

What amount of effort should be put into pursuing pleasure or removing pain?

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 24, 2025 at 7:31 AM

Question to add to the FAQ section: What amount of effort should be put into pursuing pleasure? ...Is there such a thing as not enough effort or too much effort when pursuing pleasure? Also, you could ask the flip side of the question, What amount of effort should be put into the removal of pain? Is there such a thing as not enough effort or too much effort when working to remove pain?

Post by “Don” of June 24, 2025 at 8:15 AM

I don't think "effort" is the right way to think about it.

The pleasure of aponia connotes both "without toil or trouble, effortless" and "painless; free from pain."

A more productive way to think about pursuing pleasure is to get out of its way, to recognize the pleasure that's already present in our lives and to which we stubbornly refuse to admit into our lives.

Start small, recognize the beauty of a sunset, the lack of pain in a spot in your body, the company of loved ones. Don't just acknowledge it. Feel it. Appreciate it. Value it.

By struggling in an effortful way, one is adding an unnecessary level of pain. Sure, we choose pain sometimes for greater pleasure. My go to example is always exercise, but there are much more serious examples: ex., leaving an abusive relationship in which the oppressed partner has a "sunk cost" ("they can change. I can change them.")

A start is just to get out of pleasure's way. Let it in.

I'm not saying it's easy after years of conditioning. But sometimes we ourselves are our own worst impediment to feeling pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2025 at 9:12 AM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4514-what-amount-of-effort-should-be-put-into-pursuing-pleasure-or-removing-pain/>

What Don says is true and also a lot turns on what definition you give to "effort." Building a stone wall with an inscription about Epicurus takes a lot of a certain type of effort. So does composing six long books of a poem. So does writing 37 books on Nature and all the rest that Epicurus wrote. So does building a philosophical school that opposes and takes on the majority philosophical and religious orthodoxy.

If effort means intensity of focus and action, then those are examples of people putting tremendous effort into their pursuit of a correct philosophy, on which happiness depends, and I would say you put everything you've got into that effort to find pleasure and be happy.

The pleasures Don lists which can be achieved by "getting out of the way" of them is a valid approach if you are able to maintain those and have confidence in their continuance and your satisfaction with them, but there are also other pleasures that you will never experience if you do not pursue them vigorously. There is no god to tell you whether to pursue them or not, and no "ideal" pattern to follow. You yourself have to decide which to pursue. I would argue that there is no good Epicurean authority for the proposition that everyone should always choose those pleasures which take the least "effort." Epicurus says we will sometime choose pain in order to avoid a worse pain or achieve greater pleasure.

It is also arguable based on the sources that DeWitt cites that even the [Epicurean gods](#) have to take action to maintain their own blessedness, and certainly every Epicurean we know anything about went to lots of effort to promote their philosophy. There are no Epicurean examples I know of who were held up by the Epicureans as pursuing happiness through engaging in minimal effort in all aspects of life.

The reference to the gods needing to act to maintain their deathlessness is in Section 13 part 3 of DeWitt's book, including: "If deathlessness were inherent in their nature, they would be in another class by themselves. Since they do belong in the same class as man, it is a logical necessity to think of their incorruptibility as by some means preserved. Since in the cosmos of Epicurus, unlike that of Plato, this incorruptibility lacked a superior being to guarantee its continuance, the sole possibility was that the gods preserved it for themselves by their own vigilance. Thus it must be discerned that just as the happiness of man is self-achieved, so the happiness of the gods is self-preserved. However astonishing this doctrine may seem, it is well authenticated. Plutarch, for example, who, though hostile, wrote with texts of Epicurus before him, has this to say: "Freedom from pain along with incorruptibility should have been inherent in the nature of the blissful being, standing in no need of active concern." This manifestly implies that the [Epicurean gods](#) were unable to take their immunity from corruption for granted but must concern themselves for its perpetuation. The incongruity between this selfish concern for their own bodily security and their indifference to the good of mankind was certain to elicit condemnation from believers in divine providence, and this has not escaped record. Thus the Christian Eusebius quotes his Atticus as saying: "According to Epicurus it's good-bye to providence, in spite of the fact that according to him the gods bring to bear all diligent care for

the preservation of their own peculiar blessings.")

