

On freedom from distress = full pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of March 21, 2019 at 1:20 PM

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

Then my point is that we can be happy with little, it is not necessary to add other (expensive) pleasures to be happy.

I think that is entirely correct, as far as it goes. But I think there is danger in overgeneralization. Yes we can be happy with little, but can we not also be happy with a little more, and a little more, so long as those additions do not come at too high a cost of pain or disturbance? What is the right or best amount? Is simply saying "little" or "least necessary" a good guiding standard?

Here are some points made by Elayne over at FB that apply. Lacking a better way to deal with the issue of multiple places of discussion, I'll just paste. I am bolding a couple of paragraphs that I think are most relevant. Here is the main reason I wanted to paste this:

I suspect these biological differences are behind people saying we should sit and meditate all day for maximum pleasure, or that we need to do ultra marathons. They are trying to generalize inappropriately. If they focus on pleasures instead of on only one way to pleasure, which then turns into an obsession with the path itself, they could have more pleasure.

This topic of habituation to pleasure and sustaining of pleasure is one I have spent a lot of time reading about and observing in myself and in my pediatric practice. I find it fascinating, and also pleasurable to think about! Here are a few concepts that might be of practical use in our efforts to achieve sustained pleasure:

1) Habituation to pleasure, where we stop responding to a specific experience, happens more easily when a pleasure is followed by an extrinsic reward. For example, children do not enjoy reading as much when they are given prizes for reading. This has been extensively studied, and a good summary is in Alfie Kohn's book "Punished by Rewards." It may be due to a human heuristic of assuming that if one must be rewarded for doing something, that something must be unpleasant. If I say "eat all your pie and I'll give you some ice cream", you will likely conclude something is wrong with the pie! Whereas if children choose their activities based on intrinsic pleasure, they are more likely to continue enjoying themselves over the long term. This ties in with Epicurus' emphasis on the importance of freedom!

2) I have observed, although I have not done any studies, that some children in my practice habituate to pleasures quickly (and to pains) and others do not. Some people will forever be thrilled with the same pleasures while others will require more intensity over time. When I was a kid, one summer my grandfather, a man prone to extravagant gestures, found out my sister and I liked cashew nuts. He brought us cans and cans of them over a month long visit. We ate them by the handful every day. By the end of that month my sister was sick of them and to this day has no interest in cashews. I am a slow habituator and still love them just as much. I limit my intake due to the expense and the knowledge that a cashew only diet would make me unhappy eventually due to poor health. ? My take-home here is: get to know yourself, and if you are a parent, your children. Observe closely whether they habituate quickly or not. If they habituate, they will need to rotate pleasures more often to achieve sustained pleasure. An example would be to have a toy library where only 2-3 toys are in use during a week, and then change them out.

3) Back to freedom--there is research that children enjoy toys that allow for multiple uses, and personalization/creativity rather than those which have only a set action. So blocks stay fun longer than a jack in the box.

4) There is research that shows the loss of pleasure, anhedonia, in depression, is not due to absence of pleasure but inability to sustain pleasure. The PFC specifically does not signal the nucleus accumbens, so pleasure is fleeting. It may be that some of us have a natural ability to sustain pleasure due to brain function differences. There is research being done to see if it's possible to treat deficiencies in pleasure through a variety of methods. Personally, I get a long "afterglow" from many simple pleasures, so I don't have to do anything drastic for pleasure.

5) Some people find it necessary to have a strong stimulus. When they eat spicy food, watch a scary movie, or go hang-gliding, their brains release endorphins. This may correspond to being endorphin deficient. Others may find that too intense-- I am one who finds a high level of intensity painful if sustained. So I do not assume that a hang-gliding person didn't try something easier first-- that person is different from me. We do not yet know everything about how to help people activate their own endorphins. Attention to what one is doing, a bit different from traditional mindfulness, does seem to help in many cases. Parents can watch their kids to see if a vigorous stimulus is more pleasurable for a specific child, or if that child enjoys milder stimuli. I think this relates to what Epicurus described as compression of pleasure.

There is not a single pleasure program for a child anymore than for adults. And what works best for a person can change over time. I advise not getting stuck on one specific protocol but experiment instead.

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Children also vary in their enjoyment of social/"shared" pleasure. This changes over age as well. On the autism spectrum, they will tend to prefer the toys alone or in parallel play, where they are alongside another child or adult but don't interact much. Others prefer highly social play. Some in small groups or with one person, others in a crowd. This is also something to observe for specific children, to help them understand their pleasure needs.

The human drive for "the new", encouraged by pleasure in novelty, is likely inherent in us because it made us survive and reproduce. We also have pleasure in the familiar-- what has been a proven, safe source of pleasure-- eat those berries which tasted sweet and did not lead to pain, and survive. So both novelty and familiarity are rewarded by pleasure, and to different degrees in different people.

[Graves](#) These examples you've given are very helpful! I wish I had been as wise when I was raising my son, I wouldn't have the nearly as many mistakes by being so rigid.

[Holly](#), oh, I wish I had known those things from the beginning with my own children! I learned from them and from my patients, and I made a whole boatload of mistakes. I am grandmother age now, although I don't have my own grandchildren, and I enjoy being able to help parents see happier ways of doing things.

One of the questions I always ask families when they come in with a behavior problem is "what do you enjoy doing together as a family? What do you enjoy doing together as mother-son, father-son, etc? X (child), what things are most fun for you to do?" It is shocking how many times parents draw a blank on the shared pleasures. And then when they have identified some, it usually turns out they rarely do these pleasurable things.

Before making any other change suggestions, I often ask them to start doing at least one of these shared pleasure activities on a daily basis, even if just for a short time, and not make this contingent/ reward based. This is amazingly effective at restoring good-will among family members, and then it is so much easier to solve problems that are making them unhappy.