

'Is This It?' When Success Isn't Satisfying

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You got the job, won the award, launched the new project to accolades. So why don't you feel better?

"You get the title and it's, like, 'Ugh. Is this it?'" says Robert Waldinger, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School who leads a longitudinal study, started in 1938, on how people thrive.

Sometimes, getting the thing is just as delicious as we imagine. Other times, we climb and climb, only to be underwhelmed by what we find at the top: more work, political wrangling, the feeling of being a fraud. Or the success high wears off fast, replaced by that old panic we hoped the accomplishment would finally cure. Then we wonder: Where's the next win?

We're all sprinting on what psychologists call a hedonic treadmill. That is, we might get a hit of joy when we achieve something, but we eventually return to our baseline level of happiness (or unhappiness). Whatever heights we reach, we're still, well, us.

"From the outside, people think, 'Oh, my God, amazing,'" says Andy Dunn, who helped sell clothing retailer Bonobos to Walmart Inc. in a \$310 million deal after 10 years as chief executive and co-founder.

Mr. Dunn, now 44 and based in Chicago, spent years strategizing and fantasizing about such a sale but says it was a mirage. Building the company brought him more happiness, he says, than the eventual payout. (The Walmart deal paid him tens of millions of dollars.) Now working on a new startup, he's keeping his team small and not chasing big checks from investors.

"I learned that those are just illusory things," Mr. Dunn says.

The pursuit of happiness

Plenty of us would be happy to try our luck with fame and fortune, complications be damned. And it's hard not to crave stuff and status when so much in our culture—from Super Bowl ads to friends' Instagram feeds—insists that's where fulfillment lies.

Success itself isn't inherently bad, notes Dr. Waldinger, who adds: "Just don't expect it to make you happy."

Studying the antecedents of happiness among hundreds of participants in the Harvard Study of Adult Development, Dr. Waldinger found people acclimate to the trappings of achievement—including plump paychecks—swiftly.

"The corner office just becomes the place you go and do your work after a while," he says. "The shine wears off."

Lasting happiness results from wins that foster deep relationships and are imbued with meaning—some bigger payoff beyond your salary. Think work that affects clients' lives or bonds your team together. When asked to share what they were most proud of, many of the octogenarians in the Harvard study talked about being a good leader or a helpful mentor, Dr. Waldinger says.

The power of authenticity

Many find they need to be able to succeed as themselves, rather than molding their personas to fit the goal, to enjoy it.

Steve Babcock moved to New York City from Colorado in 2016 for a top creative job at an ad agency. He went from managing 50 people at his old job to overseeing 200. Industry publications profiled him. Every compliment on his LinkedIn posts was a dopamine hit. But on his train rides home from work, he felt empty. Numb.

“I have to give up who I really am to be this thing,” he says he realized. He preferred to be funny and casual at the office, but suddenly he was the boss. Subordinates often didn’t speak candidly as they tried to impress him, leaving Mr. Babcock feeling disconnected. He was also pulled farther from the creative work that he loved.

“I was always so driven to be seen as important,” he says. “There was just this cost to that.”

Mr. Babcock left the job, moved back to Colorado and now works at a food-technology company doing creative work. He sometimes misses the money—he now earns about what he did a decade ago—and the high-profile projects. He says he’s recently turned down three offers to be a chief creative officer again, unwilling to put the mask back on.

The impostor trap

Sometimes a coveted step up comes with burnout. Sabrina Hua spent three years working toward a promotion, and two years pursuing a master’s degree. She achieved both over a few months in 2021, and felt more miserable than triumphant.

The new job, in a university fundraising office, came with long hours and high-pressure goals. The degree felt like a huge accomplishment until she started to wonder if she needed a PhD.

“I just felt so much anxiety about what’s next,” the 29-year-old says.

Last fall, she quit. She’s spent the months since living off savings, traveling and focusing on small joys. Learning to crochet brought more happiness than completing her graduate program, Ms. Hua says. She plans to start searching for a new job soon, with new priorities.

“I don’t want to be obsessed with titles,” she says. “I want to have time.”

You don’t always have to pull a Peggy Olson, jumping ship from your old gig as she did in AMC’s drama “Mad Men,” to change your mind-set. Ruth Gotian, an executive coach and author of a book about reaching the apex of success, says that professionals often fear they’ll be seen as a fake at the exact moment they’re killing it. Winning a big client or publishing a definitive paper, they brush off compliments and worry that the prize will be taken away.

“Just because it’s unfamiliar doesn’t mean that you’re a fraud,” she says. Try to reframe the discomfort as positive, a cue that you’ve entered a new stage in your career. Collect thank-you notes and records of your wins along the way, so you can pull them out when you’re feeling shaky.

“There is a whole trail, a whole history of things that led to this point,” Dr. Gotian says.

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Appeared in the March 6, 2023, print edition as 'If Success Disappoints, Start Your Reassessment'.