

The Futile Pursuit of Happiness
Jon Gertner

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The Futile Pursuit of Happiness

by Jon Gertner

1 If Daniel Gilbert is right, then you are wrong. That is to say, if Daniel Gilbert is right, then you
2 are wrong to believe that a new car will make you as happy as you imagine. . . . That's
3 because when it comes to predicting exactly how you will feel in the future, you are most
4 likely wrong.

5 A professor in Harvard's department of psychology, Gilbert likes to tell people that he studies
6 happiness. But it would be more precise to say that Gilbert—along with the psychologist Tim
7 Wilson of the University of Virginia, the economist George Loewenstein of Carnegie-Mellon
8 and the psychologist (and Nobel laureate in economics) Daniel Kahneman of Princeton—has
9 taken the lead in studying a specific type of emotional and behavioral prediction. In the past
10 few years, these four men have begun to question the decision-making process that shapes
11 our sense of well-being: how do we predict what will make us happy or unhappy—and then
12 how do we feel after the actual experience? . . .

13 Until recently, this was uncharted territory. How we forecast our feelings, and whether those
14 predictions match our future emotional states, had never been the stuff of laboratory
15 research. But in scores of experiments, Gilbert, Wilson, Kahneman and Loewenstein have
16 made a slew of observations and conclusions that undermine a number of fundamental
17 assumptions: namely, that we humans understand what we want and are adept at improving
18 our well-being. . . . To understand affective forecasting, as Gilbert has termed these studies,
19 is to wonder if everything you have ever thought about life choices, and about happiness, has
20 been at the least somewhat naïve and, at worst, greatly mistaken.

21 The problem, as Gilbert and company have come to discover, is that we falter when it comes
22 to imagining how we will feel about something in the future. . . . What Gilbert has found . . . is
23 that we overestimate the intensity and the duration of our emotional reactions—our “affect”—
24 to future events. In other words, we might believe that a new BMW will make life perfect. But
25 it will almost certainly be less exciting than we anticipated; nor will it excite us for as long as
26 predicted. The vast majority of Gilbert's test participants through the years have consistently
27 made just these sorts of errors both in the laboratory and in real-life situations. . . . On
28 average, bad events proved less intense and more transient than test participants predicted.
29 Good events proved less intense and briefer as well.

30 Gilbert and his collaborator Tim Wilson call the gap between what we predict and what we
31 ultimately experience the “impact bias”—“impact” meaning the errors we make in estimating
32 both the intensity and duration of our emotions and “bias” our tendency to err. The phrase

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33 characterizes how we experience the dimming excitement over not just a BMW but also over
34 any object or event that we presume will make us happy. . . . You may have high hopes, but
35 the impact bias suggests that it will almost certainly be less cool, and in a shorter time, than
36 you imagine. Worse, Gilbert has noted that these mistakes of expectation can lead directly to
37 mistakes in choosing what we think will give us pleasure. He calls this “miswanting.” . . .

38 “You know, the Stones said, ‘You can’t always get what you want,’” Gilbert adds. “I don’t
39 think that’s the problem. The problem is you can’t always know what you want.” . . .

40 “People ask why I study happiness,” Gilbert says, “and I say, ‘Why study anything else?’ It’s
41 the holy grail. We’re studying the thing that all human action is directed toward.”

42 One experiment of Gilbert’s had students in a photography class at Harvard choose two
43 favorite pictures from among those they had just taken and then relinquish one to the
44 teacher. Some students were told their choices were permanent; others were told they could
45 exchange their prints after several days. As it turned out, those who had time to change their
46 minds were less pleased with their decisions than those whose choices were irrevocable.

47 Much of Gilbert’s research is in this vein. Another recent study asked whether transit riders in
48 Boston who narrowly missed their trains experienced the self-blame that people tend to
49 predict they’ll feel in this situation. (They did not.) . . .

50 All of these studies establish the links between prediction, decision making and well-being.
51 The photography experiment challenges our common assumption that we would be happier
52 with the option to change our minds when in fact we’re happier with closure. The transit
53 experiment demonstrates that we tend to err in estimating our regret over missed
54 opportunities. . . .

55 Gilbert does not believe all forecasting mistakes lead to similar results; a death in the family,
56 a new gym membership and a new husband are not the same, but in how they affect our
57 well-being they are similar. “Our research simply says that whether it’s the thing that matters
58 or the thing that doesn’t, both of them matter less than you think they will,” he says. “Things
59 that happen to you or that you buy or own—as much as you think they make a difference to
60 your happiness, you’re wrong by a certain amount. You’re overestimating how much of a
61 difference they make. None of them make the difference you think. And that’s true of positive
62 and negative events.”