Post by "Cassius" of June 24, 2025 at 2:35 PM

Why art thou confused, Sir [Rolf](#) ? 😊 I would like to think I can predict your concern but I am not sure.

Post by "Kalosyni" of June 24, 2025 at 3:11 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

By struggling in an effortful way, one is adding an unnecessary level of pain. Sure, we choose pain sometimes for greater pleasure. My go to example is always exercise

Is effort always painful? (I don't think so myself).

Vatican Saying 41 hints at putting effort into things:

"We must laugh and philosophize at the same time, and do our household duties, and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy."

Post by "Rolf" of June 24, 2025 at 3:15 PM

Hmm, I'll try to put this into words. With all due respect to Kalosyni, "effort" seems like a strange way to conceptualise the pursuit of pleasure. I suppose in a sense the answer is "as much effort as possible" - what else could be more important?

Just as it would be strange for a Christian to ask how much effort they should put into loving god or whatever it is they do, an Epicurean asking how much effort they should put into maximising pleasure seems to imply that there is something *other than* pleasure that they'd rather be experiencing.

Something else that springs to mind is that ultimately this question comes down to hedonic calculus. If the “effort” you’re putting into the pursuit of pleasure is leading to more pain than pleasure, then one “should not” put that amount or type of effort into that particular venture.

I also just find that the term “should” clashes with Epicurean ideas. Should according to what standard? One can only decide for themselves what is prudent.

Post by “Rolf” of June 24, 2025 at 3:17 PM

In other words, if one could achieve maximum pleasure with no effort, then there would be no reason to put in any effort. But since this is seldom, if ever, the case, my answer is “as much effort as it takes”.

Post by “Rolf” of June 24, 2025 at 3:19 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Is there such a thing as not enough effort or too much effort when working to remove pain?

Speaking for myself here: I’m not putting in enough effort to remove pain if I’m still experiencing an abundance of (removable) pain. I’m putting too much effort into removing pain if the effort itself is increasing the level of pain I’m experiencing.

Post by “Don” of June 24, 2025 at 3:35 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Is effort always painful? (I don't think so myself).

Depends on the definition of pain and/or effort being used.

Any effort seems to me to be use of force or energy against some impediment or towards some goal which someone is trying overcome or to arrive at.

Sure, the motivation for the effort of learning a new skill or achieving a goal one wants is potentially pleasurable, but the effort experienced is painful in the form of repetitive exercises or practice. Frustration sets in that must be overcome. Feelings of inadequacy.

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2025 at 4:21 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I suppose in a sense the answer is “as much effort as possible” - what else could be more important?

Bingo Rolf! Exactly what I hoped you were thinking. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2025 at 4:24 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Sure, the motivation for the effort of learning a new skill or achieving a goal one wants is potentially pleasurable, but the effort experienced is painful in the form of repetitive exercises or practice. Frustration sets in that must be overcome. Feelings of inadequacy.

This comes very close, or is at least analogous, to the question of whether all "desire" should be seen to be painful.

My personal view is that not all desire is painful, and neither is all effort. And in the case of either desire or effort, even in those times where the desire or effort is painful, the ultimate question remains whether the resulting total pleasure is worth the total cost in pain.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 24, 2025 at 4:57 PM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4514-what-amount-of-effort-should-be-put-into-pursuing-pleasure-or-removing-pain/>

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Something else that springs to mind is that ultimately this question comes down to hedonic calculus. If the "effort" you're putting into the pursuit of pleasure is leading to more pain than pleasure, then one "should not" put that amount or type of effort into that particular venture.

I think that if you do a lot of "calculating" then there will be times that for a particular activity, the amount of pleasure produced breaks even with the amount of effort required...therefore you could reason with yourself that you might as well not do the activity.

