



## Dopamine is considered the happiness hormone. How do we get the best effect of dopamine on our mood?

### The answer is surprising.

Reading time 9 minutes

I recently listened to the two-hour [podcast](#) episode 'Controlling your Dopamine for Motivation, Focus & Satisfaction' by neurologist Andrew Huberman. And I firmly resolved to listen to it at least once more. This episode was packed with fascinating information. Today I bring you the excerpt that touched me the most.

Wikipedia says about dopamine: Dopamine is an important, predominantly excitatory neurotransmitter of the central nervous system. It is popularly known as the happiness hormone. However, the actual psychotropic significance of dopamine is thought to be mainly in the area of increased drive and motivation.

Increasing drive is the magic word today. Here comes the surprising truth: we often misunderstand this increase in drive. We see it in the context of the goal, the reward we want to achieve in the end. But Huberman explains that we are on the wrong track here - and I can only agree with him!

The thing about dopamine is that the effort itself can become the real pleasure, rewarding us with positive feelings. Sure, at first it may be unpleasant and not feel good, but we should focus on it and start feeling the reward of the effort itself.

If we focus solely on the trophy, the grade or the final goal, we undermine the neurological process. The ability to feel pleasure in the effort is undoubtedly the most powerful aspect of dopamine. And the best part? Each of us can access it!

Yes, hard work is hard. Most people don't like to work hard, but they do it to achieve certain goals. And goals are great! Rewards, whether financial or social, are also great. But if we work hard just to get a reward that comes sometime later, the work becomes much harder. It is less likely that we will be able to get up to it again in the future.



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Do you know the famous Stanford experiment? Researchers rewarded children who liked to draw with a gold star. But when the rewards stopped later, the children showed significantly less initiative to draw.

After all, it was an activity that they enjoyed doing of their own accord! This basic motivation was subsequently weakened by the reward.

When we receive rewards, even if we reward ourselves for something, we tend to associate less pleasure with the actual activity that produced the reward.



I had noticed this over and over again with myself. In the end, the rewards I wanted to motivate myself with were not suitable to increase my desire to work hard. And the effect was similar in my company. Rewards often have a counterproductive effect because they can reduce the pleasure of the performance itself. Of course, everyone loves to receive rewards but the goal behind the rewards is often missed. And the reason is this:

When we get a dopamine boost from a reward, our baseline is lowered. Our brain cognitively interprets this as evidence that we did not do the activity for the pleasure of it, but only because of the reward. However, this contradicts the concept of growth mindset developed by psychologist Carol [Dweck](#). The growth mindset focuses on getting better and better. In doing so, we accept that we are not yet perfect, but striving for it is our goal. It has been proven that people with a growth mindset perform exceptionally well because they focus on the effort itself.

The good news: each of us can cultivate a growth mindset. The neural mechanism for cultivating the growth mindset involves learning to access the rewards that come from effort and doing, and that's hard to do. Because you have to say to yourself: OK, this effort is great, this effort is enjoyable, even if the task causes physical pain.



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Huberman remembers well the feeling of wanting to get up from his desk as a student, but forcing himself to learn, forcing himself and forcing himself, and over time he found that the friction and challenge he was in at the time produced a release of dopamine. But if you only focus on the goal, you lose the ability to create the motivational process of rewarding friction during the effort.

So, if you find yourself in a difficult situation and you think, "Oh, I will do this, but it will be very hard. I will fight and fight and fight to achieve the eventual goal." Bear in mind that this will not only make you enjoy what you are doing less, but will actually make it more painful. If you engage in this sequence, you make yourself less efficient.

You should be able to access dopamine during exertion - dopamine has all these incredible properties that increase the amount of energy in our body and in our mind, increase our ability to focus. But if you undermine that ability to get motivated back into an effort, then you're going to need twice as much coffee and three times as much loud music and four times as many energy drinks just to get out the door to run or to study.

So, it is more beneficial to combine the feeling of friction and effort with an internally generated reward system. It's about not just going after the pleasant things, but telling yourself that the effort itself is the good part. Yes, it may be painful and it may not feel good, but focus on it. You will find that you find the rewards within the effort itself, meaning the dopamine release. Repeat this over and over again and it becomes a reflex for all types of effort. I've just come from the gym - this mindset worked for me today in 30° weather. Probably even too well, because less would probably have been smarter today.



And the beauty of it is that this becomes a reflex for all kinds of effort. If we focus only on the trophy, only on the grade, only on the victory as the reward, we undermine this whole process. So how do you do that? In the moments when the friction is greatest, you say to yourself: this is very painful. And because it's painful, it's going to cause increased dopamine release later on, meaning it's going to increase my baseline and my dopamine.

But you also have to tell yourself that you are doing it voluntarily in that moment, and that you are doing it because you love it. We know that sounds like lying to yourself, and in a way it is, but you are lying to yourself in the context of the truth: that you want it to feel better.



*Photo credit: Istockphoto.com / Lorado*

We want it to even feel pleasant. That's very different from thinking about the reward that comes at the end, the spa day after you cross the finish line. You can replace the spa day with any reward you can think of. We admire people who are capable of what I am describing here. The ability to derive this pleasure from effort is without question the most powerful aspect of dopamine in our dopamine biology. The beauty of this is that it is accessible to all of us. But I also point out the things that can interfere with and prevent the release of dopamine from effort itself. Don't increase dopamine levels before exertion and don't increase dopamine levels after exertion. Learn to push the dopamine from the effort itself. Anyone interested in why baseline plays an important role in dopamine should listen to the linked podcast.

So, look forward to the next opportunity to find joy in your special effort.

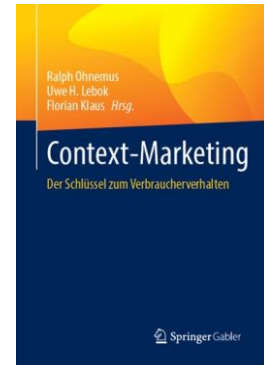


## Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

### Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



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