

No Satisfaction Zaps Motivation, Psychologist Says

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You can't always get what you want, as the song goes, but if a Florida State University researcher's new theory on motivation holds true, you may not want it anymore anyway.

Francis Eppes Professor Roy Baumeister, a renowned social psychologist, has conducted several experiments to learn how satisfaction influences motivation. Baumeister will present his theory at the annual convention of the Association for Psychological Science being held May 24-27 in Washington, D.C.

At the heart of Baumeister's theory is the idea that humans adapt to want what they can get. It goes something like this: When we want something and get it, the subsequent feeling of satisfaction reinforces and increases the strength of that desire when it returns. Conversely, chronically unsatisfied desires may diminish the intensity of motivation.

"Obviously, we want much that we cannot get, but gradually we want these things a little less," Baumeister said. "It's the 'getting' that begets wanting."

Standard theories of motivation hold that satisfaction reduces subsequent motivational drive. But three experiments conducted by Baumeister and colleagues indicated otherwise.

In one experiment, participants were asked to work a crossword puzzle or play a hand-held video game, and in another, participants were asked

to take 15-minute naps on four out of eight days. In a third experiment, participants were asked to read the top news stories on a popular Web site for two weeks. The follow-up to the experiments showed that getting people to engage in an activity led them to want to perform the activity more over time.

This theory of motivation may even explain certain addictive behavior, Baumeister said.

"Addiction may be typical of many motivations, and, in fact, may be less a special case than a common pattern," Baumeister said. "In addiction, getting leads to more wanting. One example is alcohol: Most people can live without it before they discover it, and getting pleasure from it does increase the wanting. Why this process stops short of all-out addiction for some people and not others we don't know."

The second part of Baumeister's theory holds that social and cultural factors may shape motivation more strongly when the motivation is weak. The best example of this, according to Baumeister, is that female sexuality is more affected than male sexuality by social and cultural factors because the female sex drive is less intense. By contrast, women have a stronger desire to take care of children, most people believe, and the mother role changes far less with social and cultural factors than the father role.

The study of motivation is important because psychology boils down to two things: wanting and thinking. Most research in recent decades has focused on the thinking component, cognition, while little attention has been paid to the wanting component, or motivation, according to Baumeister.

Understanding what motivates people could eventually help psychologists more effectively treat certain patients, Baumeister said.

Source: Florida State University

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