



Diener, Ed

Beyond the Hedonic Treadmill



Principle

People adapt to good and bad events to return to a baseline of happiness in complex and individual ways.

Quotes

“Creating a happier society is not doomed by the hedonic treadmill.”

The hedonic treadmill theory “implies that individual and societal efforts to increase happiness are doomed to failure. . . 5 important revisions to the treadmill model are needed. . . These revisions offer hope for psychologists and policy-makers who aim to decrease human misery and increase happiness.”

So What - Application

If all of these points about happiness setpoints are true then I could stop choosing goals or doing things or even avoiding things based on how happy or miserable I think they’ll make me, because the happiness and misery will wear off.

At the same time, if there are things that can gradually over time raise my happiness setpoint, I could focus more on happiness as a gradual long game.

The Research Story

Three researchers from University of Illinois, Michigan State, and Texas Christian University address problems in the hedonic treadmill model of happiness. The hedonic treadmill is the idea that no matter what happens, you eventually get used to it. Getting ice cream may make you happy for the moment, but the happiness won’t last. It always comes back to baseline. That seems discouraging because any effort to become happier is doomed to fail. These researchers use happiness research to propose some tweaks to the hedonic treadmill model of happiness.

A happiness setpoint is the baseline you come back to after your happy or sad experience happens and the emotions subside. Here are 5 adjustments the researchers propose.

1. Setpoints aren’t neutral. Most people have a setpoint that’s on the positive side of the scale. Most people are mildly happy most of the time.
2. Different people have different setpoints. It can be from genetics or from life events, but some people’s happiness setpoints are higher than others.
3. People can have more than one setpoint. They can be satisfied in their marriage, but not at work. They can be high in positive emotions, but even higher in negative emotions.
4. Happiness can change over time. The circumstances of our lives can have a lasting impact on our happiness levels. This is true at the national level where poverty and human rights predict happiness levels and at the individual level where long-term happiness does change for 24% of people in one study.
5. People adapt to positive or negative experiences differently. They adapt at different speeds and return to different levels of happiness, even after the same event.

One thing that gets conflated in this study is how you measure happiness. Emotions follow the hedonic treadmill model because emotions happen in our bodies and our bodies are built to stay regulated. Other measures of happiness change less rapidly, are harder to measure, and may not follow this “back-to-baseline” model.

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