

How to escape *the pleasure trap!*

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That Undermines Health and Happiness***

When you climb into a hot tub, it pays to edge in slowly. The water can be so hot as to be unpleasant—until you get used to it. Then it will feel pleasant. When you step into a swimming pool, the water sometimes feels cold. But after a few minutes, you get used to it. The scent of a Christmas tree or fragrant flowers is wonderful—at first. But then you get used to it, and soon you may hardly even notice it.

How is it that our internal experience can change so dramatically, even when our environment is staying the same? How is it that we so easily “get used to” things? It turns out that scientists have carefully studied this striking phenomenon, which they refer to as neuroadaptation. This process is called “neuroadaptation” because it involves *nerves* and *adaptation*.

Our sensory processes are dependent upon the activation of sensory nerves. It is through the activation of various sensory nerves that we are able to see, hear, smell, sense touch, and to taste. The activity of these various sensory nerves tells our brain what is going on, and to what degree of intensity. For example, when you are sitting in a dimly lit room, and you turn on more light, your visual nerves become more active. This causes you to notice an increase in brightness. Similarly, if you increase the volume on your stereo, your auditory nerves become more active. This same principle works for all of the five senses.

Relative perception

We tend to think that our nerves provide us with a very accurate depiction of real-world stimulation. Surprisingly, this is not the case. Let’s go back to the example of sitting in a dimly lit room. If you turn on all of the lights, it will seem very bright. However, if you later go outside into full sunshine, that will seem brighter still. When you go back inside, it will seem dim—even though all of the lights are still on. Clearly, your nerves are not providing you with an “accurate” depiction of reality in these instances. They are providing a *relative* depiction. Your senses are highly responsive to change. They tell you when a new stimulus is brighter or dimmer, louder or softer, hotter or colder, and so forth, but not precisely *how* bright, or loud, or hot. Perception is largely a gauge of relative change.

When there is a sudden increase in stimulation, your nerves increase their rate of “firing” (the basic mechanism that communicates sensory information to the brain). Any change in the intensity of a stimulus results in a change in the firing rate of the appropriate sensory nerves. For example, when you brighten the lights, your visual nerves will increase their firing rate. When you later dim the lights, the firing rate will be reduced.

Dangerous adaptations

In this article, we shall focus on an aspect of “getting used to” things that can lead to life-threatening mistakes.

After we brighten the lights in a room, our visual nerves increase their firing rate—but only for a short while. After a few minutes, the firing rate will slow down, or “adapt,” to the new, higher rate of stimulation. Sometimes, the nerves may even slow down their response to the level that they were previously firing at the lower level of illumination. This is why even a brightly lit room will seem merely “normal” after your sensory nerves adjust to it.

All of our sensory nerves work in this manner. When we first enter an office, we might be distracted by a noisy air conditioner. But after a while we may cease to notice it. When a person first starts smoking cigarettes, he is acutely aware of the smell of the smoke. He smells it on his fingers, in his clothes, and in his car. But before long, he won’t notice it at all. He will have “gotten used to it.” His sense of smell has adapted to the constant presence of this stimulus. The smoker may not notice much of the smell unless he quits smoking. Only then will his sense of smell re-calibrate to a more smoke-sensitive state. Then he will be able to smell the smoke—just like everyone else does.

Taste troubles

Like our other sensory nerves, our taste buds also will “get used to” a given level of stimulation—and this can have dangerous consequences. The taste buds of the vast majority of people in industrialized societies are currently neuroadapted to artificially high-fat, high-sugar, and high-salt animal and processed foods. These foods are ultimately no more enjoyable than more healthful fare, but few people will ever see that this is true. This is because they consistently consume highly stimulating foods, and have “gotten used to” them. If they were to eat a less stimulating, health-promoting diet, they soon would enjoy such fare every bit as much. Unfortunately, very few people will ever realize this critically important fact. Instead, nearly all of these people will die prematurely of strokes, heart attacks, congestive heart failure, diabetes, and cancer as a result of self-destructive dietary choices.

A gruesome tale

If a frog is placed in a pan of water, it often just sits there. If the pan is heated, ever so slowly, the frog may never notice that the water temperature is rising. He will “get used to” the increasing heat—and may be unaware that anything is amiss. Even with no barrier to his escape, he is as likely as not to sit in the pan—and boil to death. His sensory capabilities may fail to adequately warn him that action is required for his survival, and he may only survive if the heat is turned down.

