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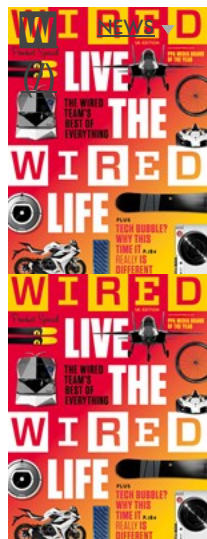
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Positivity not scaremongering could help you lose weight

SCIENCE (/BROAD-TOPICS/SCIENCE) / 29 APRIL 14 /
by LIAT CLARK (/SEARCH/AUTHOR/LIAT+CLARK)

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Scare tactics alone are never going to make us lead healthier lives. We need a combination of instant rewards, social incentives and progress monitoring to make us put that cigarette down or go for a jog, says neuroscientist Tali Sharot (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/psychlangsci/research/CPB/people/cp staff/t_sharot).

Speaking at Wired Health (http://www.wired.co.uk/topics/wired-health-2014), the director of the Wellcome Trust-funded Affective Brain Lab (http://affectivebrain.com/) explained how neurological and psychological studies have shown that people are better at taking onboard good information, but fail to learn from and make

Tali Sharot *Nate Lanxon*

behavioural changes based only on bad news.

Studies have shown that threatening people and inducing fear does not work sufficiently -- Sharot points to warnings on cigarette packets failing to deter smokers, with trials demonstrating that quitting actually became a lower priority for those involved. And in the two years preceding the recent economic recession, information collated from people checking their stock shares showed peaks whenever good news hits, and troughs in activity when the bad news was released. Come the financial meltdown, a flurry of activity occurred, but far too late. If we had heeded the warning signs, not only the good news, things could have been different.

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The good news is, as we continue to understand how brain function affects this, we can change our approach to benefit everyone.

"One study showed signals in your brain's emotional sensors are strong when we hear opinions of others, that predicts how you're likely to perform and we can change behaviour," said Sharot. "The British government was able to use this to get more people to pay taxes. In the old letter HMRC sent out, it stressed how important it is to pay taxes. Then it added one sentence: 'nine out of ten people in Britain pay their taxes on time.'" The result? HMRC ended up collecting £5.6 billion more overdue revenue (http://hbr.org/2012/10/98-of-hbr-readers-love-this-article/ar/1) in 2009-2010 than in the previous tax year. "We're social creatures, we really care about what other people are doing and want to do the same and better."

It makes sense that positivity trumps fear. It takes less energy to ignore fear than take action, explains Sharot, and people appear to prefer to opt for denial, rationalisation and distance when faced with negative information. It's easier to opt for the cake today -- we know we'll enjoy it -- than deny ourselves pleasure for a possibility we will develop heart disease in 20 years time that can't be measured or predicted.

Studies show that when presented with expert information telling us we have a 40 percent chance of experiencing hearing loss in the future, and another expert citing a 60 percent chance, we don't keep our own estimate at 50 percent but optimisically drop it to 45. It's not too logical, and appears to be a greater problem in children, teenagers and those over 40. But it can be tackled with a combination of techniques.

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Social incentives encouraged better tax paying habits, but health insurers have found immediate rewards pay off as well. "Customers were given points every time they went to the gym or bought healthy foods," says Sharot. "Using this method they were able to induce behavioural changes and make clients healthier."

A handwashing study in a US hospital demonstrated how progress monitoring helps. After a camera was setup outside patient rooms, only one in ten medical professionals cleaned their hands. When a board was setup that immediately congratulated them every time and showed how they gained points each time compared to their peers, compliance raised to nearly 90 percent.

"It's not about one solution," concluded Sharot. "Maybe you tell a child that if he didn't smoke he'd be better at sports, or saying all your friends have signed up for marathon may make him more likely to join.

