

Hedonic Treadmill

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Positive Psychology, Psychology, Economics (specifically Happiness Economics)

1. Core Definition

The **Hedonic Treadmill**, also widely known as **hedonic adaptation**, is a psychological concept describing the robust human tendency for an individual's level of subjective well-being to return to a relatively stable baseline, or "set point," despite significant positive or negative changes or events in their life. This phenomenon suggests that human happiness is not permanently altered by external circumstances; instead, individuals adapt to new conditions, and their emotional state eventually reverts to a pre-event level. The analogy of a treadmill aptly illustrates this concept: despite constant motion and effort, the runner essentially remains in the same place. This core idea implies a powerful homeostatic mechanism within the human psyche that regulates emotional responses to life events, ensuring that neither soaring highs nor devastating lows permanently dislodge an individual from their typical happiness range.

At its heart, hedonic adaptation posits that humans possess a biological or dispositional "set point" for happiness, which acts as a default or baseline level of contentment. When major life events occur, such as a substantial financial gain, the experience temporarily pushes an individual's happiness level above this set point. Conversely, a significant loss or misfortune may cause a temporary dip below the set point. However, over time, the intensity of these emotional reactions diminishes as the individual habituates to the new circumstances. The initial elation or despair fades, and the individual's subjective well-being gravitates back towards their intrinsic set point, reflecting a powerful capacity for psychological resilience and adjustment. This process of adaptation is not merely passive but involves active cognitive and emotional adjustments to assimilate new realities into one's overall life perspective.

Consider the vivid example of a person winning a significant lottery jackpot. Immediately following the win, their happiness levels would undoubtedly surge, driven by the excitement of newfound wealth and the promise of a life free from financial constraints. This initial euphoria, however, is often temporary. As the individual adapts to their changed circumstances, new stressors and complexities can emerge. For instance, managing a large sum of money requires considerable effort and often introduces dilemmas regarding investments, taxes, and security. Moreover, social dynamics can shift dramatically, as friends and family members might approach the winner seeking financial assistance, leading to increased pressure and potential distrust. The individual might also begin to question whether others value them for their personal qualities or merely for their wealth. Consequently, the initial positive impact of the lottery win is tempered by these emergent negative aspects, leading to a gradual return to their pre-lottery happiness baseline, demonstrating the

powerful effect of hedonic adaptation and the stability of the hedonic set point.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The foundational ideas underpinning the Hedonic Treadmill are not entirely novel, with conceptual antecedents traceable to ancient philosophical traditions. Philosophers like the Stoics, for instance, emphasized the transient nature of external pleasures and advocated for an internal state of equanimity, suggesting that true happiness or contentment was independent of fluctuating external fortunes. Similarly, aspects of Buddhist philosophy, with its focus on detachment from desires and the impermanence of all phenomena, resonate with the notion that clinging to external sources of happiness leads to suffering because such sources are inherently unstable and subject to adaptation. These early insights laid conceptual groundwork for understanding human adaptation to both positive and negative stimuli, long before the advent of modern psychological inquiry.

In modern psychology, the concept gained significant traction and empirical grounding in the 1970s. Key contributions came from psychologists Philip Brickman and Donald T. Campbell, who introduced the concept of "hedonic relativism" and "adaptation-level theory" in their seminal 1971 work, which posited that individuals evaluate new experiences against a context of their past experiences. This theoretical framework suggested that people constantly adjust their subjective standards of happiness in response to changed circumstances, ensuring a return to a stable baseline. The most compelling empirical evidence for the hedonic treadmill effect emerged from Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman's influential 1978 study, which compared the self-reported happiness levels of recent lottery winners and recent accident victims who had become paraplegic or quadriplegic. Their findings indicated that, after an initial period, both groups largely returned to their pre-event levels of happiness, providing robust support for the adaptation hypothesis.