Here is a practical example: There is a specific type of class that is being offered (it could be a dance class, a yoga class, or an art class, etc.) and you feel fairly certain that you will enjoy the experience and potentially meet new friends. However, the city that it is in will take an hour drive time (each way, so a total of 2 hours drive time). So even though the drive won't be particularly painful (just driving and maybe listening to an audiobook) ...the effort requires too much time. There actually isn't anything physically painful about the idea "it takes too much time"...it is just a mental judgment that it doesn't seem worth the effort.

Post by "Don" of June 24, 2025 at 7:24 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

There actually isn't anything physically painful about the idea "it takes too much time"...it is just a mental judgment that it doesn't seem worth the effort.

Ah! But I would posit that there is *mental* pain in considering all that time in the car, having to stop along the way, how much gas it might take, etc.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

Sure, the motivation for the effort of learning a new skill or achieving a goal one wants is potentially pleasurable, but the effort experienced is painful in the form of repetitive exercises or practice. Frustration sets in that must be overcome. Feelings of inadequacy.

This comes very close, or is at least analogous, to the question of whether all "desire" should be seen to be painful.

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I should have used "desire" instead of "motivation." And, using that, I suppose the desire is pleasurable to think of. I'm going to maintain that effort - expending energy for a given purpose - has pain associated with it. That's not too say you can't have "a good kind of tired" after expending it. But energy expenditure has some element of pain... Unless we're going to start talking about the "runner's high" and "being in the zone/going with the flow." Then, maybe?

Post by "Cassius" of June 24, 2025 at 7:41 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I'm going to maintain that effort - expending energy for a given purpose - has pain associated with it.

I think we definitely agree on that, and that's why it is so important to see happiness as a balance in which pleasure predominates over pain, rather than expecting that TOTAL absence of pain is going to be achievable in real life.

I see this as probably one of the most practical and important divisions in the way one will interpret Epicurus.

There is the "extinguish all pain at all cost" crowd, (which I suspect to be largely influenced by Buddhism and similar thought) who talk mostly about "*ataraxia*," without making much effort to define it, and think that what it means is something like tranquility and living as minimally and detached from the world as possible. This group has as their guiding light as the avoidance of pain - which they often translate into the avoidance of all "effort" of any kind.

And then there is the crowd (where I perceive most all of us to be) which perceives that Epicurus was happy even in the worst pain of kidney disease, just as the wise man can be happy even under torture. The group focuses on *eudaimonia* / happiness understood to mean the predominance of pleasure over pain, so the guiding light of this group is the intelligent choice or avoidance of pain, so we embrace pain when we expect that pain to produce a net gain in pleasure. We certainly don't go out of our way to look for pain that is unnecessary, but

we recognize that "effort" is necessary to achieve the happiness we'd like to achieve in life, so we don't shrink from exerting that effort.

Post by “Godfrey” of June 25, 2025 at 2:23 AM

Lately, as a way to encompass the idea of the full range of pleasure, I've been equating pleasure with "a good feeling" (or feeling good, or a good Feeling). Similarly, equating pain to "a bad feeling".

A good feeling might come from simply taking a deep breath. It might also come in the midst of wrestling with intensely painful (feeling really bad) emotions or other struggles. Or a good feeling might come after a day of intensely focused or otherwise effortful work. Or after earning a PhD in ancient Greek philosophy. Or raising a child. Or an exceptionally sweaty workout, or a victorious competition. Or while viewing art that you connect with. Or seeing a random act of levity on your drive home from work.

Looking at it in this way, maybe the amount of effort involved in pursuing pleasure isn't necessarily the effort involved in performing the activity leading to a good feeling, which obviously can vary greatly from one activity to another. Instead, the effort involved in pursuing pleasure is the work to be done to make available the mental bandwidth to notice and appreciate good feelings and to weigh potential good feelings against potential bad feelings. If this work is done, joy can be had in even the most intense effort applied to a specific task, in enduring intense anguish or in the briefest moment of perception.

