

How Can They Live Like That?

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Have you ever asked yourself this question as you surveyed the inside of someone's home for the first time? We assume that they know their house is a mess, but do they?

People have a tremendous ability to get used to their surroundings—a process psychologists call “habituation.”

Having had the ability to habituate would have been very helpful for survival among our distant ancestors. Why? We only have a limited amount of attention to pay to things.

If there is some aspect of our surroundings that is fairly constant, most likely it doesn't pose an immediate threat.

Generally we can afford to ignore things that are constants in our lives. It's the unusual, especially the negative, that grabs our attention.

Getting back to the messy house, chances are that the residents have habituated to the mess, and don't actually see it the same way we do.

Think back to a time when you started a pile—perhaps laundry or paperwork—because you didn't have time to deal with it at the time. “It's only temporary. I'll take care of

it when I have more time.”

Then, one busy day stretched into the next, and eventually you grew used to the pile. You hardly noticed it anymore (perhaps only when you added to it).

An interesting (or maybe frightening) exercise is to come home pretending to have never been inside your house before. What do you notice? What would you assume about the people who live here?

So far we have been talking about habituation as though it is always a bad thing, leading us to grow accustomed to our own filth. But imagine life without habituation. Constantly we would be distracted by such common experiences as the feeling of clothing against our skin and the hum of running appliances.

Also, we should remember that habituation is not an all-powerful force. We never do grow accustomed to some things (like some of our spouse's annoying habits?).

Unfortunately there is one area where habituation trips us up regularly: our satisfaction with life. No matter what we achieve or purchase, we tend to get used to it.

We're chronically left

with the feeling that we would be happier if only we had (or achieved) a bit more. This myth is reinforced by advertising, most of which is based on the premise that you would be happier if you owned or used brand X.

Is this really a myth? It certainly feels true that if only I had X, I would be at least a little bit happier. But remember that our old friend habituation applies to life improvements as well as annoyances.

Still not convinced? Think back to a time when you really wanted something, or really looked forward to something. Perhaps it was graduation, marriage, parenthood, or a new car, house, or job. At the time you probably felt as though you would be happier once you achieved your goal. Were you?

Certainly our lives are different after graduation or marriage or parenthood. But our overall levels of happiness are probably similar to before.

The sources of stress and pleasure change, but the general degree of satisfaction with life is pretty consistent. For better or worse, habituation is part of our human nature. We might as well count on it.