

The Happiness Trap: Why the Excitement Never Lasts

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Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Have you ever felt the excitement of a brand new phone... completely disappear in less than a week?

One day, it feels like magic in your hands.

The next week... it is just a phone.

And somehow, you already want to know what is coming next.

Today, we are going to talk about why that happens.

And more importantly... what to do about it.

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I am Martin.

And I am Julia.

And today...

I am Robert.

Friends, we have to be honest with you.

Inviting a philosopher onto an English podcast is a strange decision.

It is bold.

Maybe even a little risky.

But if you have been with us for a while, you already know something about this show.

Every so often, we like to go one step further.

We like to build something that actually matters for your life... not just for your English.

So today, we are doing exactly that.

Let me tell you something a little embarrassing.



Two weeks ago, I bought a new phone.

For three days, I could not stop looking at it.

By day seven, I had genuinely forgotten it was new.

Martin, that is not embarrassing.

That is just... being human.

I did something similar last year with a gym membership.

I was convinced I was going to exercise four times a week, so I paid for a full year.

But after the first month, I hardly went at all.

And the worst part?

I still did not cancel it.

Why not?

Because cancelling it would have meant admitting that I had made a mistake.

So every month, I paid for a gym I was not using... just to protect myself from that uncomfortable feeling.

That is another psychological trap: the sunk-cost effect.

We keep investing in something because admitting the original mistake feels painful.

But your story started with the same promise as my new phone.

Exactly.

I thought the membership would make me feel healthier, more disciplined... maybe even like a new person.

And when that excitement faded, your mind found a reason to keep the story alive.

Precisely.

The fading excitement itself has a name.

Psychologists call it hedonic adaptation.

And the endless cycle of chasing the next thing is called the hedonic treadmill.

And by the end of this episode, you are going to understand exactly why your brain does this to you.

You are going to hear how traditions like Zen Buddhism, classical yoga, and Roman Stoicism explored related questions long before modern psychology gave this pattern a scientific name.

And of course... you are going to walk away with the English to talk about all of it.

Let's go back to that phone.

The one you forgot about after a week.

When I unboxed it, my brain gave me a small hit of pure joy.

New screen, new camera, that smell of a sealed box.



For a few days, I felt sharper.

Cooler.

Happier, even.

And then... nothing.

By the second week, it was just... a phone.

The joy did not slowly fade away.

It disappeared.

That is the strange part.

Our brains are built to notice what is new... and then adjust to it almost immediately.

Psychologists have a name for this.

They call it hedonic adaptation.

You get something exciting.

You feel a spike of happiness.

And then your brain often moves you back towards a familiar emotional range.

Back towards your baseline.

Your baseline is your default level of happiness... the emotional home you always return to.

Even after many things you buy, achieve, or chase...

...your mind may pull you back towards that familiar range, again and again.

That is the hedonic treadmill.

You are walking, and walking, and walking...

...but you never actually arrive anywhere new.

Can I tell you mine now?

Please.

Two years ago, I wanted a promotion so badly it was almost all I thought about.

I worked late.

I said yes to everything.

I pictured the exact moment they would tell me.

And then, one Friday... they told me.

I remember standing in the parking lot, completely alone, feeling this huge wave of... relief, mostly.

Happy, yes.



But mostly relief.

And a month later?

A month later, I was already annoyed about a different thing at work.

The promotion was just... normal life now.

Your new baseline.

Exactly.

My brain had already adjusted, and it was already looking for the next thing to chase.

And this is where it gets interesting, friends.

Because almost everything around us is designed to use this exact weakness.

Think about it.

A new phone.

A bigger house.

More followers.

A faster car.

Every advertisement... every headline... every app... is quietly making the same promise.

"This time, it will be different.

This time, the happiness will stay."

But it never does.

Because the treadmill was never designed to let you arrive.

It was designed to keep you walking.

Keep you chasing.

So the real question is not: "What should I buy next?"

It is: "Is there a different way to feel content... that does not depend on the next thing?"

And that is exactly why we invited someone very different onto the show today.

Robert, thank you for being here.

Thank you both.

It genuinely is a pleasure.

Robert, you have spent... how many years studying this?

Almost twenty-five years, formally.

Though I would say philosophy has been quietly working on me since I was about eleven years old.



Robert, before we go further... tell our friends what surprised you most, learning about this hedonic treadmill idea from modern psychology.

Honestly?

Nothing surprised me.

Because the people I study... discovered this thousands of years ago.

They just used different words for it.

Let's start with the Stoics, since both of your stories fit them so well.

The Roman Stoics had a practice called "the view from above."

They imagined looking down at their own life... from very, very far away.

Like from a plane?

Further than that.

From above the whole Earth.

From up there, a new phone looks... very small.

A promotion looks very small.

Even an entire human life looks small.

That sounds a little bleak, honestly.

It is not meant to be bleak.

It is meant to be freeing.

The Stoics believed most of our suffering comes from caring too much about things outside our control.

External things.

Possessions.

Other people's opinions.

The phone in your pocket... is outside your control.

Your reaction to it... is the only thing that is truly yours.

So the treadmill only has power over us... if we hand it that power?

Exactly, Julia.

The Stoics would say: enjoy the phone.

There is nothing wrong with that.

But do not build your peace of mind on top of it.

Now, walk with me to a completely different tradition.

