

# How the Desire for Certainty Is Preventing You From Being Happy

Our brain's default mode helps us to anticipate the future and to maximize certainty. But is that a good thing?



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Vered, the psychologist I used to go to, is an exceptionally incisive woman. She taught me to look at myself as being “both this and also that.” When I gave her an example of how I thought I was a bad father to my children, she countered with another example that illustrated that I am actually a good father, and thereby helped me to understand that I am both a bad father – as well as a good one. It was a kind of ping-pong between us, and from there things became easy. I discovered that I am both childish and also extremely mature; that I am both from Dimona and from Harvard; and that I both do yoga and eat organic food, but also sin by engaging in habits that are harmful to my health. And that’s all fine: I am different things at different times.

That seemingly simple perception has had a far-reaching influence on the way I live with myself, and with others. We are full of inner conflicts, and our natural predilection, not to say obsession, is to try to reconcile them. It is either this or that – the main thing is to choose one. Stability is important to us in order to keep going. But it’s typically a temporary, fragile stability. Conflicting perceptions will always crop up, and at some point they will succeed in penetrating the things we have repressed and thus undermine the story we tell ourselves. We are condemned to keep suffering the agonies that accompany the attempt to stabilize our self-narrative.

Hannah Arendt once said that people do not search for truth but rather for meaning. Meaning points to a way forward, and it is far easier for us than grappling with the true complexity that is our existence. We are simply not built to live with more than one truth. But there are very few absolute truths.

In almost every aspect of our life there is more than one truth, and each is correct in a different context. We want one truth that will be true always, but the understanding that there isn't one liberates more than torments us. A person can be very dependent when in love, let's say, but rock-solid when alone. Or be an optimist when in a good mood and a pessimist at other times. Or altruistic when it comes to family, but selfish with strangers. Or attentive and embracing in certain situations and self-centered in others. We are not a fixed monolithic entity, but a dynamic system, based on context and our inner state.

If we understand and accept our internal conflicts, we will be able to accept ourselves. Why agonize when we are feeling weak, if we know that we can also be strong? "Self-acceptance" may sound like some unfounded New Age term, but it is nevertheless a necessary principle for our happiness. We are bombarded with and accustomed to advertisements, articles, books and other content urging us to change. And it works: How many of us are happy with who they are? People are constantly trying to change themselves. But what is it that's bad in you that you need to change?

You are simply a complex and multifaceted being. Of course there are areas in which it's possible and worthwhile to improve, such as when it comes to preserving one's health, becoming more educated, conducting better social interactions and so on. It's also legitimate to try to work on communication with our partners or on our parenting style. But all that is within our control and amenable to choice – and not a source of agony or confusion, but rather a source of growth.

Self-acceptance comes with an automatic bonus: acceptance of the Other. The understanding that everyone around us is also both like this and also like that. An irascible person is at certain times a calm person, a hurtful person is also one who has been hurt, and a happy person can also be sad. "I no longer care what people around me wear, what music or restaurants they like, and whether they are addicted to reality shows or to opera." Acceptance brings with it a reduction of the desire to be critical, and that in return reduces friction with the world and with the self.

But why do we, nevertheless, refuse to internalize and accept the inherent contradictions we harbor within us? Because our brain will do everything to achieve certainty. Uncertainty arouses anxiety, and indeed we have shown in the lab that the ability to minimize uncertainty is flawed in cases of psychological problems such as anxiety and depression. In the past few years we have been learning that minimizing uncertainty is a guiding principle when it comes to how the human brain operates. And we perceive non-uniform truth as uncertainty. It's not surprising that in physics class in school we found it difficult to accept the fact that light takes the shape both of waves and of particles.

But there are cases in which uncertainty and instability do not evoke unease, and perhaps it is possible to learn from such cases. A good example, from the world of perception, is the famous rabbit-duck image. As part of that optical illusion, which has been around for over a century, we perceive the figures of a duck and a rabbit alternately (not everyone succeeds in perceiving both, but that is less relevant here). It's impossible to hold the two simultaneously, but the understanding that the drawing contains the two of them – both this and that, as it were – exempts us from the impossible attempt to see them as a uniform, stable image. Like that illusion, which belongs to the group of stimuli known as “bistable figures,” we are once a “rabbit” and once a “duck.”

The brain relies on prior knowledge to envision a future. The brain's “default mode network” – i.e., a massive cortical network that is highly active when we are not immersed in a demanding task – is occupied with simulating possible scenarios that are intended not to entertain us, but to prepare us for what will happen down the road. It strives to maximize certainty and minimize surprises. Research is increasingly showing that memory is actually a tool that serves us to anticipate the future – for example, to anticipate the possible responses of a friend to something we are about to tell her, or to move aside to avoid being struck by a paddle ball that's hurtling toward us on the beach.

