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Your Life Is Better Than You Think

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BY **TALI SHAROT AND CASS R. SUNSTEIN** FEBRUARY 22, 2024 7:00 AM EST
Sharot is a professor of cognitive neuroscience at University College London and MIT, and founder and director of the Affective Brain Lab. Sunstein is an American legal scholar who was the administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Obama administration. They are coauthors of *Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There*.

The undeniable popularity of self-help books, wellness podcasts, and happiness workshops reflects the constant human desire to make life better. But could it be that many of our lives are already better than we recognize?

While we may have a loving family, a good place to live, and a decent job, we often fail to notice those things. It's not because we are ungrateful or stupid. It's because of a basic feature of our brain, known as habituation.

Habituation is the tendency of neurons to fire less and less in response to things that are constant. You enter a room filled with roses and after a short while, you cannot detect their scent any longer. And just as you get used to the smell of fresh flowers, you also get used to a loving relationship, to a promotion, to a nice home, to a dazzling work of art.

Like the front page of a daily newspaper, your brain cares about what recently changed, not about what remained the same. And so, what once took your breath away becomes part of life's furniture. You habituate to it—you fail to notice and respond to elements of your life which you previously found enchanting.

The good news is that you can dishabituate. That is, you can suddenly start perceiving and responding to things to which you have become desensitized.

The key is taking small breaks from your daily life. For example, when people return home from a long business trip, they often find their ordinary life has "resparkled." Mundane things suddenly seem amazing. The actress Jodie Foster recently described this feeling when sharing her experience of returning home after filming on location for six months. "I came back from somewhere that is amazing and beautiful," she explained. "But you know, you long for really dumb things that you're just used to... Right now, I'm like 'my God avocados are amazing!' or 'I'm so glad I get to go to the gym again!'" Things that six months ago were sort of what I was trying to escape from."

Of course, Foster's life is far from ordinary, but we think that in this case her experience reflects a fundamental point. If something is constant, we often assume (perhaps unconsciously) that it is there to stay. As a result, we focus our attention and effort on the next thing on our list. But if we can make the constant less so, our attention will naturally drift back to it. If it is good at its core, it may just resparkle. This is why time away, however short, will enable you to perceive your life with fresh eyes—and to break up reality.

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The renowned couple's therapist Esther Perel draws similar conclusions. When Perel asked people to describe an incident when they were most drawn to their partner, they mentioned two general situations. First, they were especially drawn to their spouse when they felt unfamiliar and unknown—for example, when they saw their partner from a distance or when they observed them deep in conversation with strangers. Second, they were especially drawn to their spouse when they were away and then when they reunited. Perel's conclusion is supported by science. A 2007 study of 237 individuals showed that when people spend more time apart from their partner, they report greater sexual interest in them.

But what if you are unable to get away from your daily routine, even for a short while? Well, perhaps you can change your environment using your imagination. Close your eyes and imagine your life, but without your home, without your job, without your family; create vivid images with color and detail. This small act might make you feel lucky about what you have.

It's a bit like having a nightmare in which you lose a loved one—when you wake up and realize it was all a dream and the person is right there beside you, you feel especially thankful. Before the nightmare you may well have *known* that you had a good thing, but after you awake from it, you *feel* it too.

Why, though, does the emotional response habituate so fast? Why have we evolved a brain that derives less and less pleasure from good things that are constant or frequent? And perhaps most importantly, wouldn't it be great if you marveled at your job, house, or spouse just as you did at the very beginning?

Maybe, or maybe not. Habituation to the good drives you to move forward and progress. If you did not experience habituation, you would be satisfied with less. For example, you might end up being happy with a low-paying, entry-level position many years after getting the job. Now, being satisfied with less may seem desirable, but it also means that you would have reduced motivation to learn, to develop, and to change. Without emotional habituation, our species may not have ended up with the technological innovation and great works of art we do, because people might not have had the motivation to create them.

A delicate balance must be struck here. On the one hand, without habituation (and dare we say some boredom, restlessness, and greed), we might have remained mere cave dwellers. But on the other hand, habituation can lead us to be unsatisfied, bored, restless, and greedy. Perhaps then, rather than focusing completely on how to better our life we need to also learn how to see our life better—to notice the great things we have habituated to a little bit more.

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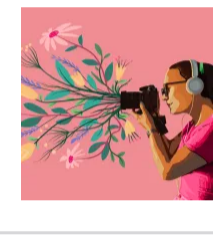
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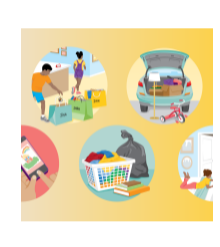
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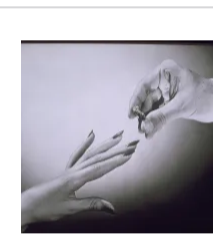
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