



e-quilibrium

- *"electronic briefs on behavior and health"*

Volume 9, Number 5
May 2013

Hedonic Adaptation

Hedonic adaptation is a term that can be used to describe how the excitement of something new or different wears off, as the new becomes the usual. People predictably become habituated to changes in life. The process occurs with new possessions, new relationships, new jobs, and other new circumstances. Sonja Lyubomirsky, the author of The Myths of Happiness, argues that hedonic adaptation is an obstacle to long term happiness, although one can manage this impediment.

Consider how adaptation affects the satisfaction that comes with the attainment of goals. As a graduate student, I recall how I was susceptible to thinking that "life will be easier when ... I complete my master's degree ... I pass my comprehensive examinations ... I pass my dissertation oral defense." Indeed there was a sense of accomplishment (and relief) for a short time when I achieved these milestones, but life really wasn't different. Rather quickly, each accomplishment became just a part of my graduate student status. This personal experience helped me appreciate that in many cases, satisfaction in life comes more from the pursuit of goals, rather than the attainment of goals.

So does all this mean that we shouldn't actually attain goals, accomplish ambitions, or get new things? Certainly not. However, it does mean that it behooves us to be aware that the thrill of an accomplishment will typically be short-lived, and the new circumstance will become the usual. There is much satisfaction and pleasure to be derived from the pursuit of goals, especially if we choose to value work, challenge, and progress. The pursuit of goals provides structure and meaning

to our lives, and the movement itself toward goals provides mini changes in circumstances which themselves can be savored. And there can be enjoyment simply in the anticipation of the newness or change that will occur when the goal is reached (even if the actual joy, when experienced, will likely be short-lived).

One of the life transitions that many people work toward and often eagerly anticipate is retirement (if this means that there is sufficient income to live without the necessity of having a job). But hedonic adaptation can result in a profound letdown for the retired individual, after the newness of more freedom with time, more opportunity to travel, and/or more time for hobbies becomes the usual. If combined with the absence of the pursuit of goals (and the structure and satisfaction that can come from the pursuit), a retired individual may become disillusioned and unhappy. On the other hand, very fulfilling and happy retirement years can be cultivated by recognizing that adaptation will occur and by understanding that meaning and satisfaction come from pursuing purposeful activities in our lives.

Certainly new circumstances and new things can give us bursts of delight in our lives. We are wise, however, to understand that the thrill of novelty is time-limited. The fact that these bursts in satisfaction don't persist matters much less when we have learned to be appreciative of and derive satisfaction from the ongoing and usual circumstances in our lives.

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