



JOSH SHINNER

PEOPLE & PARTIES > BAZAAR AT WORK

Do you need to ‘dishabituate’ from your job?

Used to love work but now feeling a little stuck? There's a science behind it...

“**Y**ou can explain a lot of complicated social phenomena by looking at the much more basic rules that govern our brain,” says Dr Tali Sharot, neuroscientist and author of the new book, *Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There.*

Sharot, who is professor of neuroscience at UCL and the founder and director of the Affective Brain Lab, has written a compelling account of how even the most rudimentary understanding of our brains can help us comprehend the way we operate. Her book centres on the neurological pattern of behaviour known as ‘habituation’.

“Almost all neurons in the brain comply with this idea of habituation, which is simply that we respond less and less to things that are constant or that change very gradually,” she explains. “That can be everything from smell (if you go into a room and it’s full of smoke, you stop smelling the smoke after a while) to your work, or behaviour in society. Anything you see over and over again, you kind of stop noticing.”



Habituation allows us to adapt to our environment in order to better survive it, says Sharot. Part of this neurological process involves building a model of the world based on what we see around us. We learn essentials through this (for example, fire is hot and ergo, we shouldn't touch) but also repeated messages and images around certain ideas. Our concept of how everything works is based on seeing things over and over again, which leads us to assume unbreakable, unimpeachable norms.

Sharot believes this has particular relevance to us at work, an environment in which it is easy to form patterns of behaviour and get into routines that numb us to the good – and the bad – in our jobs.



JOSH SHINNER FOR HARPER'S BAZAAR

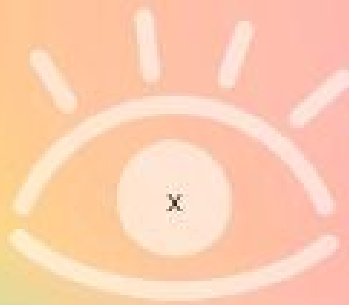
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“Habituating to the good is when you get a job that you really want and when you start, you’re so excited about it, but over time, it just becomes normal life. It’s mundane, it no longer sparks joy,” says Sharot. “On the negative side, when you start a new position, there are probably a lot of things around you that you notice are wrong, or inefficient. And again, eventually you get used to those things and so they don’t bother you as much. But, of course, there are things that we *should* keep paying attention to – like inequalities. Habituation stops us noticing, and therefore stops us from making things better.”

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LOOK AGAIN

The Power of Noticing
What was Always There



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Acknowledging habituation can inspire us to shake things up at work, to reclaim the joy we first felt in our jobs. But if we can sense that we are stuck and have lost

passion, that's not necessarily a negative. "If we are alert to it, it can be a good thing," says Sharot. "It can allow us to move forward and progress."

What we really need to do, Sharot advises, is *dishabituate*: to regain a sensitivity, not only to the positives of your job, but the less-than-ideal things you've stopped noticing. This means shaking ourselves up at work so that we can start to notice all the things we take for granted – good and bad.

There are many ways in which you can dishabituate, Sharot says. One is by changing your environment. Have you ever noticed how, when you travel, you often think about your life in a whole new way, or return with a fresh mindset? This is because you are dishabituating: removing yourself from the adaptations of your everyday life.

"If you work in your office for a few hours and go for a walk, then come back, or go and work in a coffee shop for a period of time, suddenly, your brain has to process everything a little bit differently. That causes dishabituation," Sharot explains. "Studies show that, when this happens, people come up with more creative solutions. Creativity is often rethinking the regular things we see every day. It's actually been shown that people who habituate more slowly tend to be more creative."

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"It is not about where you go, but how you see things when you come back"

Sharot believes that more companies should invoke a sense of dishabituation as much as possible: mixing it up between working from home, and in the office, for example, or even rotating employees into different departments. “The dishabituation then occurs because you’re talking to different people with different ideas. You may then eventually habituate to this new team, but when you then come back to your original environment, you see it differently as well.”

At its core, a lot of this mindset is about perspective – gaining a different or more distant one so that you can appreciate more. Try keeping track of what you love about your work; the practise of gratitude can be key to this, as can travel and change, however quotidian. Sharot also recommends something as simple as mixing up your commute or changing your morning routine. Even the smallest tweaks can dishabituate you, and may also open your eyes to changes that need to be made to your career, or workplace, for the better.

“There is a quote I love that says it is not about where you go, but how you see things when you come back,” says Sharot. “That is exactly the power of dishabituation.”

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