

BENEFITS OF BORING

Perks of the monotonous routine

By Leo Cardez

Flipping through T.V. channels it is easy to believe anyone and everyone's life is more fulfilling and interesting than that of a humble inmate. Our whole world fits in a 9x12 concrete box. Every day the same. Over and over until we feel like Bill Murray in Groundhog Day. What we wouldn't give for just one day to make our own choices; to come and go as we please?

Oftentimes I watch the Travel or Cooking channels and imagine myself off in some exotic locale enjoying a wonderful meal. Then I snap back to reality, make yet another noodle and go to sleep early. I am beyond bored. This mind-numbing experience dulling my spirit and crushing my hopes.

The kids call it FOMO or Fear of Missing Out. The zeitgeist believes it is rooted in the realization that life is temporary and lest we activate our adventure muscle we may simply watch it pass us by. The truth is much simpler. Experts believe our biology is hard-wired to watch out for and pay close attention to new stimuli. An evolved survival instinct -- watch out for any new things that could potentially hurt us. For example, one of our early ancestors would come across a new animal and all his senses would go on full alert. What is this thing? Is it dangerous? Does it want to hurt me? Is it edible? Over eons, this ingrained pursuit of newness explains why people crave variety and new experiences -- even at the expense of some of their favorite things.

No one would pick a life where every day is exactly the same...even if that

day was wonderful in every way. Let's say you were allowed to pick the menu for your prison; and let's say your favorite food was pizza. You may add pizza to the menu a few times a week, but certainly not for every meal, every day indefinitely. Why? Because you inherently know that too much of anything will certainly burn you out and oftentimes create the opposite effect -- making you dread another slice of pizza. In fact, studies show when research participants were given similar scenarios they would space out their favorite options further apart over time -- enjoying the experience more as more time passed between repetition. I can attest to a similar situation. Last summer an ice cream company donated thousands of pints to our prison. Many of us hadn't had ice cream in years, even decades. We slurped it up voraciously, licking the pints clean. They were going for exorbitant prices on the inmate black market. But, as days turned to weeks and weeks to months of daily ice cream...well, it got to the point that you couldn't give it away and you'd see garbage cans full of unopened containers. So, that's one side of the coin, but as we all know, coins have two sides.

Repetition gets a bad rap in the era of #YOLO. To many it may seem like a waste of time or worse, waste of life. But recent research from the prestigious University of Chicago Business School, Booth, suggests we may be taking for granted the value of really digging deep into one domain, says PhD Professor of Behavioral Science, Ed O'Brien. He suggests, viewed from the right perspective repeating experiences can not only be satisfying, but bring additional joy.

I see his point, we all happily listen to our favorite song on repeat or re-watch our favorite movie.

My cellmate has been watching re-runs of The Big Bang Theory for a decade -- he knows the shows so well he laughs before the punchline. He refuses to watch any new show, content with

it. He may be on to something.

The reality is the human mind is constantly wandering. We are rarely fully in any one moment. Due to our monkey mind we miss out on substantial parts of every experience. For example, I have taken hundreds of showers in the same stall, but I have never really examined it. After taking some time to really engage my senses in the shower I realized it had a pungent smell I no longer registered and black mold [REDACTED] I never noticed. And it is like that in virtually everything we do on any given day. We live on autopilot never fully engaging, therefore, "repeating things can really be seen as another opportunity to actually experience something fully or in a new way," says Michael Norton, PhD, a professor at Harvard Business School. This is especially true for complex experiences such as visits, playing games/sports, or watching a movie.

Studies show that most people believe that they are fully experiencing these types of activities when the truth is they are only registering about 30-50% of the available stimuli at any given moment. Even the simplest activity, say brushing your teeth, has multiple layers left to explore, according to Ellen Lange, PhD, a professor of Psychology at Harvard University known as the "Mother of Mindfulness". She further expounds, "and the process of finding these new insights is fulfilling in and of itself." We all have the power to live deeper, fuller lives by being more mindful and aware of our surroundings and experiences. It's easy. Simply make the conscious concerted effort to notice new things in every repeated experience. The Secret Service use a simple mind trick to scan crowds more effectively. They simply scan from right to left, bottom to top -- the exact opposite of how we are trained to read and write. By forcing ourselves to engage in an activity in a novel manner, we allow ourselves the possibility of seeing that experience more fully or deeply.

We are firing more neurons and sparking discoveries we otherwise may have missed, which in the case of the Secret Service can be a life or death proposition.

Lange offer some tips on how to start finding new meaning in repeated experiences:

1. Recognize everything is always changing -- there will always be something new for you to experience.
2. Looking for and finding these new elements is beneficial, helping concentration and mindfulness; and brings joy -- like that shot of endorphins you get when you Find Waldo.
3. Realize events are neither positive or negative -- it is the way we understand and interpret them that makes them either positive or negative. Conclusion: Change your mindset, change your life.

Beyond helping us manage the humdrum monotony of prison life it will help us see the value of every experience upon our release. While the rest of American culture is obsessed with filling every second of every day with new, cool experiences we can appreciate time spent with family and friends.

Now, everytime I feel myself falling into a boredom-induced funk I embrace and engage in whatever I am doing. Last month, for example, I re-read books I had not read since high school. Not only did I realize I had not retained the majority of the content, but I found myself aroused and excited by the vague familiarity of the storylines. I have no doubt I enjoyed these much more upon second reading.

In conclusion, we all know firsthand the litany of negative side-effects caused by a life lived incarcerated. For the most part, there is little we can do,

Which is why it is so important to take control of the little things we can. As boring as our lives may seem, I hope this pieces has inspired you to see the possibility of newness in everything you do. The science is clear: How we choose to view experiences will dictate how we interpret them. Life is only as boring as we allow it to be and a deeper examination of our lives can be fulfilling in its simplicity.

- h. c. -

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