

2023-01-09 ☐☐ dopamine, and how “scheduled boredom” has helped me immensely in the age of digital dominance

source: godofthestorms@reddit.com

hello everyone! i was asked by u/inasaba to post this here. this post was originally written for a subreddit for people with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (a condition resulting from long-term trauma). however, most people, whether they have trauma or not, may benefit from the information in it.

we live in a world where time spent in solitary reflection and decompression is becoming increasingly scarce. with constant access to digital distraction at our fingertips, most of us have lost the “margins” that used to serve a useful reparative, restorative, and incubatory purpose in human life. scheduling some periods of “intentional boredom” can help create such margins of time where we don’t have to do anything and are freed to let life sink in, process and digest it, contemplate, plan, and regenerate motivation and rediscover a sense of who we are. the original post follows.

a while back, i watched this podcast with neuroscientist dr. andrew huberman about dopamine. dopamine is often misunderstood as the “reward” hormone. in reality, it’s more of our motivation hormone: our brains produce dopamine when we are presented with the opportunity to get something we want. dopamine is involved in motor activity (people with parkinson’s suffer from low dopamine levels, which causes motor dysfunction symptoms), and it primes us to get moving in the direction of things we might enjoy.

i think dopamine is a big key in why many of us with c-ptsd suffer from executive dysfunction and related issues like learned helplessness, avoidance/procrastination, and difficulty completing activities or projects. when our early environment is characterized by aversive stimuli — sources of pain, punishment, shame, humiliation, abandonment, etc. — rather than attractive stimuli (sources

of happiness, excitement, satisfaction, fulfillment, etc.), our main goal in life becomes to avoid pain rather than to pursue pleasure. everyone has some degree of things they want to avoid, but when that becomes our primary focus, we lose out on opportunities to develop the other motivation system: expansion, exploration, experimentation, curiosity, goal pursuit, etc. for most people, life feels as if it's filled with opportunities to pursue pleasurable goals. for those of us with trauma, however, life is an endless succession of hurt we must avoid.

i believe this screws up our dopamine systems. every goal takes on a threatening aspect. every action is fraught with danger. every path is dangerous. every pursuit risky. no wonder we don't want to go anywhere or do anything out of a very narrow comfort zone! our naturally-inborn pleasure-seeking instincts get clouded up with anxiety. life is like navigating a minefield of potential pain, hurt, disappointment, shame, humiliation, etc. what should be stirring up our dopamine and motivating us to take action actually leaves us feeling conflicted, afraid, confused, and overwhelmed.

what's more, life can often become a series of obligations: "i should go there" or "i must do that" or "i have to be this sort of person." this leaves no room for finding and pursuing what we want, need, value, etc. life becomes either an escape from pain or the joyless fulfillment of obligations that don't belong to us. this naturally induces anger, resentment, and resistance. no wonder we find ourselves unable to act! no one wants to be made to pursue goals that don't belong to them, especially when the rest of their life is characterized by a lack of joy, pleasure, or satisfaction. how can we recover our natural motivation system in this landscape of fearful stimuli and "the tyranny of shoulds" (to quote psychoanalyst karen horney)? life is hardly a captivating experience when these are our only options...

one starting place, for me, has been "scheduled boredom." those of us with c-ptsd spend so much of our lives in this driven, relentless, breathless flight from pain or pursuit of externally-imposed goals. scheduled boredom is similar to the pop-psychology trend of dopamine fasting, but simpler. essentially, every day, i schedule a block or two of time in which i do nothing. i literally just sit and do nothing. i put my phone away, turn my laptop off, put away books, music, tv, etc. and i just allow myself to sit and get bored on purpose.

this seems to have two main benefits:

it gives me a break from constant stimuli, which can cause overwhelm, stress, and exhaustion. it allows me to "de-compress", slow down, and get reacquainted with what life actually is. you get back in touch with the slow pace of life, its quietness, its strange wonder. it gives me time to think and contemplate without distraction (a rare practice nowadays, but probably something most people did each evening or morning 100 or more years ago). sometimes i do focusing or some other form of self-inquiry, but mostly i just sit and wait. sometimes an emotion will come up, and i will compassionately attend to it. sitting and spending time with your emotions can be very healing in itself.

it actually stirs up motivation to do things.

one important point that huberman makes is that dopamine is essentially a resource of which we have a finite store at any given time. if you expose yourself to stimuli that spikes your dopamine by a lot, you have less of it in the immediate aftermath. this is why we often feel “strung out” or possibly even depressed, apathetic, or anhedonic after experiencing a high. even smaller stimuli compounded over time can reduce our dopamine levels in the long-term: compulsively checking the news or social media (including reddit or youtube) presents us with an endless stream of potentially intriguing content, and spikes our dopamine levels with each new thumbnail or heading. somehow, sitting and not moving or doing anything gets me in the mood to do stuff.

at first, when you first start intentionally allowing boredom into your life, you will probably find the simple stuff calls out to you to be done: cleaning up, watering your houseplants, reorganizing the bookshelf, etc. then, you will probably find more substantial stuff you will want to do. when you feel the impulse to do something (that isn’t just surfing the internet or social media), get up and do it. that’s a healthy impulse and deserves to be nourished. i’ve been practicing “scheduled boredom” several times a week in the evenings (and during the day, i try not to use social media or surf the internet until after lunch). during this time, i’ve found the motivation to do things and even taken up new pursuits that i would have just distracted myself or exhausted myself before discovering: reading poetry, learning to code in python, reading books about the most random topics, learning to write comedy/stand-up, etc.

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