Following these pioneering studies, the Hedonic Treadmill became a major focus within the burgeoning field of positive psychology, which emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Researchers like Ed Diener, Daniel Kahneman, and Richard Lucas further refined the concept, exploring the mechanisms of adaptation, the stability of the set point, and individual differences in hedonic adjustment. While the initial model emphasized a fixed set point, later research has introduced more nuanced perspectives, such as the idea of a "dynamic set point" or the possibility of slight, sustained shifts in baseline happiness through intentional activities. The ongoing research continues to explore the interplay between genetic predispositions, environmental factors, and volitional efforts in shaping long-term subjective well-being, solidifying the Hedonic Treadmill as a cornerstone concept in the study of happiness.

3. Key Characteristics

Adaptation to Circumstances: The most fundamental characteristic of the hedonic treadmill is

the process of adaptation. This refers to the psychological mechanism by which individuals adjust to new positive or negative life circumstances, gradually reducing the emotional impact of these events over time. This adaptation ensures that initial strong emotional reactions, whether joy or sorrow, dissipate, and the individual's emotional state normalizes. This process is not merely passive; it involves cognitive reappraisal, shifts in attention, and changes in expectations, allowing individuals to integrate novel experiences into their ongoing lives without sustained emotional perturbation. The speed and completeness of this adaptation can vary depending on the nature and intensity of the event, as well as individual differences in coping styles and resilience.

Hedonic Set Point: Central to the concept is the notion of a hedonic set point, which represents an individual's genetically and temperamentally determined baseline level of happiness. This set point is often viewed as a relatively stable internal thermostat for subjective well-being, to which individuals tend to return following emotional fluctuations. While life events may temporarily elevate or depress an individual's mood, the set point acts as an attractor, drawing emotional states back towards this equilibrium. Research suggests that a significant portion of an individual's characteristic happiness level is heritable, indicating a biological predisposition that contributes to this set point's stability. However, contemporary perspectives acknowledge that while stable, the set point may not be entirely immutable and can be influenced by sustained behavioral patterns and lifestyle choices.

Relativity of Happiness: The hedonic treadmill highlights the relative nature of happiness. Our perceptions of pleasure and satisfaction are not absolute but are constantly benchmarked against our recent past experiences and current expectations. What once brought immense joy, such as a new car or a significant promotion, can quickly become the new normal, reducing its capacity to evoke strong positive emotions. This phenomenon explains why a continuous pursuit of more material possessions or achievements often fails to deliver lasting increases in happiness; each new acquisition or accomplishment merely raises the bar for future satisfaction, perpetuating the "treadmill" effect. This constant recalibration of our internal reference points means that true contentment often stems from internal factors rather than external acquisitions.

Asymmetry in Adaptation: While the hedonic treadmill suggests adaptation to both positive and negative events, some research indicates a potential asymmetry in this process. There is evidence that individuals may adapt more slowly or less completely to certain negative life events, particularly severe and chronic conditions such as enduring pain, disability, or prolonged grief. While adaptation to positive events tends to be quite rapid and complete, significant traumas or losses may lead to a sustained, albeit smaller, deviation from the original happiness set point. This suggests that while humans are remarkably resilient, some deeply impactful negative experiences can leave a lasting imprint on subjective well-being, challenging the strict interpretation of an absolutely fixed set point.

4. Significance and Impact

The Hedonic Treadmill has profound significance across various fields, particularly in positive psychology, economics, and individual well-being strategies. In positive psychology, understanding this concept has shifted the focus from merely reducing suffering to actively building and sustaining well-being. It underscores that lasting happiness is unlikely to be found in the relentless pursuit of external achievements or material gains, which provide only transient boosts. Instead, it directs attention towards internal resources, intentional activities, and stable life conditions that can more effectively contribute to a stable and elevated hedonic set point or counteract the effects of adaptation. This has led to the development of interventions aimed at fostering gratitude, mindfulness, strong social connections, and engagement in meaningful activities, which are believed to have a more enduring impact on subjective well-being.