This is an important, central and mostly desirable principle; if it weren't, evolution would not have allowed us to be occupied with such simulations and

with the wandering thoughts that make them possible during about half of our wakeful hours. But when it comes to how we see ourselves, and the Other, this marvelous impulse to generate certainty becomes an obstacle to our happiness.

## **Exploiters vs. explorers**

Attaining a feeling of certainty, it turns out, is not always so urgent. Our research as well as studies by others points to differences between situations of exploration and exploitation. When we are in the latter mode, we will prefer to exploit the routine and the familiar for the benefit of what's safe and comfortable. In contrast, when we are explorers we opt for new experiences, learning and thrills, despite the possible dangers and the extra energy that such situations may demand.

Studies I have conducted jointly with Dr. Noa Herz and Dr. Shira Baror showed that the difference between these two situations is primarily our tolerance for uncertainty. And perhaps more important, despite all the individual differences between us, each of us can at times be more exploratory and at other times more exploitative. It turns out that when we are in the "exploring" mode, we also think more creatively, see the big picture and are in a better mood. The relationship between the different aspects of our state of mind is reciprocal and works multi-directionally.

Possibly, it follows from our studies that in an exploration mode it will be easier for us to accept the "both this and also that" within us and to accommodate our uncertainty better, seeing it more as an opening for opportunities than as a source of anxiety. But at present this is only a hypothesis; to probe it will require closer examination, involving experiments that will better combine clinical psychology and brain research.

From more than two decades of research, it emerges that our representation of our self, and our representation of the self and of the intention of others, is created in the brain's default mode network. We want to be capable of predicting ourselves – our reactions, our emotions, our actions, and likewise those of other people – so it's natural that we will try to be accurate. But in a situation of a shifting, non-uniform self, such predictions typically falter. The

only way to cope with the resulting instability is to take into account the dynamic nature of the self and its dependence on a broader context.

During my rather amateur journeys to the world of meditation and Buddhism, I have encountered an exercise that challenges me every day anew. The idea is to try not to assign names to the stimuli around us. For example, not to identify the sound of a truck that we hear outside the window as an approaching truck, but rather as a sound with certain frequencies and intensities. Or to observe a bird without calling it a bird. Try it and suffer!

The tendency to give names is a process that occurs automatically in the brain, deriving from that same powerful desire for certainty. We affix a familiar label to a familiar stimulus so that we will know how to treat it on the basis of past experience. Flower, fork, umbrella, beggar, explosion – these are all names that help us understand what to expect and how to behave. But what happens when it's not clear whether the sound outside was made by a truck or a helicopter? We will usually feel uncomfortable with that ambiguity and will go to the window to check. But if from the outset we do not try to attach a specific name to the sound, we will not have to grapple with the uncertainty.

A recurring theme when speaking of the effects of meditation is diminishment of judgment, both as it concerns oneself and also the Other. That was another concept that sounded “hippie-ish” until I decided to try it myself. The brain continually produces predictions: gray clouds cause us to expect rain, in a fancy restaurant we will expect a large check, and a certain skin color might lead us to make certain assumptions. But meditation helps us extinguish expectation and prejudgment.

It might sound poetic to say we should allow the world to come to us as it is, but it's also correct. Generally our perception of the world is based on a combination of two sources of information: what arrives from the senses (bottom-up) and what arrives from the memory and from the expectations that were constructed based on it (top-down). Despite our subjective feelings, our assumptions, expectations and prejudgments directly affect our perception of the world.

As Immanuel Kant said, we do not see the thing-in-itself. Meditation, by encouraging concentration on the present, reduces the influence of thinking about the future – and we end up with fewer expectations. That’s not a situation we desire when we walk down the street and have to avoid obstacles, or when we want to prepare for a job interview. But extinguishing the expectations regarding our self and regarding others as well is a tool that makes it possible to better accept things as they are.

The principle of “both this and also that” can also be generalized and applied in additional realms. We can imagine coexistence as another sphere in which thinking of this kind might lead to understanding and acceptance, but my own default network has already managed to execute a rapid simulation of the web comments this will produce. Other examples abound. For example, I like to drive my old Alfa Romeo. It both gives me immense pleasure on the open road and also breaks down every two weeks.

The one truth about which one can perhaps be totally certain is love. Nili, my 11-year-old daughter, just came home from school and suggested that I play a game with her that examines whether I am an angel or a devil. I came out “devil” – but it didn’t bother either of us.

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