"We need empirical research as to which method works when -- it's important for public policy. Now, all health campaigns are fear campaigns, and the message from data is that inducing fear only has a little impact -- we need to use other behaviours as well."

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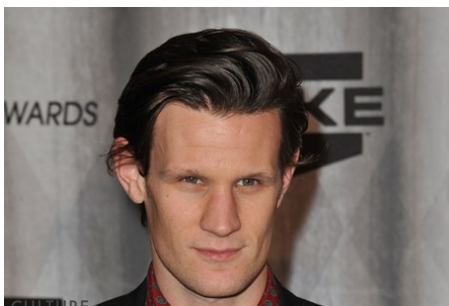
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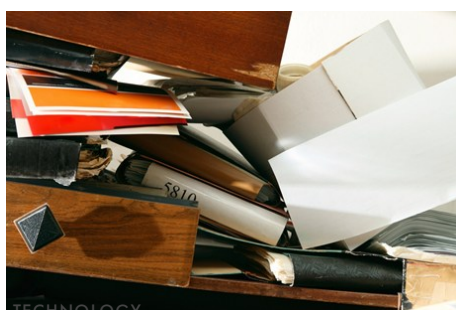
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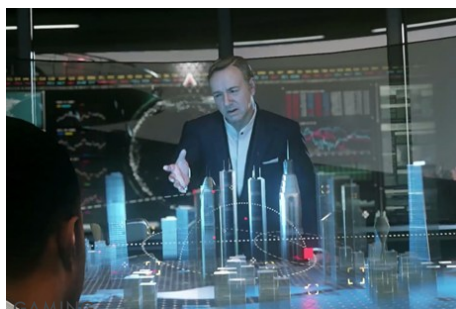
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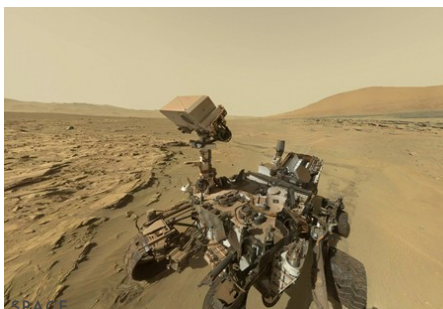
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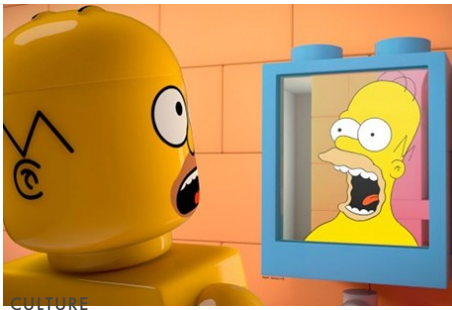
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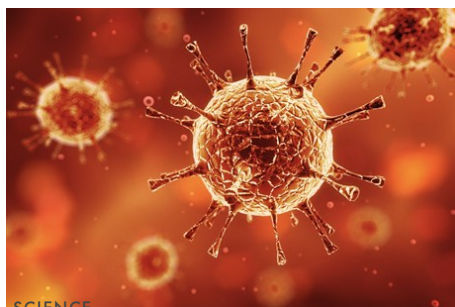caiman's tears
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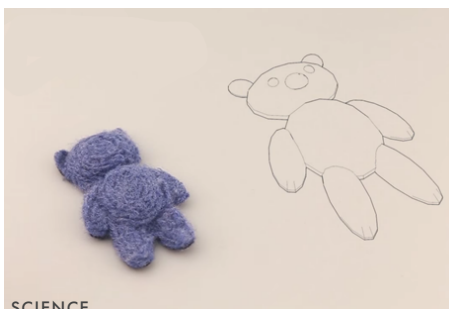
