

Hedonism is as important as self-control for a happy life

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Enjoying activities that don't contribute directly to long-term goals, such as relaxing on the couch or eating delicious food, contributes at least as much to a happy life as self-control, according to new research from the

University of Zurich and Radboud University. The researchers therefore argue for a greater appreciation of hedonism in psychology. Their findings will be published on July 27 in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

The research literature has a lot to say about how we can get better at pursuing long-term goals in our lives, such as getting fitter or healthier. The prevailing view is that [self-control](#) helps prioritizing long-term goals over momentary pleasure and that if you are good at self-control, this will usually result in a happier and more successful life.

But it's time for a new voice, says Katharina Bernecker, psychology researcher at the University of Zurich. "Of course self-control is important, but the research on [self-regulation](#) should pay just as much attention to hedonism, or short-term pleasure." That's because their research shows that people's capacity to experience pleasure or enjoyment contributes at least as much to a happy and satisfied life as successful self-control.

Pleasure without distraction

Bernecker (University of Zurich) and her colleague Daniela Becker (Radboud University) used questionnaires to find out whether people differ in their capacity to pursue hedonic goals and whether this ability is related to well-being. They developed a questionnaire that measures the extent to which people can actually enjoy themselves when choosing to do so, for example, when people decide to watch a TV series on the couch rather than exercising.

"While trying to enjoy or relax, some people are distracted by thoughts about things they feel they should be doing instead. For example, when lying on the couch you might keep thinking of the sport you are not doing. Those thoughts about conflicting long-term goals undermine their

[goal](#) to relax," says Becker. "We saw in our research that people who can enjoy themselves in those situations generally have a higher sense of well-being. Contrary to what the literature says about people's capacity for self-control, it turns out that the capacity for hedonism has at least the same degree of impact on happiness."

More isn't always better

Bernecker: "The pursuit of hedonic and [long-term goals](#) needn't be in conflict with one another. Our research shows that both are important and can complement each other in achieving well-being and [good health](#). Accordingly it is important to find the right balance in one's everyday life."

This finding also needs to be taken into account when looking at things like working from home, the researchers believe. "The environment where you normally rest is suddenly associated with work, which can lead to more distracting thoughts, making you less able to rest," says Bernecker.

Unfortunately, simply relaxing more, eating more [delicious food](#) and going more to the pub with friends won't automatically make for more happiness. "It was always thought that hedonism, as opposed to self-control, was the easier option. But really enjoying one's hedonic choice isn't actually that simple for everybody because of those distracting thoughts. More isn't necessarily better," says Becker. But what can you do now to enjoy better? More research is needed, but the researchers suspect that consciously planning and setting limits to periods of enjoyment could help to separate them more clearly from other activities, allowing [pleasure](#) to take place more undisturbed.

More information: Katharina Bernecker et al. Beyond Self-Control: Mechanisms of Hedonic Goal Pursuit and Its Relevance for Well-Being,

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