For the past several decades, the modern American diet has been increasing in animal protein, animal and vegetable fats, refined carbohydrates, and added oil, salt, and sugar. In just the past two decades, our caloric intake has slowly escalated by 650 calories per person, per day. Not surprisingly, obesity and other diseases of dietary excess are at all-time highs. But just a few decades ago, our nation’s dietary habits were remarkably different. Meat was an expensive commodity—for some, a “treat.” The same was true for refined flour products, refined sugar, and oils. But times have changed. Today, almost everyone in America can have all they desire of these rich foods—and they do, virtually every day.

From the perspective of our natural history, a daily life with such dietary choices is extraordinary. For hundreds of thousands of years, our ancient ancestors scratched and

scraped, struggling against the harsh forces of nature in order to get enough food to survive. Even today, in undeveloped countries, significant food shortages are still a great concern, with millions dying each year from starvation. Yet, in a mere blink of history's eye—in just a few decades—industrialized societies have arisen from environments of scarcity and have transformed themselves into societies of unprecedented abundance. The most striking feature of that abundance is a virtually unlimited supply of food.

Artificial appeal

An abundance of food, by itself, is not a cause of health problems. But modern technology has done more than to simply make food perpetually abundant. Food also has been made artificially tastier. Food is often more stimulating than ever before—as the particular chemicals in foods that cause pleasure reactions have been isolated—and artificially concentrated. These chemicals include fats (including oils), refined carbohydrates (such as refined sugar and flour), and salt. Meats were once consumed mostly in the form of wild game—typically about 15% fat. Today's meat is a much different product. Chemically and hormonally engineered, it can be as high as 50% fat or more. Ice cream is an extraordinary invention for intensifying taste pleasure—an artificial concoction of pure fat and refined sugar. Once an expensive delicacy, it is now a daily ritual for many people. French fries and potato chips, laden with artificially-concentrated fats, are currently the most commonly consumed “vegetable” in our society. As Dr. Joel Fuhrman reports in his excellent volume *Eat to Live*, these artificial products, and others like them, comprise a whopping 93% American diet. Our teenage population, for example, consumes up to 25% of their calories in the form of soda pop!

Most of our citizenry can't imagine how it could be any other way. To remove (or dramatically reduce) such products from America's daily diet seems intolerable—even absurd. Most people believe that if they were to do so, they would enjoy their food—and their lives—much less. Indeed, most people believe that they *would literally suffer* if they consumed a health-promoting diet devoid of such indulgences. But, it is here that their perception is greatly in error. The reality is that humans are well designed to fully enjoy the subtler tastes of whole natural foods, but are poorly equipped to realize this fact. And like a frog sitting in dangerously hot water, most people are being slowly destroyed by the limitations of their awareness.

The pleasure trap

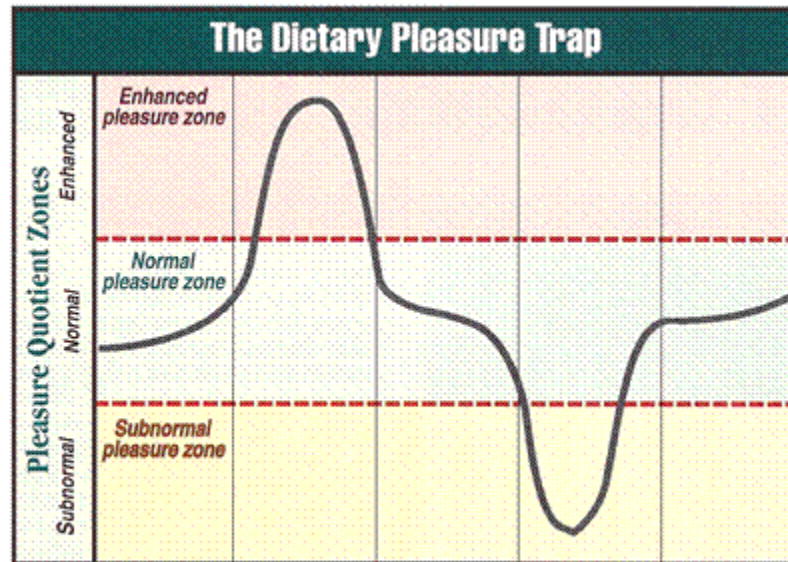


Figure 1 (above left) depicts a devastating trap. People consuming a whole natural foods diet will experience a normal range of pleasure from eating low-fat, high-fiber, unprocessed foods—shown as Phase I. However, if concentrated, adulterated, processed foods are consistently allowed in the diet, they quickly will become preferred.

