



Decision making

## ‘Just because we are used to something, doesn’t make it OK’

Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience, Tali Sharot, tells Deputy Editor Jennifer Gledhill why our extraordinary ability to habituate needs to come with a health warning...

05 February 2024

**I**n your new book, *Look Again*, you explain why our habituating skills enable us to survive, by noticing anything unusual and potentially dangerous. Why does this skill then cause problems for us?

Habituation is necessary. However, we know that we can habituate emotionally to all sorts of misinformation and discrimination.

The idea for this book grew from a previous study, back in 2016 when I looked at how we habituate to lying. We asked volunteers to lie for their own benefit, at the expense of someone else. The first few times they lied, there was a strong reaction in their amygdala; the part of the brain that shows emotion. We would expect that because most people feel that lying is wrong. But what we found was that the more the volunteers lied, the quieter their amygdala became. They habituated emotionally to lying.

**... study came out at the time of the US elections. I bet it caused quite a  
storm.**

It struck a chord, especially as Donald Trump's statements were being fact-checked in the press. During the first hundred days of his presidency, he averaged almost five false public claims a day. By the end of his term, that rose to over 19 a day. Becoming habituated to untruths doesn't just happen in politics though, we are constantly bombarded with falsehoods online and in the workplace, which raises the risk of all sorts of discrimination.

## **You also explore how we can habituate too readily to the good stuff in our lives. What's the risk here?**

When I first wrote the proposal for this book, I was going to call it *Adapting to Demons* and focus on the risk of habituating to misinformation. But there is also a downside to adapting too readily to the good things. When we become habituated to what brings us joy, the risk is that we quickly stop reacting to the happiness they can bring. Amazing food, great trips, expensive cars etc, will trigger a burst of joy if you experience them occasionally. But once those experiences become frequent, they stop producing real pleasure and instead, they produce comfort – which is entirely different.

We appreciate them intellectually and know they're a good thing, but we don't feel it emotionally. In a study where volunteers were shown photos of delightful things (adorable puppies and kittens etc) their facial movements were measured over time, and they felt less pleasure with each repeated exposure. They knew the photos were adorable, but they no longer sparked joy. There is a difference between 'knowing' something is good and 'feeling' it.

## **How then do we start to dis-habituate and re-notice the good stuff in our lives?**

Novelty and change can help something 'resparkle', but we also have a need to balance this with safety and predictability. When we spend time away from our partners, or even our favourite foods, we experience more joy when we reconnect. Some people are 'exploiters' i.e., they tend to make choices with safer, known benefits – the familiar restaurant, the staycation – and others are 'explorers', preferring choices with an element of the unknown, but perhaps with greater potential benefits.

## **Why are some people able to dis-habituate more easily?**

Some studies have found that more creative people do indeed show less physiological habituation. It seems that a failure to habituate may be related to more innovative thinking. Tests show that people who are faster at habituating can filter out seemingly irrelevant information. Those who are slower to do this end up with a kind of soup in their heads, full of bits and pieces of information. And sometimes, these bits of information come together to form an original, unique idea.

In my book, we use the example of Dick Fosbury, who went from being a failing high jumper to Olympic gold winner by completely re-inventing the way he jumped. He didn't habituate and say, 'I'm just not good enough at it'. He didn't accept that you could only jump the bar

facing forward. He invented a completely different approach to the high jump, with his back to the bar, and the Fosbury Flop was born. We don't officially know if he was slow to habituate, but we do know that when you observe people doing the same thing in the same way, over and over, your mind stops registering or questioning their actions. Fosbury was able to think about it differently.

Being someone who doesn't entirely habituate can also be important for social change to happen. We call these people 'dishabituation entrepreneurs'. Sure, there will be many situations where you may be better off accepting things that aren't great, but through awareness, there may be chains you can try and break.

## **Is there a downside to not habituating so readily?**

Habituation plays a critical role in mental function. Our brains respond to something new – an angry face perhaps and it signals that we must process some information and make a safety judgement. If the same face appears a few seconds later, neural activity will be reduced. Such habituation is absent in people with schizophrenia for example, they will observe the same emotional face again and again and each time their brain will respond as strongly as it did before. People with depression can also find it harder to adapt – we saw this in a study by Dr Daisy Fancourt that looked at how easily people were able to adapt in lockdown. While failure to habituate can lead to problems for some people, it can also lead to creativity and innovative thinking for others.

## **So apart from innovative sports techniques, what else can dis-habituation help us with?**

So many things! Take safety for example. When Sweden switched to driving on the right to move in line with other Scandinavian countries, the fear was that accidents would rise. On the contrary, they dropped by 40 per cent! The perception of risk was reset: people didn't take road safety for granted, as they feared that the risk was too high and therefore took extra care. It was two years before accident rates returned to normal.

If you want to dishabituate people to a certain risk, you need to shake things up. That's why the US Food and Drug Administration require the graphic warnings on cigarette packets to change their images quarterly.

## **When it comes to habituating to something that has the potential to cause harm, social media is a biggie. What needs to change?**

When Facebook launched to the public in 2008, a study by Luca Braghieri found that depressive episodes in the college-age population increased by 83 per cent! Although it's difficult to establish causation, his team estimated that at least a quarter of this increase was due to social media use. Economist Hunt Allcott asked volunteers to deactivate their accounts for his study and the results showed they had less depression and anxiety after leaving social media behind. Yet, after the study was finished, they went back to social media.

Why? It's part of our culture, everyone else is on it. But more recently, studies have shown people would be willing to pay money for social media not to exist. They would prefer it not to be there in the first place. Because of habituation, it's difficult to assess how 'online noise' affects our lives. Noticing the impact of things that are a constant is hard. The only way to know is to change your usage patterns and experiment with fewer or different habits.

## **In the book you share a finding that could help us dis-habituate to untruths on social media – tell us more!**

Yes, that was a study we did at UCL and it's so simple. We created a social media platform that was like Twitter/X and added a trust and a dis-trust button. We discovered that users clicked trust and distrust to separate true from false posts three times more than other buttons such as 'like'. Also, people started posting more true than false posts as they were rewarded when they did so. The spread of misinformation was cut by half! In the real world, the results won't be so huge. But even if it cuts untruths by 10 per cent or 15 per cent, that will still be a huge impact. And it's relatively easy to do.

## **Did you share these results with the big platforms? What was the response?**

I did contact Facebook and we didn't get any response. I think there is probably an unwillingness from social media platforms to get involved with these kinds of things. What I like about this idea is that it doesn't ask too much of the user. A lot of government initiatives are about educating the user to be able to sift out lies or truth.

The social media platforms don't need to do anything, it's all about educating the user so they can do better. I don't think that's the right approach. I feel the better thing to do is change the platform itself, not to put the responsibility on users. It's hard to know what's true. If there's an incentive for people to post truthful things to gain trust kudos, then this could make a difference.

## **The last chapter of the book points out that technology has the potential to make us reassess our own lives in a fresh light and re-evaluate beliefs that might have become frozen. Do you think this can really happen?**

There are certainly challenges to this happening. On the one hand, of course, it's helpful for us to be open and to encounter and learn about different cultures and communities. I am really interested in AI now and think this offers so much potential, to look into other people's worlds. What you might encounter could be revolting or thrilling but, in either case, it might enable you to see your own situation and life in a fresh light.

*Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There, by Tali Sharot and Cass R Sunstein, now, published by The Bridge Street Press.*

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