

Your Craving Cycle: The Perils of Modern Overabundance

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11:30 pm. Your retainers are on. You just brushed your teeth. You stroll into the kitchen to turn off the lights. As you reach your hand toward the switch, something in the corner of your eye captures your attention. You have no control. It is like watching that black and white hypnotic swirl: gravitating, inundating, unceasing. The taste of caramel already coats the surface of your tongue. Now, you want the entire experience. Should I have a midnight snack? Especially, given the fact it is a Belgian chocolate delicacy. Is it *really* that...too late.

7:30 am. Your alarm clock rattles. You envelop your body into your blue velvet comforter. Bzzzzz. A faint light emanates from your bedside table. The light brightens like the sun revealing itself before the horizon; at the center, a silhouette of Jesus descends from the depths of heaven. The clamor of the alarm clock subsides to an ambient noise; the orchestra of notifications reels you in. The desires are so copious this time that there is no time for questioning. You open Instagram. You open Youtube. You open TikTok. You tell yourself it will only be five minutes, but is that realistic? Look at all the social media updates you *need* to attend to.

It is these—nearly unconscious—cravings that drive us into distractions, bad habits, and wasted time.

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, characterized these sinful actions as byproducts of the *Id*: the unconscious part of the brain responsible for our most important motivations.¹ The *Id* is driven by the “pleasure principle”—a belief that human nature desires instant gratification from sexual and aggressive urges. The *Id*, however, isn’t entirely evil: it also ensures basic survival necessities like hunger and thirst.

The *superego* counteracts the *Id*. It is the conscious reason in our brain telling us what is acceptable and moral within society. When the *superego*’s need for perfection isn’t met, we feel guilt.

Finally, the *ego* balances the tug-of-war between the *Id* and *Superego*. It is the part of the brain that casts the final vote. If the *ego*’s job wasn’t hard enough, it also has to consider the “reality principle”—the idea that the *ego* must modify or delay our cravings based on the conditions of the external world.²

Freud’s three aspects of the human mind are like the devil and angel on our shoulders in the cartoons we watched as kids. In the middle, our human consciousness endures the constant bickering matches between the two sides. It can be overwhelming. Sometimes we give in to the louder side; other times, we find a “common ground.” Recently, however, I have noticed that the *Id* has been winning most of these battles.

¹ Saul McLeod, "Freud's Id, Ego, and Superego," Simply Psychology, 2021. Simply Psychology.

² "History vs. Sigmund Freud - Todd Dufresne." Youtube, uploaded by Ted-Ed, 31 Mar. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKG-PEVYOR8.

It is not necessarily your fault.

Open a McDonald's happy meal. An enticing red box and welcoming amber smile greet you. Research neuroscientist Dr. Nickel Avena describes the Happy Deal's alluring design as "a psychological trick to have children and parents associate happiness with highly-processed junk food and soda".³ The association extends further. Every happy meal also contains a toy, such as a Captain America figurine. By adulthood, we unconsciously crave those McNuggets because of their association with discovering a new toy as a child.

The opioid epidemic is a less subtle example of how a corporation can manipulate our cravings. A recent hearing with Richard Sackler, one of the masterminds behind the opioid epidemic, revealed that he knew the addictive nature of these painkillers all along.⁴ Addiction poses a problem because an immediate withdrawal can lead to extreme illness, and an overdose can lead to death. According to the CDC, "Opioids were involved in 68,630 overdose deaths in 2020."⁵ Sackler didn't care. With doctors continuing to prescribe the drug, he was making billions.

Apple wants your addition to their phones. Facebook wants your addiction to stay on its site. Nearly every American private corporation *craves* your cravings and thus develops products and algorithms to exploit them. It is the result of modern consumer culture, driven by the fact that the degree of attachment to a company's service increases profit.

In the past, we craved because we found pleasure in obtaining something rare or improving our odds of survival.

Sugar. It was always scarce for primitive hunters and gatherers.

