



Character Lab
Actionable Advice to Help Kids Thrive

PARENTING

Joy Division: The Benefits of Breaking Up Fun

Breaks reduce habituation, making the initial joys last a little longer.

Posted March 4, 2024

Reviewed by Michelle Quirk



KEY POINTS

- Habituation is our tendency to respond less and less to things that are the same.
- What's thrilling on Monday becomes boring by Friday.
- There is a way to make the good stuff “resparkle”: Chop up the good experiences into bits.



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Today, we've asked Tali Sharot to share her Tip of the Week.

Every year, my children participate in their school's Spirit Week. Each day has a certain theme: Monday

On that Monday, my kids are searching with excitement about picking out their outfits. On Tuesday, the enthusiasm is lower, but they are still game. By Thursday, they can no longer be bothered.

What is thrilling on Monday becomes boring by Friday. That's because our brains have a basic feature that governs every neuron in it, something called *habituation*. Habituation is our tendency to respond less and less to things that are the same. You enter a bakery, and after about 20 minutes, you no longer notice the smell of warm pastries. Just as you get used to the scent of baked goods, you also get used to a whirlwind romance, newfound wealth—and the thrill of going to school in costume.

So, even exciting events lose their sparkle after a while. But there is a way to make the good stuff “resparkle”: Chop up the good experiences into bits.

For example, think of a song you like. Do you think you'd enjoy it more if you listened to it continuously or with short interruptions? When surveyed, 99 percent of people said they would want to avoid interruptions. Yet, **research** has found that people enjoyed a song more with breaks and were willing to pay more to hear the music in concert. Breaks reduce habituation, making the initial joys last a little longer.

Don't think thrills will always feel thrilling.

Do chop up the good stuff. To decrease habituation, insert short breaks into pleasant experiences. Instead of having a “spirit week,” schools could have five “spirit days” scattered throughout the year. Instead of taking a two-week vacation, you might try going on several mini-breaks. To paraphrase the economist Tibor Scitovsky: Pleasure results from incomplete and intermittent satisfaction of desires.

With joy and gratitude,

Tali

*Tali Sharot is a professor of cognitive neuroscience at University College London and MIT and the author (with Cass Sunstein) of **Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There**. A version of this post also is published on *Character Lab*.*

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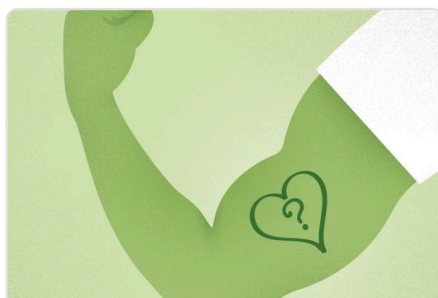
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Character Lab is a nonprofit whose mission is to advance scientific insights that help kids thrive.

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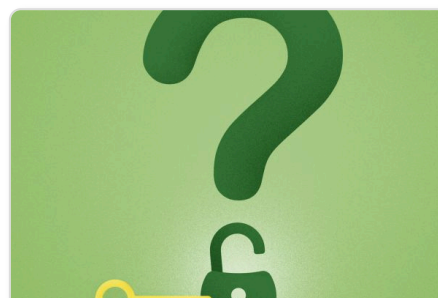


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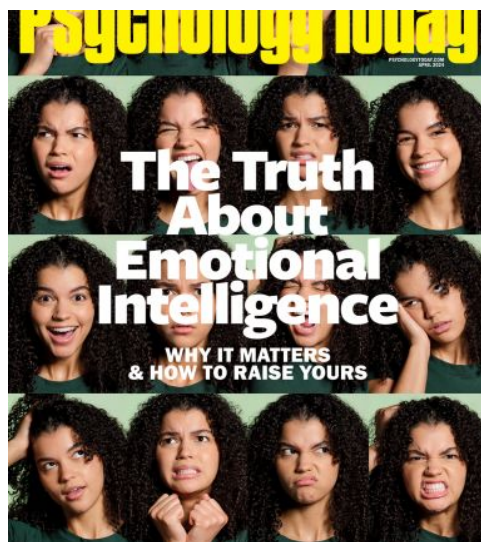
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