

Thrilled to Death: How the Endless Pursuit of Pleasure is Leaving Us Numb

Archibald Hart

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To judge by the number of books on the subject of happiness, misery is near pandemic. Scores of titles offer the seven secrets or five keys or twelve steps to happiness in thirty or three days, or possibly only fifteen minutes. *Are You as Happy as Your Dog?* asks one title. *Does Your Life Need a Laxative?* asks another (subtitled “Practical Prescriptions for Happiness”).

Undaunted, Dr. Hart, a psychologist and professor at the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, whose previous works include *Stress and Your Child*, and *The Anxiety Cure*, offers his own take on why so many fail to sustain happy lives, and what to do about it. Fortunately, his book is clearly written, practical, and full of interesting ideas. His main thesis, citing neurological research, is that many people are generally stuck on a “hedonic treadmill”; wherein the craving for pleasure is never satisfied, and the desire to feel better is continuously ratcheted up no matter what one achieves. “Our overindulgence in seeking too much stimulation for our brain’s pleasure center is slowly deregulating it,” he states. He proposes that anhedonia, an inability to feel pleasure, arises from a lethal combination of passive pleasure seeking (TV, Internet surfing, etc.), addiction to thrills and instant gratification, stressful lives, and a devaluation of the simple things that provide joy rather than pleasure. He clarifies the difference between them, stressing that although pleasure is not happiness, one cannot experience happiness if the brain’s pleasure pathways are not functioning correctly.

The second half of the book focuses on ways out of this dilemma; while there is nothing terrifically groundbreaking here, he does a solid job of offering practical suggestions, spiritual advice, and thoughtful insights. He touches on cognitive and relaxation training, meditation, and prayer as useful elements to help with self-regulation. Sidebars offer lucid main points: “Our continuous pursuit of high stimulation is snuffing out our ability to experience genuine pleasure in simple things”; “Everything that gives us pleasure has the potential to become addicting when abused.” Self-tests help readers gain some perspective on where they may need work, such as the “Laughter Quotient Scale,” and “Measuring Your Sensation Seeking Tendency.”

The book’s only weakness is a lack of reference information: the author lists only nine resource books, five of them his own. (He does provide Internet resources as well.) Even for a non-scholarly text like this, more detailed academic attributions might be welcome (when he offers data “according to researchers,” for example), particularly as his main premise relies on scientific research.

Overall, the work is entertaining, thoughtful, and well-written. No matter how prolific literature on the subject may be, intelligent advice like this will surely be welcome to anyone seeking the elusive goal of consistent, non-chemically enhanced happiness.

LAURIE SULLIVAN (August 8, 2007)

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