

# Pleasure

Researchers in positive psychology have identified three major components to an authentically happy life\*: pleasure, engagement, and meaning. The first of these, pleasure, is the most fleeting and poses some interesting challenges.

Our culture is highly enamored with pleasure. It seems to be the engine that runs our economy and can prompt us to ruin our health and happiness through habitual over-indulgences. Conversely, pleasure also creates positive emotions that enable us to think better, look better, perform better, live longer, and in general broadens our lives in every way. It's a double-edged sword.

Experiments with rats give us a clue to our own behavior. Scientists implanted a very thin electrical wire into the pleasure centers of rats' brains. The rats were then given the ability to stimulate their own pleasure by pressing a lever. The rats soon were craving the stimulation more than food, sex, or life itself. They became addicted to the stimulation and, in fact, continued to stimulate their brains until they dropped.

A friend used to say, tongue in cheek, that you haven't had enough until you've had too much. Does this sound familiar?

The problem with pleasure is that it fades quickly. The first taste of that double chocolate brownie is divine, so you quickly have another bite and another and another. However, if you are paying very close attention, you'll notice that by the third or fourth bite, the actual experience has significantly diminished. This phenomena is a neurological process called habituation or adaptation. The brain is wired to notice that which is new and to essentially disregard that which is not. After firing, the neurons can't fire again for a period of time. When we over-indulge, it's our attachment to the initially intense first experience that sets up a craving and prompts us to try to recapture that first delicious bite.

So how do we reap the positive benefits of pleasure and avoid the negative results of over-indulgence?

There are some simple solutions to the pleasure challenge. If we learn how to pay close attention to our pleasure and use simple means for extending the experience without over-indulging (the equivalent to the rats pressing the lever until they dropped), we can amplify the positive experiences, and their benefits, that pleasure brings.

- Extend the time periods between your pleasures to heighten the experience and lessen the habituation to it.
- Prepare for your experience. Allow yourself to anticipate the event and do what you can to maximize it. If your pleasure is a hot bath, make sure the phone is turned off and there won't be any interruptions. Make it a ritual. Light some candles. Set it up to maximize your enjoyment.
- Approach your pleasure mindfully. Pay close attention to the entire process. Notice all of your sensations and thoughts with an open awareness.



- Take mental snapshots of your pleasure so you can recall it later and savor it. It's the equivalent of taking home a souvenir when you are on a vacation. It will help your brain to recall the experience in vivid detail.
- Afterwards, savor the experience. Share it with a friend. Relive it. If your pleasure is a food item, recalling the pleasure mentally and enjoying it all over again in your memory, rather than actually indulging, won't increase your cholesterol or add unwanted pounds.

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\* Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, 2002, Simon and Schuster

