

The Key to a Fulfilling Career? Variety.

by Tali Sharot and Cass R. Sunstein

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Summary. If you feel bored or unfulfilled by a job you once relished, you might be succumbing to what scientists call habituation: our brain's tendency to react less and less to things that don't change, so that what once brought joy and meaning can stop doing so over time. The... [more](#)

Are you feeling dissatisfied in a job that previously made you happy and left you fulfilled? It's certainly possible that you need a drastic change — a better boss, a bigger team, a new project, a different role, another organization entirely. But you might also be succumbing to what scientists call habituation: our brain's tendency to react less and less to things that don't change, so that what once brought joy and meaning can stop doing so over time.

When you start using a new perfume, for example, you can easily detect its distinctive scent every time you spritz. But with repeated applications, you hardly sense its presence. The same can happen with work tasks, roles, teams, and organizations, even to people pursuing noble and exciting careers. Consider, for example, a cancer researcher who has spent years working on new treatments but who finds her sense of purpose diminishing, replaced by ennui, or a political reporter who had loved covering presidential campaigns but now slogs through them.

Thankfully, there is an antidote to habituation: variety. When you shake up your typical day with different activities, both inside and outside work, you force yourself to dishabituate, and thus to see things anew. Whether it's taking on a new hobby, meeting with new colleagues, putting your hand up for an assignment outside your usual purview, or simply taking a different route to the office, this diversification will push you to learn, change, and evolve. And, though it might feel uncomfortable at first, it will ultimately bring you more joy.

One reason diversification leads to joy is that it puts you in a state of learning, and learning is intrinsically rewarding. Consider research conducted in London by two neuroscientists, Bastien Blain and Robb Rutledge. When they asked volunteers to play a game and report their feelings every few minutes, they found that participants were happiest not when they won the most money but when they learned something about the game. In another study Andra Geana and her colleagues at Princeton found that people playing a computer game for which they had all the necessary information to perform perfectly did not at all enjoy it. The reason? They quickly became bored! But when asked to play a new game that required them to learn as they went along, they were far more engaged. Also, when given the opportunity to shift from one game to the other, they were far more likely to shift from the one with perfect knowledge to the one with learning — and stay there.

As change often leads to learning, it can increase well-being. This relationship was shown in research from the University of Chicago economist Steven Levitt. He invited people who were considering a change in their life to use an online coin toss to decide whether to do it or not: heads meant yes; tails meant stick with the status quo. When he followed up a few weeks later, he found those who got heads were 25% more likely to make a change, and more importantly, those who did were happier on average than those who did not, a difference that held through six months after the coin toss. This suggests that people should be embracing change and variety in their lives more than they do.

Organizations can nudge people into diversifying their experiences — for example, by rotating employees to different units, assigning diverse projects, or asking people to experiment with new ideas or tools. Within the U.S. government, employees are sometimes “detailed” from their agency or department (in, say, the Environmental Protection Agency) to another (in, say, the White House), partly because they are needed there but also because the posting will be enriching and improve their work when they return. In academia, faculty members often take a sabbatical every few years — a semester in which they are relieved of their usual teaching duties and are free to work elsewhere. They may produce a book, visit other universities, or work in government or industry, any of which add variety to their work lives, thus boosting career satisfaction and improving the quality of their teaching and research.

Even if you don’t work in an organization that helps you diversify your work life, however, you can take steps to reverse habituation. You might travel to a new and unfamiliar place and spend a few weeks there, or even decide to live in a different location for a while if the opportunity presents itself. You might choose to develop an entirely new skill, learn a new language, try a new hobby, or take a course in a field different from your own.

Such learning, as you now know, is likely to increase happiness. But that's not all. Once you return to your usual work you will be able to view it from a different angle. You might notice suboptimal aspects of your organization that could be made better (perhaps in how decisions are made, the physical layout of the workspace, or the frequency of team meetings). You might also rediscover positive aspects to which you have become habituated (maybe the kindness of co-workers or the view from your office window).

You are also likely to think more innovatively about the actual work that you do, yielding better results. For example, in the past few decades, economists, legal scholars, and business leaders have studied psychology, and as a result, they're now approaching longstanding problems, such as how to promote responsible behavior, more creatively than they otherwise would have.

We've also tried diversification in our own lives. For Tali, a course in filmmaking was not only an enjoyable, enriching experience but also a path to new knowledge (for instance on story structure) that helps in science communication. Cass found that stints in the U.S. government changed his approach to academic writing and teaching, in particular by casting a new light on the practical realities and institutional constraints blocking change.

Diversification takes effort, but it can also be fun. In the words of the singer Sheryl Crow, "a change would do you good."

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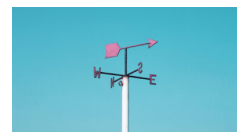


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