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives, and were more optimistic about the near future. The level of stress they experienced, and the corresponding cortisol levels in their systems decreased. Depression also decreased.

Children who practice gratitude have more positive attitudes toward school and their families. Young adults have higher states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness, and energy.

We're more likely to help other people when we practice gratitude, and we also tend to take better charge of our emotional lives.

That's all really good stuff, but how does it counter that hedonic treadmill?

We're learning, growing organisms, and we're about 4 times as sensitive to negative experiences as we are to positive ones; so, when we think of alternative scenarios to our circumstances in life, we tend to think of what has gone wrong, and could be better. That focus on what's wrong is what comes naturally to us. It keeps us on the job of solving the problems that life presents.

When things go well, on the other hand, we don't tend to think about how they could've gone *worse*. We may enjoy the good things for a short time, but then we're on to the next thing.

By deliberately practicing gratitude, we're purposefully, consciously countering our natural bias toward negative assessments, and bringing the positive experiences to the foreground of our awareness.

We're looking around at the beauty and wonder that we've come to expect as normal and appreciating them as though new.

I live on the coast of California, where we can see breathtaking sunsets over the ocean pretty much every day. How often do you suppose I take the five or so minutes to get to the beach to savor those?

Not often.

How often would I do that if I were here on a visit for a few days, and had never seen a sunset over the ocean? Probably every day I was here. And I would feel a deep appreciation for the magnificence of such a vision.

Yet the objective circumstances are right here for me to have that profound experience any time I like. All it takes is a deliberate shift in thought – imagining that this is a special treat that I'm blessed to be able to enjoy.

A beautiful sunset is something we can all appreciate. But there are multitudes of positive experiences that each of us has enjoyed and can savor the memory of; to enjoy and can choose to appreciate with fresh eyes; or may enjoy and can appreciate the opportunity for.

There are people whom we love and trust, circumstances that allow us to flourish and grow; experiences that bring us meaning and joy.

And when we take a moment to purposefully savor and feel gratitude for any of these, we step off that hedonic treadmill.

We look at our habitual experiences through fresh eyes. And when we do that, there's a strength that can flow into us; we can see what's right with our world, and all the love, beauty and opportunity we may have forgotten, presents itself to us, like an old, dear friend who's been right there all along.

*For some reason, this book by Prof. Emmons is very expensive. There are four more on his Amazon Page far less so.

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.

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