

Overdoing it? Simple techniques can help avoid overindulgence

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Some people overindulge on junk foods or needless shopping sprees when they feel depressed. Others lose control the minute they feel happy. Is there a way to avoid such extreme actions? A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* demonstrates simple techniques that can help people act in their long-term interests rather than indulging in immediate pleasures.

"The recipe is simple," write authors Aparna A. Labroo (University of Chicago) and Anirban Mukhopadhyay (University of Michigan). "If you are feeling happy, focus on reasons why those feelings will last, and if you are feeling unhappy, focus on reasons why those feelings will pass."

The authors explain that indulgence is often a result of people trying to improve their mood. People tend to indulge themselves when they believe their happy feelings might pass unless they do something to prolong the good feeling. Others feel miserable and believe they'll be stuck with the blues unless they do something to improve their mood.

"People strategically manage their actions both to accomplish their long-term interests and to attain immediate pleasures. If they believe they need to take action to regulate their feelings in the here and now, they tend to indulge in immediate pleasures. In contrast, if they believe such actions are not required, they act in their long-term interests," write the authors.

In one study, the authors presented participants (who were dieters) with

line drawings of either smiley or frowny faces. "The results revealed that simply associating a smiley with less transience (coloring with a superfine micro tip, which takes a long time to color, rather than a sharpie, which colors the face in a few short strokes) resulted in people becoming more likely to act their long-term interests and choose an apple as a snack rather than a chocolate," write the authors.

Next time your misery makes you reach for the hot fudge, take a moment to think about how the feelings will pass. "Simply thinking life is not so bad might actually help you make your life a little better by helping you make a healthy food choice," the researchers conclude.

More information: Aparna A. Labroo and Anirban Mukhopadhyay. "Lay Theories of Emotion Transience and the Search for Happiness: A Fresh Perspective on Affect Regulation." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2009.

Source: University of Chicago

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