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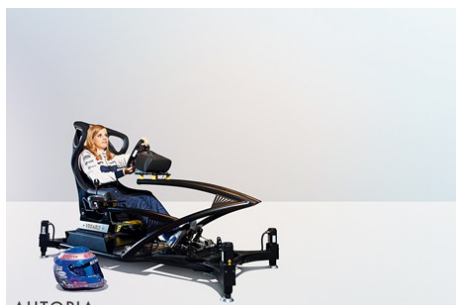
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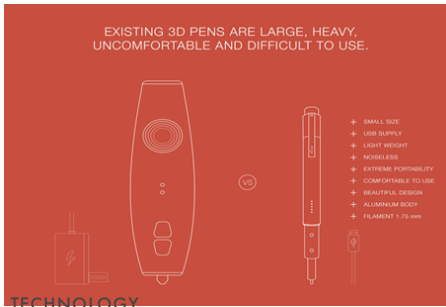Tested: best smart devices for the home (/magazine/archive/2014/05/test/smart-home)
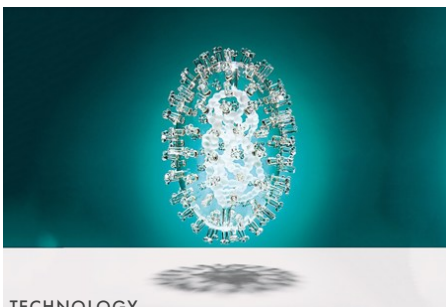
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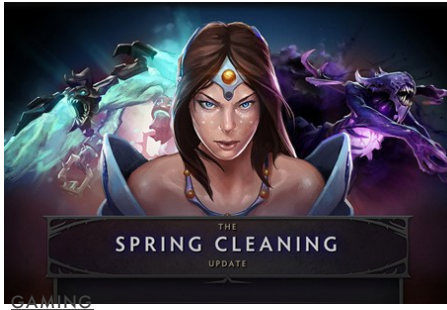
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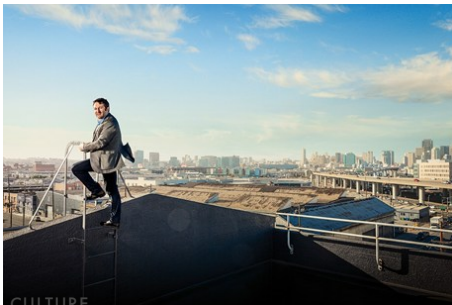
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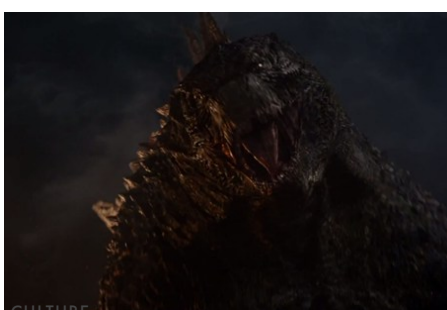
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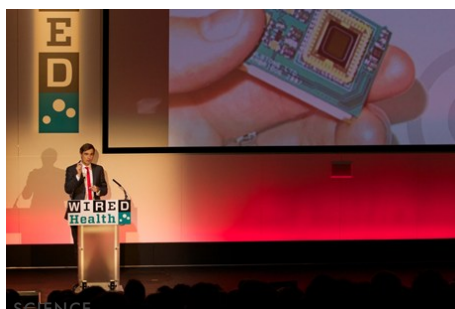
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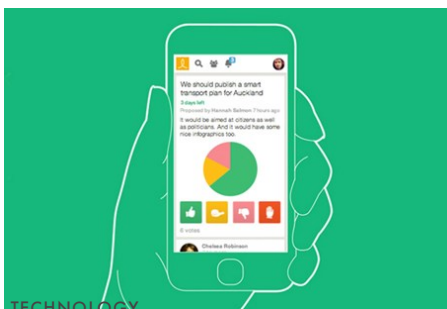How handheld breathalysers could instantly diagnose cancer (/news/archive/2014-04/29/wired-health-billy-boyle)

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