



The big idea

The big idea: this simple behavioural trick can help you get more out of life

Habituation is a key component of human nature, and knowing how to manipulate it can make the things you enjoy even better

Cass Sunstein and Tali Sharot

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Imagine you're out for dinner at your favourite restaurant and the waiter seats you at the best table. It is nice and quiet, so you can have a pleasant conversation with your partner. The table is also right next to a window with great views. You drink your wine and enjoy some delicious food. The dinner lasts a couple of hours. Do you think you'd enjoy the evening more if you sat at the nice table the whole time, or if you were occasionally sent to the back of the restaurant where it was crowded and noisy?

"Well, that's a stupid question," you're probably thinking. Who would want to go somewhere rowdy if they had a lovely spot exactly where they were? That's certainly what intuition suggests. But it's wrong. Studies show that people enjoy good things in life (like listening to music or getting a relaxing massage) more if they break them up into smaller pieces.

A nice table is pleasant, but the joy experienced during the first hour fades over time. The reason? Habituation. That's our brain's tendency to respond less and less to things that are constant, that don't change. As we get used to the pleasant aspects of our life, both big (a loving spouse, a comfortable home, a good job) and small (a great view, a tasty dish), we notice and appreciate them less. Unless, that is, you break up the experience. Moving to the more cramped bit of the restaurant for a while (perhaps to visit the bathroom) will trigger dishabituation, making the luxury of your window seat more salient.

For another example, consider vacations. A few years ago one of us (Tali) went on a work trip to a sunny resort in the Dominican Republic. Her mission was to find out what made holidaymakers happy and why. She interviewed people about their experiences and asked them to fill out surveys. When the data was in, she noticed one word that appeared again and again: *first*. Vacationers spoke of the joy of "seeing the ocean for the first time", the "first swim in the pool", the "first sip of a holiday cocktail". Firsts seemed hugely important. You cannot habituate to a first.

As firsts usually happen earlier in a vacation, Tali wondered if people had a better time at the start of their trips. Luckily, the large travel company with which she was working had asked customers from around the world to rate their feelings throughout their holidays. Crunching those numbers revealed that joy peaked 43 hours in. At the end of day two, after people had got their bearings, was when they were happiest. Thereafter it was all downhill.

■ ■ *You might benefit most from several small trips spread through the year, rather than one long escape*

Which is not to say that they found themselves miserable by the end. Even when they returned home, many still benefited from a warm holiday afterglow. Still, less than a week passed by before they quickly adjusted to home life - work, school runs, bills. Within seven days, it was difficult to detect any effect of the time away on their mood.

This evidence suggests that you might benefit most from several small trips spread through the year, rather than one long escape. That way, you will maximise firsts and afterglows, not to mention the pleasure of anticipation, which you will experience more often.

This applies much more generally than holidays, of course. For example, people who were given massages with breaks in between were found to have enjoyed it more than those who weren't interrupted. Anything that is wonderful will become at least a bit less wonderful over time. Why not take a break, and enjoy it all over again?

What about unpleasant experiences? Should you divide those up too? Imagine you had to clean a toilet. Would you rather do it in one go or take little breaks every 10 minutes? Or suppose that your upstairs neighbour Marvin is practising the drums, and that you can hear the annoying noise loud and clear. Should you make Marvin a cup of coffee so that you both get a break from the *bang bang bang* of his drumsticks?

Most people want to endure the unpleasantness in chunks. When researchers **asked** people whether they would like a break from smelling a nasty odour or just have the whole thing over and done with in one go, 90 people said, "Breaks, please!". The vast majority - 82 out of 119 - also said they wanted a break from an irritating noise. They did so because they believed the experience would be less upsetting with a breather.

It seems like a reasonable prediction, but it isn't correct. When people were actually exposed to the noise, those who took time out suffered more overall. The break interrupted their natural habituation to the unwelcome stimulus. The lesson? If you need to complete an unpleasant task it would probably be wise not to chop it up. Once you come back, the smell will be worse, the noise louder, and the experience grimmer overall.

There's some folk wisdom embodied here, perhaps. Exhortations to "get it over and done with", or "rip off the Band-Aid" are familiar - and in "absence makes the heart grow fonder" we have, perhaps, some age-old advice that recognises the influence of habituation in relationships. But although they're there in our language, it seems we have a hard time overcoming our intuitions to the contrary. The results of psychological experiments are clear, however, and being mindful of habituation's powerful effect could help us all experience a bit less pain and a little more pleasure.

● *Cass Sunstein is university professor at Harvard and the author of Nudge. Tali Sharot is professor of cognitive neuroscience at UCL. Their current book, [Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There](#) is published Bridge Street Press.*

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[Stumbling on Happiness](#) by Daniel Gilbert (HarperCollins, £9.99)

[10% Happier](#) by Dan Harris (Yellow Kite, £10.99)

[Thinking Fast and Slow](#) by Daniel Kahneman (Penguin, £12.99)

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