Post by “Rolf” of June 25, 2025 at 5:02 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

A more productive way to think about pursuing pleasure is to get out of its way, to recognize the pleasure that's already present in our lives and to which we stubbornly refuse to admit into our lives.

I was interested in Taoism for some time before my discovery of Epicurean philosophy, and this reminds me of a common Taoist adage about “getting out of one’s own way”.

I don't love relating the philosophy to religious and spiritual doctrines, but I find this particular

idea rather helpful.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 25, 2025 at 7:59 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I was interested in Taoism for some time before my discovery of Epicurean philosophy, and this reminds me of a common Taoist adage about “getting out of one’s own way”.

I think that with Epicurean philosophy it uses reasoning - mental thinking and evaluation - based on fundamental ideas which remove "ego" aspects (pursuit of riches, fame, or power, or status (of somehow being better than everyone else)...and instead thinking what does the human-animal need. So there are parallels but also differences (when comparing) such that we are going to maximalize indulgence of "what an animal needs" (and I have ideas about this that I haven't yet talked much about, but perhaps I should soon, since the question of this thread may actually be a "compensation" for a lack of human need fulfilment (but will get into that in another thread).

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 25, 2025 at 8:04 AM

I am thinking about another way to ask the question: How much work should be put into pursuing what is hedonically pleasurable and how much work should go into pursuing human needs. Is there a method of evaluating what level of work (effort) is too much or too little -- your trying too hard or you are not trying hard enough -- and this may be an aspect of temperament in that some people may tend to "try too hard" and others may tend to "not try hard enough".

I've seen something on Reddit, written about "chasing after pleasure" as being a bad thing, and that Epicureans should just "relax" (code word for do less)...and my concern is that human needs will then go unmet...which will then result in a lesser quality of life (and less joy).

Post by “Rolf” of June 25, 2025 at 8:21 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

How much work should be put into pursuing what is hedonically pleasurable and how much work should go into pursuing human needs.

I would argue that “what is pleasurable” and “human needs” are one and the same. I’m not sure if Epicurus himself said this, but personally I find it most prudent to focus my efforts first on needs (that is, necessary desires), since their absence tends to result in pain.

Once I have those secured, I am free to pursue unnecessary pleasures (what I assume you mean by “what is hedonically pleasurable”). I don’t see it as “work” though. If the work I put into attaining something pleasurable causes an more pain than the resulting pleasure, it’s not something I want to be pursuing anyway.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 25, 2025 at 9:30 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

If the work I put into attaining something pleasurable causes an more pain than the resulting pleasure, it’s not something I want to be pursuing anyway.

Now...what happens if it is a tie? ...that it results in equal levels of pleasure and pain. It seems that the default answer is to not do it...but what if you make a conscious choice to do it anyway, because of various reasons (and what would those reasons be?).

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I would argue that “what is pleasurable” and “human needs” are one and the same.

Yes! 😊

[Quote from Rolf](#)

personally I find it most prudent to focus my efforts first on needs (that is, necessary desires), since their absence tends to result in pain.

Once I have those secured, I am free to pursue unnecessary pleasures (what I assume you mean by “what is hedonically pleasurable”)

And you could say that hedonic pleasures are sometimes done to remove boredom. And sometimes they are done as a kind of medicine (or distraction, or a coping mechanism) when certain needs go unmet - of course the Epicurist would make sure to do this in such a manner as to not create worse pains).

Post by “Godfrey” of June 25, 2025 at 6:09 PM

Quote from Kalosyni

Now...what happens if it is a tie?

This is why I don't like the term "hedonic calculus"! 😄

Post by “DaveT” of June 26, 2025 at 12:16 PM

[Cassius](#) I'm not clear how to work the copy paste of a quote but I'd like to chime in on your comment: **"The pleasures Don lists which can be achieved by "getting out of the way" of them is a valid approach if you are able to maintain those and have confidence in their continuance and your satisfaction with them, but there are also other pleasures that you will never experience if you do not pursue them vigorously."**

Yes, I agree with your overall comments, and those other pleasures might be the natural but not necessary pleasures.

