

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Finding Healthy Addictions

Posted by [Jason Bradford](#) on May 5, 2010 - 6:12pm in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Demand/Consumption](#)

Tags: [consumerism](#), [social behavior](#), [sustainability](#) [[list all tags](#)]

Some of you may remember a similar [post](#) from about a year ago.-Gail

I want to discuss the notion of “healthy addictions.” Really, this is an important topic. Our brain likes 'happy' chemicals and we tend to find ways to effect their release. Trouble is, we become quickly habituated to stimulation and then seek novelty in order to get that same old feeling. Our modern society gives us so many opportunities to be rewarded, but many people can't handle it. They gradually become addicted to unhealthy things.



Topics I'll explore are: Distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy addictions. Examples of each kind. And my birthday wishes.

Background

Nate Hagens has written about the psychology, sociology and neurology behind addictive behavior, including consumerism, which is basically the process of turning high value natural capital into mostly disposable products with low or often negative marginal utility.

Over a year ago Nate and I did a radio show together titled [Evolution, Addiction and Economic Demand](#). Go there for more background or check out [this one](#) from The Oil Drum archives.

The bottom line is that I don't believe we can keep from becoming addicted to *something*. Once we accept this fact of life, the issue becomes whether we can work on controlling what we are addicted to--making it healthy and inexpensive rather than destructive and costly.

How to Tell the Difference

This table contrasts healthy and unhealthy addictions using four criteria that I think are important.

Criteria	Healthy	Unhealthy
Ecological Footprint	Low	High
Habituation	Slow	Rapid
Discount Rate	Flatten	Steepen
Utility	Build skills or fitness	Weaken mind or body

Consider what you do regularly as a kind of pleasurable compulsion and compare it to that table. Is it an activity that consumes a lot of resources and generates trash, or is it environmentally benign? Do you get tired of it quickly and feel pressure for "more", or does the pleasure linger? Is it causing you to be pulled always into the present and unable to plan for the future, or does it involve delayed gratification? Are you depleted mentally or physically by the activity, or are you stronger or more skilled as a result?

My Healthy Addiction

I believe cultivation of plants is a healthy addiction. When I am working on the farm or garden I get to do all sorts of addictive activities. First, I make plans. This sets up the expectation of a reward. But the reward is in the future and the exact timing and quality of the reward is not perfectly known. This is important from a neurological perspective. We want to have expectations fulfilled, but they can't be totally predictable because fulfillment requires the establishment of tension.

After the garden plan sets up a potential reward, I invest in its outcome. This raises the stakes. I really don't want the plants to die. I tend them. Watching them grow feeds mini rewards. "Oh look! The seeds are germinating!" Getting the odd positive reinforcement along the way keeps me hooked. It's like having a flirtatious conversation.

I really don't know why, but the plants are beautiful too. I like to gaze upon a thriving bed of rainbow-colored chard. The colors of lettuce are astounding, especially when back lit during dawn or dusk. I grow a light green variety called Salad Bowl and a dark red one called Red Oak Leaf. Seeing them side-by-side is a treat.

I look forward to these experiences each year. In the winter I start to miss them. Seasonality is crucial because it re-establishes novelty. I don't eat fresh tomatoes out of season, which means I enjoy them all the more when they come off those vines. And the winter provides its own rewards. Tree collards are sweetest in the winter, for example. The occasional snow or hard frost

events are fun. An inch of snow on dark green-blue Dino kale is a more or less twice-yearly spectacle.



Looking at the four criteria, growing my own organic food is a great addiction. It has a low ecological footprint as I use mostly manual labor and local resources, and it displaces potentially purchased food with a high footprint. Habituation is slow because the novelty begins anew each year. The required planning and delayed gratification related to "plant time" helps me develop a long-term perspective, or a relatively flat discount rate. And I am eating nutritious food and getting plenty of fresh air and exercise.

By Contrast

For comparison, let's briefly review the great American pastime of shopping.

Product developers and marketers exist to get us addicted to buying stuff. I notice that people give each other things because they feel obligated or as a sign of affection. (Personally, I can't guarantee I won't snap when my kids are given more plastic gizmos and candy at the next round of holiday festivities).

Shopping addiction qualifies as unhealthy: the embodied energy and resulting pollution are high, product novelty wears off quickly, advertiser promotion of "newness" increases short-term thinking, and having too much stuff means that the marginal utility for most things is low.

My Birthday Wishes

As a kid I would ask for new things for my birthday. But now I am trying to reduce the burden of material stuff cluttering my life. In fact, this year (I'll be 40) I'd like a whole lot of people to stop being addicted to consumerism. (Note: My birthday isn't for a couple of months. Second note: I'd also like Bart Anderson of Energy Bulletin to consider this essay worthy of Deep Thought status.)

As an American, I'd actually like to destroy the idea that we are a nation of consumers. We need a new identity. Perhaps we can try "citizens" or "sentient Earthlings." I don't know, but just about anything is better than what we label ourselves now. It would be great to have reports about "consumer confidence" be replaced by reports on "citizen life satisfaction."

Think about it. If consumer confidence goes up people will eat out more, buy more party food, and probably gain weight and clogged arteries. We will then get a new report on the worsening epidemics of obesity and childhood diabetes.

My last birthday wish is for more people to start connecting a few simple dots.

What Else?

There must be a whole lot of healthy addictions out there. I expect that as people have less money and more time they will shift into new kinds of activities, and I hope these outlets are good ones. We are a remarkably species, able to adapt and acclimate to great changes.

Discussion question for readers: What healthy addictions have you developed, and what unhealthy ones may have been replaced?



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