



Getting off the Hedonic Treadmill

 Happiness

 Exercise

 10 min

 Client

 No

Often, we have a hard time identifying what makes us feel happy. We may think that something will leave us feeling content, and in the end, we are disappointed when it does not. When people remain at a steady level of happiness despite external changes, such as getting a new car, buying a new phone, or getting a pay raise, this is called the “hedonic treadmill.” While these items may bring about a short increase in the feeling of happiness, the person will return to his/her previous level of happiness very quickly. This exercise can help people who feel stuck get off the treadmill and realize what can increase their happiness level long-term.



Goal

The goal of the exercise is to make clients aware of the well-known happiness inhibiting process: hedonic adaptation. In addition, this exercise requires participants to think of ways to prevent hedonic adaptation in the future by focusing on changes that are likely to result in long-lasting increases in happiness.



Advice

- This exercise is for all clients, particularly those who focus on the accumulation of more items, such as more money, bigger homes, and so on. One way to introduce the idea of the hedonic treadmill is by identifying those things that provided only a brief boost and had short-lived effects, although clients assumed that they would make them happier in the long run. Then, it is important to identify and encourage activities or items that are likely to contribute to increased happiness over a longer period. It is essential to understand that some items, such as more money, can make people happier if those items are used to do the activities that make people happier. For example, if an increase in wealth gives people the freedom to spend more time with loved ones, help or give to others, reduce the number of sources of stress around them, or support artistic or scientific pursuits, then that happiness is more likely to last for longer periods.
- This exercise also works very well in groups. It can be used to explain the concept of hedonic adaptation and related constructs, like intentional activity, circumstance change, and circumstantial change (see Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). When used in groups, it can be informative to ask participants to share their most and least beneficial items in terms of sustainable happiness and look for similarities between these items.



References

- Gilbert, D. (2006). *Stumbling on happiness*. Vintage.
- Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). Achieving sustainable gains in happiness: Change your actions, not your circumstances. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 7, 55-86.



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Instructions

See the table on the next page.

1. In the first column, list events, circumstances, or possessions that you believe have contributed to your happiness in the last year.
2. Using the events, circumstances, and possessions that you listed in step one, think about how long this new situation increased your happiness. Write the amount of time in the column titled "Duration."
3. Select items in the "Duration" column that contributed to your happiness for over three months by putting an "X" in the ">3 months" column.
4. For those items which resulted in an increase in happiness for over three months, in the column titled "Specifics," write down what specifically lead to the elevated level of happiness.

See the table below for an example:

Events, circumstances, or possessions	Duration (months)	>3 months	Specifics
new car	1		
joined sports club	12	X	Joined a new sports team. Nice people, looking forward to meeting them every week.
bought a new book	1		

Now take action.

5. Look back at the "Events, circumstances or possessions" and "Duration" columns and notice which situations increased happiness for one month or less. Using this information, think about ways in which you can adjust your life to focus more on those items that break you free of the "Hedonic Treadmill." Using the space below the table on the next page, list several ways you will change your life in the next month to focus more on items that provided increased happiness for longer periods (more than 2 months or the >3 months column). Be sure to keep your plans simple and "doable."