In happiness economics, the Hedonic Treadmill provides a crucial explanation for the "Easterlin Paradox," which observed that beyond a certain point, increasing national wealth does not necessarily lead to proportional increases in national happiness. This paradox is well-explained by hedonic adaptation: as societies become wealthier, people's expectations and reference points also rise, and they adapt to higher standards of living, preventing a sustained increase in overall life satisfaction. This insight has critical implications for public policy, suggesting that governments should not solely prioritize economic growth but also consider policies that support other determinants of well-being, such as health, education, social trust, and environmental quality. It encourages a broader view of societal progress that moves beyond purely economic indicators to encompass holistic measures of human flourishing.

For individuals, awareness of the Hedonic Treadmill can be highly empowering. It discourages the often-futile chase for constant external novelty and pleasure as a pathway to lasting happiness. Instead, it encourages a focus on what psychologists call "intentional activities" - behaviors and practices that individuals actively choose to engage in and that are less subject to adaptation. These include cultivating strong interpersonal relationships, engaging in meaningful work or hobbies, practicing gratitude, exercising mindfulness, and pursuing personal growth. By understanding that the thrill of a new possession or achievement will eventually fade, individuals can shift their efforts towards building a life rich in experiences, connections, and purpose, which are more resilient to the forces of adaptation and can contribute to a more stable and higher baseline of well-being.

5. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its robust empirical support and widespread acceptance, the concept of the Hedonic Treadmill is not without its debates and criticisms. One of the primary areas of contention revolves around the immutability of the hedonic set point. While early formulations suggested a relatively

fixed and genetically determined baseline, later research has presented a more nuanced view. Critics argue that while adaptation is a powerful force, the set point may not be entirely unchangeable. Studies have shown that sustained positive life changes, such as successful therapeutic interventions for mental health conditions, significant personal growth, or a consistent engagement in well-being-promoting activities, can lead to a slight but lasting upward shift in an individual's baseline happiness. This perspective suggests a "dynamic set point" or "hedonic offset" where the baseline can be influenced over time, albeit with considerable effort.

Another significant criticism concerns the generalizability of adaptation to all life events. While adaptation to many positive and negative events is well-documented, some profound and chronic negative experiences, such as severe physical disability, chronic pain, or the loss of a child, may not result in a complete return to the original set point. In such cases, individuals may experience a permanent, albeit smaller, downward shift in their baseline happiness, suggesting that the psychological system's capacity for full adaptation has limits when faced with extreme or ongoing adversities. This challenges the universality of the treadmill metaphor, indicating that for certain types of trauma or ongoing suffering, the track might indeed shift permanently.

Furthermore, methodological challenges in measuring long-term happiness and adaptation contribute to ongoing debates. Self-report measures of subjective well-being can be influenced by recall bias, current mood, and social desirability. Distinguishing between a return to a baseline happiness set point and a genuine inability to adapt due to ongoing stressors remains a complex task. Critics also highlight the importance of individual differences, arguing that adaptation rates and the stability of set points vary significantly across people, influenced by personality traits, coping mechanisms, and available social support. These nuances suggest that while the Hedonic Treadmill provides a valuable general framework, a more individualized and context-sensitive understanding of happiness dynamics is often required, acknowledging the potential for both fixed and flexible aspects of human well-being.

Further Reading

[Positive psychology - Wikipedia](#)

[Psychology - Wikipedia](#)

[Economics - Wikipedia](#)

[Happiness economics - Wikipedia](#)

[Subjective well-being - Wikipedia](#)

[Set-point theory \(psychology\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Adaptation \(psychology\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Philip Brickman - Wikipedia](#)

[Adaptation-level theory - Wikipedia](#)

[Significance - Wikipedia](#)

[Public policy - Wikipedia](#)

[Gratitude - Wikipedia](#)

[Mindfulness - Wikipedia](#)

[Well-being - Wikipedia](#)

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