Social Acceptance. We sought tribe formation for protection, survival, and reproduction. Today, however, the quantity of sugar, the quantity of social media likes, erupts the dopamine in our brains like a barrage of fireworks. And, since our brains have not evolved to modern overabundance, we love it. Those instantaneous cravings rewarded every couple of seconds with the scroll of the next TikTok keep us satisfied. Keep us addicted. A few weeks ago, my dad and I planned on watching the Martin Scorsese movie "Taxi Driver" for father-son time. He told me he would be ready to start watching in a few minutes. So, I picked up my phone, laid in bed, and started watching Youtube shorts. When my father signaled he was ready, I did not budge. My eyes were already glued to my phone screen. Why would I watch a two-hour-long movie when I could watch 240 thirty-second videos with constant reward? So, that is what I did. For those two hours, I was addicted.

Wait...what is so bad? I feel good watching TikToks. How much could it *harm* me?

³ Lucia Capretti, "The Dangerous Truth Lurking Inside Every McDonald's Happy Meal," Mashed, 19 Mar. 2021 www.mashed.com/361018/the-dangerous-truth-lurking-inside-every-mcdonalds-happy-meal/?utm_campaign=clip.

⁴ Geoff Mulvihill and Jenifer Peltz, "After years of pain, opioid crisis victims confront Sackler family in court," PBS, 10 Mar. 2022. PBS, www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/after-years-of-pain-opioid-crisis-victims-confront-sackler-family-in-court.

⁵ "Death Rate Maps & Graphs." CDC, 2 June 2022, www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths/index.html.

Possibly, you have already fallen down the craving cycle like me, but let me present to you the science. Stanford psychiatry professor Anna Lembke, featured in the Netflix documentary “The Social Dilemma,” found that dopamine byproducts from pleasure and pain generate in the same part of the brain.⁶ As a result, the brain tries to balance these two opposing forces. This equilibrium is known as homeostasis. For example, after you consume a drug and undergo its initial dopamine spike, your brain quickly tips the balance toward the pain side. Evolutionarily, this makes sense. After hunters found a pack of deer right before nightfall, they could celebrate in euphoria; however they quickly had to redirect dopamine levels in the opposite direction to stay alert for the cold, dangerous night ahead. If you wait long enough, your dopamine will reset to its baseline state; however, if you stimulate another dopamine spike too quickly, your brain will fall into a dopamine deficit state, where your dopamine baseline lowers. Now, in order to feel that same rush of pleasure as before, you consume more drugs to overcome the rock-bottom dopamine state you begin with. Lower dopamine states correlate to anxiety and depression. Fortunately, to tip the scale back to a stable baseline, you can do the reverse: seek discomfort, go for a run.

We praise the borderline obsessive workaholics like Micheal Jordan, who cannot spend a day without a basketball. Yet, his basketball spikes of dopamine occur in the same place of the brain as a drug addict.⁷ Thus, we can leverage our cravings for good. For example, David Goggins transformed his food cravings as a 300-pound couch potato and developed an obsession with endurance sports.⁸ He became one of the only African-American Navy SEALs at the time.

The strict definition of “craving” has not changed throughout time: something we deeply desire; however, the circumstances in the world have changed, causing the role of cravings to evolve into something much more fragile. The *Id* desperately screams for our attention, muting any sense of reason from the *superego*. Let’s restore the homeostatic balance between the *Id* and *Superego* and re-establish the “craving” into something we work for.

⁶ "Dr. Anna Lembke: Understanding & Treating Addiction." Huberman Lab, 16 Aug. 2021, hubermanlab.com/dr-anna-lembke-understanding-and-treating-addiction/.

⁷ "Dr. Anna Lembke: Understanding & Treating Addiction." Huberman Lab, 16 Aug. 2021, hubermanlab.com/dr-anna-lembke-understanding-and-treating-addiction/.

⁸ "About David Goggins." David Goggins, davidgoggins.com/about/.

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