



In pursuit of pleasure

Why does 'pleasure' so often feel like a guilty indulgence? We've lost sight of what living is for, says Sanjida O'Connell, who examines how we can get more enjoyment in our life without having to rely on cheap temptations

My truly perfect moment this summer: trying to surf off Sennen Cove in Cornwall, then slumping on the beach, my toes curling in the crisp, white sand, the sun hot on my face, a glass of ice-cold, mineral-dry champagne in one hand, my whole body relaxed after a couple of hours of being battered by the sea. And I nearly missed this fragment of pleasure – I almost cancelled, thinking of the time it would take to drive to the coast and the stack of work that felt almost as big as the pile of unwashed laundry.

Most of us, juggling jobs, children, husbands and friends, often push pleasure to one side. We think it's shameful, or not as worthy a goal as finding success, happiness or meaning. Yet Martin Seligman, founder of the Positive Psychology Movement, describes happiness as being made up of three equally important components: enjoyment; meaning; and pleasure. Aristotle stated that 'Pleasure is the beginning and the end of living happily', while the philosopher John Stuart Mill believed that 'pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends'. It may be transitory, but pleasure is a worthwhile goal. Sadly, it's also a goal we've lost sight of in our busy, achievement-obsessed world.

Tom Hodgkinson, editor of *The Idler* and author of *How to be Idle*, agrees that modern society is geared toward the deferral of pleasure. 'It's

as if there are two warring elements in the British psyche – the desire to "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die", and the idea that life isn't about fun, but serving the future,' he says. 'At the moment, the pleasure-repressing side has the upper hand, which may be a legacy of the Protestant work ethic. And it serves people at the top to have a docile, non-pleasure-seeking population. In contrast, the taking of pleasure seems rebellious. But the sense of guilt around it is artificial, something that we've created.'

According to Hodgkinson, the deferral of pleasure can be counter-productive. 'Feeling guilty or resolving to behave better doesn't work,' he says. 'You just make yourself feel miserable and then go on a binge anyway. We need to realise that the odd bout of hedonism is fine.' More than fine. Pleasure reminds us life is good, not just

something to get through. It shifts the focus from duty to ourselves, our friends, our families.

For those still battling with their pleasure-repressing side, Dr Harry Witchell, a physiologist at Bristol University, teaches adult education classes on how to have more pleasure in life. What we need, he says, is to have more instant pleasure without taking class-A drugs or losing ourselves in alcohol. But how do we go about it?

The first thing to realise is that pleasure is a slippery concept. It has sensory components, but it can also take us out of ourselves, beyond physical pleasure, to transcendent moments; those brief but sublime

Pleasure's a worthwhile goal we've lost sight of in our busy world

experiences where we feel overwhelmed by simple happiness and contentment – what Wordsworth has referred to as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’.

It's a personal thing

Pleasure is subjective. Whether you prefer racing a fast car or savouring a swim in the sea, the experience is the same. Pleasure occurs when levels of the neurotransmitter, dopamine, increase. Brain scans show that one particular part of the brain lights up – the ventral tegmental area – when people take cocaine or heroin. It also lights up when you orgasm. In one study carried out in 2005, scientists watched women's brains as they orgasmed or faked their orgasm. The women's partners couldn't tell the difference between the two orgasms – but the scientists could.

The fact that your brain responds the same way to legal, as well as illegal, pleasures is good news. Yet, still, many of us feel unable to indulge ourselves, conditioned to see ‘pleasure’ as immoral – or fattening. ‘I do worry about the morality of pleasure,’ says Yasmine Khan, a 32-year-old TV producer from London. ‘It might be good for you, but it doesn't seem to be good for others if you're indulging yourself.’ She also fears that it's selfish. ‘I never have enough time to spend with my husband or the kids. If I take time for myself, someone else in the family will lose out.’

Perhaps we fear that pleasure is a waste of time or that if we allow ourselves to indulge, we'll end up as full-time hedonists. Ours is a work- and goal-obsessed society. Anything not making us better, bigger or richer is perceived as childish at best, immoral at worst.

On a more personal level, people often feel guilty about pleasure because of their illusions about

How to get more pleasure in your life

Not all pleasures have to be illegal, immoral or fattening.

Experts believe you can maximise the amount of pleasure you experience in everyday life just by following some simple steps.

● **MAKE A LIST**

‘Make a list of things that give you pleasure,’ says Professor Robert Provine, author of *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (£12.99, Faber & Faber), ‘whether it's having sex, a good meal, a massage or going scuba diving, and try and fit more of these into your life.’

● **THE THREE BLESSINGS**

Dr Chris Johnstone, a positive psychologist, says make a list at the end of the day of the three things that gave you most pleasure – and mentally revisit them. ‘If you've had a really good conversation with your friend, run it through in your mind again to get a second dose of pleasure.’

