



Your Story MATTERS

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Columnist

COVID stole my dopamine, now what?

Excitement. Pleasure. Novelty. Anticipation. Reward. The “zest,” the “looking forward to,” and the “passion.” The common denominator? Dopamine.

It is the brain chemical we chase in our society and what we have a hard time living without. We must thank dopamine for the gusto it gives us, the inspiration, the drive, and innovation, but in our popular culture so reinforced by a mindset of scarcity where whatever “is” is simply not enough, dopamine has hypnotized so many of us into restlessness, discontentment, and distraction. Our dependence on the dopaminergic excitement or trepidation of “what’s next” robs us of being present in the “what’s now.”

We become antsy, impatient, frustrated, and even hopeless in times when our once-trusted dopamine fixes fade from our reach.

COVID has undoubtedly been a dopamine disruptor. Financial reward, opportunities to perform, incentives for validation, leisure, the chance to be noticed, anticipated escapes, and methods of distraction have all been

compromised. As they have dwindled, many of us have attempted to hold on to dopamine’s spell. Alcohol consumption has spiked, the pantry door has been opened a few too many times, drama has been manufactured, we get lost in the fight or flight as we defend our side of the fence, and point fingers at others.

Certainly more uplifting, some too have found ways to create, to serve, to give, to protect, to advocate.

Dopamine is central to it all.

“I don’t feel motivated,” say the vast majority of clientele that walk in my office these days. “I don’t know what to look forward to.” “I don’t feel excited for anything.”

As children and adolescents suddenly lost many of the social incentives and validation from physical school and navigated the blurry experience of virtual learning, many simply stated, “what’s the point?”

For a lot of us, COVID has quieted our “give a darn’s” about a lot of what seemed to be important pre-pandemic. I personally have made some efforts to keep a morning routine as I hastily run a brush through my hair and slap on some makeup, but as I sit in my reasonably wrinkle free blouse while doing ZOOM session after ZOOM session, I am rather comfortable in my running shorts and bare feet — unbeknownst to my clients. I just don’t care for my slacks much anymore. But thank you to all that is holy that my (yes, I feel like it is mine) local coffee drive-thru is still open. Caffeine deprivation is not yet a first-world dopamine sacrifice I am prepared for.

Some of the lost “give a darn’s” have been in fact

liberating. Others more consequential. For some, COVID meant such a rapid shift circumstantially and neurochemically that the unrest in the unknown has been paralyzing. Traumatic. Just the act of getting out of bed may seem daunting.

In the initial days of the COVID pandemic, dopamine was intimately intertwined with the novelty, the stress, the innovation that followed. Altruism flourished, people mobilized, we prepared. As the dust has settled to reveal what seems to be a long road ahead, the sprint that epitomized the early days has slowed to tenuous march. As is many times the case, the feeling of motivation in itself is fleeing. It takes discipline and intentionality despite hardship to persevere. And sometimes that means asking for help.

Our society and popular culture jumps in bed with dopamine every chance it gets. Who gets pushed out of the bed? Serotonin.

While dopamine has been termed our “reward” chemical, serotonin has been dubbed our “contentment” chemical. And guess what? It doesn’t take much to realize that in our culture, contentment is simply not sexy.

Our brains and bodies become so primed for dopamine and stress that serotonin receptors central to mood and anxiety eventually become less responsive. Furthermore, as we flood our brains with dopamine, our cellular receptors dopamine attaches to become a bit overwhelmed by it all and start to downregulate. This is the biology of tolerance. In an attempt to compensate, we try to up the ante: more

adrenaline, more distraction, more drugs, more sugar, just more. And all the while, we become less content and often, more depressed.

Robert Ludwig, the author of “The Hacking of the American Mind: The Science Behind the Corporate Takeover of Our Bodies and Brains” says it well:

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions. The same factors that increase dopamine (technology, lack of sleep, drugs, and bad diet) also decrease serotonin. Furthermore, stress drives dopamine release and also decreases the serotonin-1a receptor reducing serotonin signaling. Addiction results from dopamine receptor down-regulation coupled with excessive stress. Depression results from reduced serotonin transmission from the same precipitating factors, also coupled with excess stress.”

COVID has taken away much of what we were looking forward to, much of our perceived motivation — but in the absence of so-called excitement, it is an also an opportunity to reevaluate, to slow down, and to simplify. Passion, excitement, and drive are central to the human experience, but must be balanced with times of stillness, contemplation, gratitude, and thoughtfulness. Many of us have forgotten, or perhaps have never been taught, how to be still. How to be without noise. How to feel without a ready escape.

These are uncertain times, but then again, life is never certain. Accept change, accept the chance to evolve. On the other side of grief is transformation and perhaps, as we mourn our dopamine, serotonin and the contentment it brings may become just a bit more alluring.



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