

Places for Struggling Teens™

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"It is more important to get it right, than to get it first."

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How To Destroy The Brain's Pleasure Centers

By: Lon Woodbury



Too much pleasure might be the way to destroy the brain's pleasure centers. At least this is the suggestion of Trace Embry, Director of Shepherd's Hill Farm, a Christian Therapeutic Boarding School for struggling teens, located in Georgia. He suggests, in an essay titled *Anhedonia Parts I and II* posted on Strugglingteens.com, that the overuse of technology by adolescents is creating a serious condition, which he and others have explained damage the pleasure centers in the brain. In Anhedonia Part II, he explains that Americans are becoming weary of pleasure even faster than they are becoming weary of pain. For example, look at how many teens say they are bored.

That probably needs a little explaining.

Anhedonia is a medical term, indicating a person has no variation of mood. Often associated with clinical depression, it describes the "inability to experience pleasurable emotions from normally pleasurable life events." Recent brain research has found that a person with Anhedonia shows different brain activity than that of a normal person. Essentially, the brain's reward system has broken down through a depletion of dopamine pathways.

Mr. Embry's use of the term is broader than the narrow medical definition, but his expanded understanding is very intriguing and potentially very useful in understanding some aspects of human behavior. He observes that when a person finds some activity pleasurable, over time the activity has to be increased in order to maintain the same level of pleasure. Eventually, a person either realizes that activity is no longer pleasurable and they stop it, or they continue to extremes in a desperate attempt to experience more of the original pleasure. He makes the point that adolescents with all their technological toys sometimes get stuck in the extreme end of this process and continue with their toys (texting, computer games, etc.) with no balance in their life and do not enjoy anything anymore. He suggests that overuse of technology is depleting dopamine pathways in adolescent brains.

This pattern of course is well known in all the various addictions that need to be treated. One way of describing an addict is a person who desperately increases the amount of drugs, sex, computer gaming, etc. in an attempt to recapture the original pleasure.

It can also give insight into fads like fashion, language, etc. That is, something is pleasurable perhaps for its novelty, and once it becomes popular and "everybody is doing it," the pleasure disappears and the fad goes away. At least this is the average person's typical reaction.

A similar pattern seems to exist in relationships like marriage, a committed relationship or even dating. The initial attraction is very pleasurable so people want it to last by establishing some kind of committed relationship. But, inevitably, the initial rush of pleasure will fade and many are then tempted to break out of that relationship and look for the pleasure of another fresh new relationship. The person who continues to succumb to that temptation when in committed relationships cannot ever have a relationship that is very deep and lasting. It is evident in people like this that their lives are usually not very pleasurable, despite what they might claim. Awareness of this human pattern is the reason marriages have traditionally been taken so seriously, with a permanent commitment before God and/or the community, legally binding contracts, etc. All these were probably designed to combat the all too human temptation to put immediate pleasure ahead of providing an intact and stable family for the children, or take responsibility seriously and be accountable for the consequences of their actions.

Another thing about this expanded understanding of Anhedonia is the view that people are pleasure seeking beings, and to have a civilized society, pleasure seeking must be balanced with responsibility, accountability and the understanding there are deeper satisfactions than just seeking immediate gratification. Perhaps true appreciation of those deeper satisfactions is the mark of a civilized society.

A possible irony is that the person who puts pursuing pleasure ahead of all else is the person who is most likely to be destroying those pleasure centers.

Essay: Are You Emotionally Preparing Your Kids For College?/ 2

Visit Reports: Mountain Springs Prep/ 4
Insight Intensive/ 5

New Perspectives: Laurel Springs College Prep/ 7
Odyssey Wilderness Program/ 8
Forest Heights Lodge/ 9

Seen N' Heard: 10

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