● **SYMBOLIC THINKING**

Think of some pleasurable emotions, such as feeling confident, relaxed and devil-may-care, which you would like to feel in situations you don't always find pleasurable. Now think of an animal, a location and a situation that could help you reach those feelgood emotions. For this to work, you need to imagine your scenario vividly, and then conjure up images to create your devil-may-care attitude on demand. Bizarrely, I ended up as tiger on a desert island

in a thunderstorm. This type of thinking works because it is symbolic rather than abstract. ‘You chose a tiger because, to you, it's a symbol of power,’ says physiologist Dr Harry Witchell of my choice. ‘It would be easier to say “imagine you are incredibly powerful”, but this requires not only an ability to process abstract thought, but also to exclude objections (such as, “I can be a real doormat”).’ Since animals are agents that you can identify with, they work better than other symbols of power or confidence such as a mountain.

● **CUED ASSOCIATION**

This learning technique, based on Pavlovian conditioning, can allow you to enjoy an event you don't normally find pleasurable. Choose a feelgood memory; now pick a physical and unique cue (for instance, clicking your fingers), then close your eyes, think of the memory and carry out your cue rapidly to link the two together. You will learn to associate the two together, so that eventually the cue alone should fill you with a feelgood factor.

● **SHINY, HAPPY MEMORIES**

Think of a pleasurable experience you've had recently. As you replay it in your mind, make it brighter, supersaturate the colours, intensify the scents and sounds, and make the whole scene glow and sparkle in your mind. This technique can

put you into a positive state of mind before you walk into a situation you may have little enthusiasm for.

● **SET YOUR LIFE TO MUSIC**

For this exercise, you really need music that, as Witchell puts it, ‘makes you shiver’. Either imagine this music playing as you go about less than pleasurable chores or listen to it on your iPod. Music that really gets you going makes the nucleus accumbens – ‘the brain's G-spot’ – light up, as well as the VTA and another region called the anterior cingulate.

who they should be. We may harbour false illusions, such as ‘I must be busy all the time’. We're often afraid of pleasure, scared that an inclination to lazy afternoons or silly films means that we are indolent or lowbrow.

But pleasure is good for you personally, and for all of us socially, as it contributes to your overall happiness and wellbeing. The two sides of your nature can co-exist quite happily – you can be focused and hard-working, yet love lying in at weekends. The one feeds off the other. Dr Chris Johnstone, a positive psychologist, says people who are happier are better at making decisions and solving problems, and are more likely and better able to help others.

Happy people are more likely to help others

PHOTOGRAPHS: PASCAL/AMAR/TERENDANCE FLOVE; MAT JACOB/TERENDANCE FLOVE



So what are the ways to increase pleasure? According to Witchell, there are three main routes: change how you think; change how you do things; or change what you do.

Paths to pleasure

Changing how you think is, in a sense, the easiest option. ‘Some people are experts at thinking miserably, but you can change paths,’ says Witchell. By eliminating negative thoughts, life becomes more pleasurable. For example, instead of thinking, ‘I have to get that report finished today and it's bound to take ages’, try ‘It'll be great to finally get that report finished and I'll have learnt something from doing it’.

Jean Brown, a 46-year-old yoga teacher from Frome, Somerset, has an elderly mother in Hertfordshire. She says, ‘I often drive through the

night, arriving at my mother's house in the early hours of the morning, as that's the only way I can spend even a small amount of time with her.’ Jean has tried to change how she thinks about the visits. ‘Instead of seeing the hours in the car as wasted, I see them as me-time,’ she says. ‘I take audio books to learn Italian. It's had a really positive effect; I no longer feel resentful and I'm less tetchy with my mum.’

Witchell's next recommendation is to change how you do things. Find ways to boost the pleasure you get out of already pleasant experiences. ‘I go to the gym once a week,’ says Yasmine. ‘Not only do I exercise, I now also have a massage and a facial. There's a Play Zone, so the kids can come, too. I'm much more relaxed and have energy to spend with my husband in the evening.’

The third recommendation – changing what you do – ‘can bring the most pleasure’, says Witchell. But, he adds, ‘It is the hardest to do consistently. Changing what you do will perforce change who you are, not only internally, but to others. You have roles and responsibilities, which can require that you do things you find unpleasurable, while precluding you from doing others that you know you would enjoy.’

Perhaps one of the problems with pleasure is its transitory nature. The first forkful of chocolate cake is wonderful, but, after a few mouthfuls, the sensation can pale. The way around it, says Johnstone, is to increase the duration and intensity of pleasure by enjoying it in slow motion: ‘Focus on that cake and give it your full attention, savouring every mouthful.’

So, as August unfolds, I'll relive my moment on the beach, feeling the condensation pearling on my glass of bubbly. Or I'll go surfing again and let the feelgood factor spill over into the rest of my life. ■

RESOURCES

- **HOW TO BE IDLE** by Tom Hodgkinson (£8.99, Penguin)
- **FIND YOUR POWER** by Dr Chris Johnstone (£12.99, Nicholas Brealey)