Zen Buddhism.



Zen has this idea of impermanence.

Everything... your phone, your job, your body, even this conversation... is temporary.

Nothing stays.

Nothing is meant to stay.

That sounds sad too, Robert.

It sounds sad the first time you hear it.

But Zen teachers say the opposite is true.

Once you truly accept that everything is fleeting... you stop gripping so tightly.

You stop demanding that this feeling, this object, this moment, last forever.

And strangely... that is when you can actually enjoy it.

So it's not "don't feel joy when you get the new phone"?

No, not at all.

Feel it fully.

Just don't be surprised, or devastated, when it fades.

Zen would say: the joy was never supposed to stay.

That was never its job.

And then there is a third piece, from the yogic tradition of India... long before "yoga" meant stretching in a gym.

In that philosophy, there is a concept called santosha.

It roughly translates to contentment.

But it is a very specific kind of contentment.

Not "I am satisfied because I finally got what I wanted."

It is contentment with what already is, right now, regardless of what you have or do not have.

That sounds almost impossible in the world we live in.

It is difficult.

Nobody said it was easy.

But the yogic texts describe it through a kind of detachment.

Not detachment from life.

Detachment from the outcome.

You still work.

You still want things.



You still buy the phone, if you need one.

But your peace does not depend on whether you get it.

So Robert, if I am hearing this correctly...

Three different traditions...

Greco-Roman Stoicism, Zen Buddhism, and classical yoga...

...and they all offer a related lesson.

They do, although they developed in different periods and influenced the world through different cultural paths.

They do not say exactly the same thing.

But each one warns us against making inner peace depend entirely on possessions, outcomes, or permanent feelings.

And modern psychology describes a similar pattern in its own language.

Exactly.

Different traditions, different frameworks... but a remarkably useful point of connection.

And the modern world is selling us the opposite message.

"Buy this, and you will finally feel complete."

Yes.

And it is not even malicious, necessarily.

It is simply business.

Novelty sells.

Contentment does not need to be sold to you.

You already have access to it.

That might be the most useful sentence in this whole episode.

So Robert, practically... what can our friends actually do with this?

Start small.

Notice the treadmill.

Just notice it.

The next time you buy something and feel that spike of joy... watch what happens over the following two weeks.

Watch it fade.

Do not judge it.

Just watch.

That single habit... noticing... is where every one of these traditions actually begins.



Not stopping the wanting.

No. Just wanting... with your eyes open.

And what about Julia's gym membership?

Yes, Robert.

How do I know when it is time to stop paying and admit that I made a mistake?

Ask yourself one honest question.

If I were making this decision today, knowing what I know now... would I choose it again?

If the answer is no, remember that the money you already spent cannot be recovered.

It should not decide what you do next.

So cancelling is not admitting defeat.

No. Sometimes cancelling is simply making a better decision with the information you have today.

Robert, before you go, we always end with a small English gift for our friends.

I love that.

Please, go ahead.

Let's gather the words from today's conversation.

First: to adapt.

To adapt means to slowly get used to something, until it stops feeling special or difficult.

Your brain adapts to a new phone in about a week.

Second: to chase.

To chase something is to constantly run after it, hoping it will finally satisfy you.

The treadmill keeps you chasing the next purchase, the next goal, the next like.

Third: fleeting.

Fleeting means lasting for only a very short time before disappearing.

That first excitement you feel is real... but it is fleeting.

Fourth: baseline.

Your baseline is your normal, default emotional state — the place your mood always returns to.

Fifth: contentment.

Contentment is a calm, steady kind of satisfaction that does not depend on getting more.

Robert's word, santosha, is one very old name for it.

Sixth: detachment.



In this context, detachment does not mean "not caring."

It means caring... without needing a specific outcome to make you happy.

And seventh: a sunk cost.

A sunk cost is time, money, or effort that has already been spent and cannot be recovered.

The sunk-cost effect makes us continue simply because we have already invested something.

And eighth: impermanence.

Impermanence is the simple fact that nothing — no object, no feeling, no moment — lasts forever.

Zen would say: once you truly accept impermanence, you stop fighting reality.

And that is where peace begins.

Now, friends, here is your sentence of the day.

Repeat it with me, out loud, twice.

I don't have to chase every new thing to feel content.

I don't have to chase every new thing to feel content.

What a conversation, friends.

Let's bring it all together.

Your brain is wired to adapt.

That new car, new job, new relationship... the excitement is real, but it is fleeting.

Over time, you will often move back towards your baseline.

That is not a flaw.

That is just how humans are built.

But three different traditions...

Roman Stoicism, Zen Buddhism, and the yogic philosophy of India... all discovered the same escape route, thousands of years apart.

Stop building your peace on top of things that were never meant to hold it.

Notice the chasing.

Practice a little detachment.

And remember: contentment was never something you had to buy.

It was always something you already had access to.

Robert, thank you again for being here.

Thank you both.

This was a genuine pleasure — I hope to come back.



You are always welcome on this show, Robert.

And friends... if you made it this far, you are truly committed to your English.

Head over to Your English Toolbox dot com for the full transcript, the vocabulary cards, and every free tool we make for you.

Your support there means the world to us and keeps this project growing.

Thank you for being here with us, friends.

See you at Your English Toolbox dot com.

Bye for now.

Take care, friends.