I think about the possible foundations of Epicurus' teachings, and then how they might be adopted more widely. I guess he studied the beliefs of other philosophers, and looked around to see how people generally behaved on a daily basis. He must have seen how they tried to live well and avoid the anxiety of daily life. From what I've learned here in Epicurean Friends, his Garden included average people as well as intellectuals.

As I understand it, modern science is disclosing how our brains work, and it's not just a matter of paying attention to the teacher. Some among us can conceptualize to a higher degree, and intellectually discipline ourselves because of their particular brain structure. They are the lucky ones and not the average person. They have that capacity while the majority of people don't have the same ability to focus on the pursuit of higher pleasures. Making a living, raising a

family, trying to be comfortable after a busy week takes up the majority of time for most of us, whether highly gifted or not.

So, I tend to appreciate the way [Don](#) addressed the more effortless process to pursue a happier life. I don't know how that way of life can be widely adopted unless monotheistic thought is abandoned widely. Thoughts?

Post by “Cassius” of June 26, 2025 at 4:22 PM

Great points and they definitely lead to your final question.

[Quote from DaveT](#)

I don't know how that way of life can be widely adopted unless monotheistic thought is abandoned widely. Thoughts?

I believe that you are right and the Epicurean way of life can't be widely adopted in many parts of the world - the prevalence of monotheistic influence, including in the morality of "humanism" which has much the same basis, is a huge obstacle.

Certainly monotheistic religion is not going to be abandoned overnight, but on the other hand there was a time when it played little role in Western civilization, so it's not inevitable that it remain so powerful.

Epicurus didn't have to confront the type that we confront today, but I agree with Nietzsche that Epicurus was already combating a form of monotheism as it existed in the Greco-Roman world at his time. What we face today is a much more powerful and oppressive form than what Epicurus faced.

But if Epicurus was right - as I think he was - there is no fate or necessity that prevents change from happening. We live in a time when at least for now information is more widely accessible than ever, and that opens up possibilities that never before existed.

Epicurean philosophy provides a foundation from which people in the future can build further to overcome these problems, and even now in the present I personally get a lot of satisfaction and pleasure out of thinking that we can do a small part to re-educate the world to the Epicurean alternative.

No doubt we know only the famous ones, but every example of a devoted Epicurean in the ancient world seems to have been a campaigner for the views that they adopted from Epicurus. That's really the core mission of Epicureanfriends.com, to campaign on these ideas, even as we

also help ourselves and learn to live better in the here and now.

Post by “Patrikios” of July 6, 2025 at 10:14 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

By struggling in an effortful way, one is adding an unnecessary level of pain. Sure, we choose pain sometimes for greater pleasure. My go to example is always exercise

Is effort always painful? (I don't think so myself).

Vatican Saying 41 hints at putting effort into things:

"We must laugh and philosophize at the same time, and do our household duties, and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy."

Thanks [Don](#) and [Kalosyni](#) for your perspectives on effort & pain.

While there can be pain in the effort to learn a new skill or a new exercise, there may come a time where the effort produces no pain, but joy in accomplishment. In some cases for those who have learned their skill well, doing yoga or even playing golf, is a joyful (not painful) effort. As one teacher said, "if you are feeling pain, you're doing it wrong."

[Quote from Rolf](#)

In other words, if one could achieve maximum pleasure with no effort, then there would be no reason to put in any effort. But since this is seldom, if ever, the case, my answer is "as much effort as it takes".

I think that Epicurus was trying to give us the lessons for how to master the art of living well, by staying attuned to the nature and natural flows and movements.

So, how much effort does it take to be present in the moment, to live like a god, to live a life of wellbeing (eudaimonia)? Maybe a lifetime of daily, joyful effort, which reminds me of T.S. Eliot's

words.

Quote

**“Quick now, here, now, always-
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)”**

— T.S. Eliot, [Four Quartets](#)