

Form Follows Function

One thing that has repeatedly struck me in the clinical practice of psychology is just how greatly it can serve a client's interests when form follows function... and just how often the people that I counsel do things in completely the reverse fashion.

The "pleasure principle," as originally conceptualized by Freud, essentially speaks to our primal desire to experience the immediate gratification of both needs (food, for example) and wants (such as sex). Through the years, I have come to notice that there appears to be a secondary, more subtle principle on display with many of my clients. I have designated it the "*pleasurable* principle."

We have been conditioned in society to believe that if the *idea* of doing a particular thing feels pleasurable to us, only then should embrace it. We typically require, at a minimum, the positive sensation that accompanies the promise of reward before we will engage ourselves in an activity (e.g. going to work for the promise of a paycheck). It's even better if we feel truly excited about an activity prior to its commencement (the arousal that stems from the anticipation of sex, for example).

But what of the myriad activities in our daily existence that neither inspire nor excite us, or even feel particularly rewarding? The true humdrum of life, things such as running errands or doing chores? How many folks experience positive feelings when faced with a mountain of dirty laundry, simply owing to the promise of having clean underwear to wear to work on Monday morning?

Regardless, the majority of folks manage to cope with the inevitability of these activities, however much they may complain as they engage them. They understand the need to do, even when they don't *feel* like doing. And, inevitably, when the chores are done, or the errands run, they are rewarded with, at a minimum, the joy of being relieved of a burden - a condition that, in its way, supplies a modicum of pleasure. The "form" (in this case, relief) follows the "function" (the activity).

Sadly, there is a large but often silent minority of folks out there for whom crushing depression, chronic pessimism, and endless negativity are nothing less than a seemingly inescapable way of life. For those poor, unfortunate souls, even the most basic of acts (bathing, eating, getting dressed and out of the house) can require a Herculean effort of will. Going to work? Joining a gym? Having a supportive circle of friends with whom they can interact regularly? Forget

about it.

In my article on non-medicinal ways to combat depression, I list, among other things, an improved diet and regular exercise as critical components in the battle. But what of those folks for whom the idea of looking forward to a workout (or just about *any* activity) is as familiar as eating a steak would be to a vegetarian. To persons such as this, I would first recommend a medical check-up, followed by a visit to my office. There, among other things, I would issue the following advice: waiting until you "feel like it" can often mean an infinite wait.

We need to become comfortable with the idea that inspiration is a luxury, not a requisite; it's nice if it's there, but there are times in which the feeling can only be attained as a byproduct of the act. This concept has often been illustrated with the phrase, "Fake it 'til you make it." In this simplistic idiom lies a profound truth: there are going to be times you are called upon to act without the slightest promise of reward for your actions. At such times, remember that form follows function. Don't feel like doing it? Let go of the "pleasurable principle!" If the activity is good for you, or even one of life's annoying necessities, do it regardless of how you feel about it! If you do, I think you will find that, more often than not, satisfaction - and often even pleasure - will find you.

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