63 Much of the work of Kahneman, Loewenstein, Gilbert and Wilson takes its cue from the
64 concept of adaptation, a term psychologists have used since at least the 1950’s to refer to

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65 how we acclimate to changing circumstances. George Loewenstein sums up this human
66 capacity as follows: “Happiness is a signal that our brains use to motivate us to do certain
67 things. And in the same way that our eye adapts to different levels of illumination, we’re
68 designed to kind of go back to the happiness set point. Our brains are not trying to be happy.
69 Our brains are trying to regulate us.” In this respect, the tendency toward adaptation
70 suggests why the impact bias is so pervasive. As Tim Wilson says: “We don’t realize how
71 quickly we will adapt to a pleasurable event and make it the backdrop of our lives. When any
72 event occurs to us, we make it ordinary. And through becoming ordinary, we lose our
73 pleasure.”

74 It is easy to overlook something new and crucial in what Wilson is saying. Not that we
75 invariably lose interest in bright and shiny things over time—this is a long-known trait—but
76 that we’re generally unable to recognize that we adapt to new circumstances and therefore
77 fail to incorporate this fact into our decisions. So, yes, we will adapt to the BMW and the
78 plasma TV, since we adapt to virtually everything. But Wilson and Gilbert and others have
79 shown that we seem unable to predict that we will adapt. Thus, when we find the pleasure
80 derived from a thing diminishing, we move on to the next thing or event and almost certainly
81 make another error of prediction, and then another, ad infinitum. . . .

82 While Gilbert’s most notable contribution to affective forecasting is the impact bias,
83 Loewenstein’s is something called the “empathy gap.”

84 Here’s how it expresses itself. In a recent experiment, Loewenstein tried to find out how likely
85 people might be to dance alone to Rick James’s “Super Freak” in front of a large audience.
86 Many agreed to do so for a certain amount of money a week in advance, only to renege
87 when the day came to take the stage. This sounds like a goof, but it gets at the fundamental
88 difference between how we behave in “hot” states (those of anxiety, courage, fear . . . and
89 the like) and “cold” states of rational calm. This empathy gap in thought and behavior—we
90 cannot seem to predict how we will behave in a hot state when we are in a cold state—
91 affects happiness in an important but somewhat less consistent way than the impact bias.
92 “So much of our lives involves making decisions that have consequences for the future,”
93 Loewenstein says. . . .

94 Would a world without forecasting errors be a better world? Would a life lived without
95 forecasting errors be a richer life? . . . The research on affective forecasting suggests that
96 people may have little ability to anticipate their adaptation beyond the early stages.”
97 Loewenstein, along with his collaborator Dr. Peter Ubel, has done a great deal of work
98 showing that nonpatients overestimate the displeasure of living with the loss of a limb, for
99 instance, or paraplegia. To use affective forecasting to prove that people adapt to serious

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100 physical challenges far better and will be happier than they imagine, Loewenstein says, could
101 prove invaluable. . . .

102 To Loewenstein, who is especially attendant to the friction between his emotional and
103 deliberative processes, a life without forecasting errors would most likely be a better, happier
104 life. “If you had a deep understanding of the impact bias and you acted on it, which is not
105 always that easy to do, you would tend to invest your resources in the things that would make
106 you happy,” he says. This might mean taking more time with friends instead of more time for
107 making money. He also adds that a better understanding of the empathy gap—those hot and
108 cold states we all find ourselves in on frequent occasions—could save people from making
109 regrettable decisions in moments of courage or craving. . . .

110 “But I should have learned many more lessons from my research than I actually have,”
111 Gilbert admits. “I don’t think I want to give up all these motivations,” he says, “that belief that
112 there’s the good and there’s the bad and that this is a contest to try to get one and avoid the
113 other. I don’t think I want to learn too much from my research in that sense.” . . .

114 “Hope and fear are enduring features of the human experience,” he says, “and it is unlikely
115 that people are going to abandon them anytime soon just because some psychologist told
116 them they should.” In fact, in his recent writings, he has wondered whether forecasting errors
117 might somehow serve a larger functional purpose he doesn’t yet understand. If he could wave
118 a wand tomorrow and eliminate all affective-forecasting errors, I ask, would he? “The benefits
119 of not making this error would seem to be that you get a little more happiness,” he says.
120 “When choosing between two jobs, you wouldn’t sweat as much because you’d say: ‘You
121 know, I’ll be happy in both. I’ll adapt to either circumstance pretty well, so there’s no use in
122 killing myself for the next week.’ But maybe our caricatures of the future—these overinflated
123 assessments of how good or bad things will be—maybe it’s these illusory assessments that
124 keep us moving in one direction over the other. Maybe we don’t want a society of people who
125 shrug and say, ‘It won’t really make a difference.’ Maybe it’s important for there to be carrots
126 and sticks in the world, even if they are illusions,” he adds. “They keep us moving towards
127 carrots and away from sticks.”

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