In Phase II, we see that these products are typically experienced as better—that is, more pleasurable—than natural foods. This is the result of the heightened pleasure-inducing characteristics of artificially-produced foods. However, within a short period of time (a few weeks), the taste nerves adapt to this higher level of stimulation, and reduce their firing rate. This reduces the pleasure experience of artificially-stimulating foods back down to normal levels (Phase III).

Phase III is the culmination of a process of extraordinary importance. It is within Phase III that most people live out their lives. And it is from within Phase III that most people will engineer their own health crises. Phase III occurs when we have become “used to it” - used to the extreme levels of stimulation present in artificial foods. Yet ultimately, we experience no more pleasure than had we remained on a simpler, more healthful diet! However, this process is rarely noticed - just as we rarely notice the process of getting used to a brightly-lit room.

A challenging escape

Once in awhile, a person may actually become aware of important dietary knowledge. Despite the ingenious misinformation campaigns waged by the dairy, cattle, and processed food industries, sometimes a person actually comes to understand the truth about diet. At such times, determined individuals might attempt to change their diet toward whole natural foods—in spite of dire and unfounded warnings from their families, friends, and doctors.

But along the way, they are likely to be met with a formidable obstacle—their own taste neuroadaptation to artificially-intense foods. This challenge is depicted as Phases IV and V, wherein a change to less stimulating foods typically will result in a reduced pleasure experience. In the early stages, this process is dramatic because natural foods often are not nearly as stimulating.

Scientific evidence suggests that the re-sensitization of taste nerves takes between 30 and 90 days of consistent exposure to less stimulating foods. This means that for several weeks, most people attempting this change will experience a reduction in eating pleasure. This is why modern foods present such a devastating trap—as most of our citizens are, in effect, “addicted” to artificially high levels of food stimulation! The 30-to-90-day process of taste re-calibration requires more motivation—and more self-discipline—than most people are ever willing to muster.

Tragically, most people are totally unaware that they are only a few weeks of discipline away from being able to comfortably maintain healthful dietary habits—and to keep away from the products that can result in the destruction of their health. Instead, most people think that if they were to eat more healthfully, they would be condemned to a life of greatly reduced gustatory pleasure—thinking that the process of Phase IV will last forever. In our new book, *The Pleasure Trap*, we explain this extraordinarily deceptive and problematic situation – and how to master this hidden force that undermines health and happiness.

A fast way out

For many people, knowing how this trap works is a great ally to their self-discipline. But for others, this trap can seem just too difficult to manage. For them, the road may seem too long, and even minor indulgences often keep them in the trap. They might benefit greatly by getting some help. One method could be to enlist the aid of a Lifestyle, Fitness and Health coaching service such as *mytrainer.com*. For some people, such support might be all they need to push past the obstacles that are in their way. For others, however, the pleasure trap might still be too difficult to escape in their home environment. Like alcohol addiction, food addiction for some may be best managed by an inpatient stay within a controlled environment – an experience that can greatly speed up the process of taste re-calibration. In a controlled environment, a person can “get clean” by avoiding all addictive foods. In fact, we can go even one step further. Complete abstinence from *all* food - water only fasting - has been shown to be the most effective method ever discovered for quickly reestablishing a healthy relationship to food.

A properly-supervised period of water-only fasting is a safe and effective way to quickly re-sensitize taste nerves so that whole natural foods can be fully enjoyed. At the TrueNorth Health Center in Northern California, (www.healthpromoting.com) we have noted that for most people, one week of consuming nothing but water in an environment of complete rest is enough to substantially re-calibrate their taste buds. Patients find that after a fast, healthful fare tastes as good as the artificially-intense foods that they may have been eating previously. Sometimes natural foods taste even better.

Avoiding the trap

The modern American diet contains concentrations of chemicals that we were never meant to consume. As food manufacturers have sought to compete with each other, foods

have become increasingly artificial—loaded with ever-higher concentrations of pleasure-inducing chemicals, such as sugar, salt, and fat. But curiously, though the concentrations of these chemicals have escalated, the actual pleasure from eating has always stayed about the same. We now understand why.

As our modern foods have become increasingly stimulating, our taste nerves have become desensitized. Our citizens are neuroadapted to the modern diet's excessive stimulation. This sets up a devastating trap, wherein a health-promoting diet is relatively unappealing, while self-destruction feels better and seems safe.

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is a most challenging problem. While it appears that it should be easy, it is a path laden with obstacles. But we will make this statement and inherent promise: We've never met a single individual who went to the effort to escape the pleasure trap – and didn't feel like it was incredibly worthwhile. Learn about this problem. Determine to transcend it. If you need help, seek assistance. Escaping the pleasure trap will help you recover your health and happiness – to lose weight, feel great, and to put you on a path to the life you deserve.