

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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Ep. 186: Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There

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INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the 3 key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi, everyone. It's Lynn Thoman, and welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today, I'm excited to be with neuroscience professor Tali Sharot. Tali asked the question, why does what was thrilling on Monday tend to become boring by Friday? Why do exciting relationships, stimulating jobs, and breathtaking works of art all lose their sparkle after a little while? And just as people stop noticing what is wonderful, according to Tali, they also stop noticing what is awful. They get used to dirty air. They stay in relationships that may not be great. And in addition, they overestimate the happiness they'll feel from positive changes. And on the flip side, overestimate the painfulness of negative changes.

LT: I'm excited to learn from Tali Sharot how we miss-see the world around us and how we can regain joy from the great things in our lives. And get more pleasure from our everyday lives. And also how we can regain sensitivity to the terrible things we've stopped noticing, so we can change them. I'm also curious to learn why experiences make us happier than material things and why shorter but more frequent vacations are better for most people than longer ones. Tali Sharot is a professor of cognitive neuroscience at University College London and MIT. She's the founder and director of the Affective Brain Lab. She's written for the New York Times and the Washington Post and is the co-author with Cass Sunstein, who is the world's most cited legal scholar and a former presidential advisor, of *Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There*. In case you're interested, Cass Sunstein, Tali's co-author, was a guest on episode 54 of 3 Takeaways, where he talks about the latest findings in behavioral science. And he will soon be a guest again to talk about *How To Become Famous*. Today, we're going to talk to Tali Sharot about *Look Again, The Power Of Noticing What Was Always There*. Welcome, Tali, and thanks so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Tali Sharot: Thanks for having me. It's a pleasure.

LT: I love your book. The opening is especially wonderful, where you ask people to imagine the best day of their lives. Can you read it?

TS: Yes, I can.

TS: What was the best day of your life? You might find it difficult to select the very best day. That's fine. Just choose a really good day. Some people think back to their wedding day.

Others choose the day a child was born or their graduation day. Others give more idiosyncratic answers. The day I breakdance with my labrador retriever on the roof or the day I gave a speech about the fear of public speaking. As long as it is a great day, it qualifies. Envision that day. The sun is out, the sky is blue, you're running on the beach in your yellow bathing suit. Or maybe the sky is dark, the snow is falling, warm your red nose against that of a newfound love.

Whatever it is, it's joyful. Now, imagine reliving that day again, and again, and again, and again. You are trapped in a best day of my life loop. What will happen? What will happen is that the best day of your life will become less exciting, less joyful, less fun, and less meaningful. Soon, the best day of your life will become tedious.

The sun will not feel as warm. The snow are not as magical. Your love not so perfect. Your accomplishments not as great, and your mentor, is not as wise. What is thrilling on Monday becomes boring on Friday. We habituate, which means that we respond less and less to stimuli that repeats. That's human nature.

Even those things that you once found exhilarating, a relationship, a job, a song, a work of art, they lose their sparkle after a while. Studies show that people even start habituating to the magic of a tropical vacation within 43 hours of arrival.

LT: Tali, why does that happen? Why do all these wonderful things, the best days of our lives or anything that repeats, why does it become less special, less joyful?

TS: It's really a basic phenomenon that governs every neuron of our brain, which is called habituation, which is our tendency to respond less and less and less to things that are constant or that change very, very gradually. Maybe an easy example is smell. So imagine you walk into a bakery and the smell of the baked goods is really salient, It really smells nice. But after about 20 minutes, you stop being able to perceive the smells of the cookies and the baked goods. It's just as if it's not even there – your olfactory neurons stop responding to the smell, because it's just been there for a long time, and so it seems like it's not important anymore, and they want to keep the resources for the next stimulus that comes along.

TS: And so just as we habituate to smell, we also habituate to other things. For example, temperature. When you jump into a pool, it's really, really cold at first, but after a while, it doesn't feel so cold, but also to more complicated events in our life and into events in society. So just as we have habituate to the smell of baked goods, we also habituate to a new love, but also to a breakup to a new promotion but also to being laid off, to the view of the ocean, but also to pollution.

TS: Why then is our brain wired, or seems like it's wired, to want things, whether it's a fancy car or a big house or a loving spouse or a high paying job, but then almost as soon as we get them to overlook those things?

TS: The question of why, we can answer is mechanistically. Mechanistically, the answer that I gave before, which is this is how our brain works. But also there's a question of why in the meaning of, well, is it good for us? Is it adaptive? That kind of why. Here, the answer is, to some extent, yes. To some extent, it is adaptive to not feel as joyful, not have that joyful

reaction to things that have really made us happy before. Because, let me give you an example. Imagine, your first entry level job. When you first got that job, you're probably quite happy and quite excited about that job. Now imagine you will continue being really excited about that new entry level job forever. Well, then you won't be motivated to try and get the next position, right to climb the ladder to progress.

TS: So to some extent, the fact that we habituate emotionally to the good stuff in life means that we are more motivated to try and move ahead as an individual, but also as a society. Without it, probably, we wouldn't see as much progression.

TS: Now, on the other hand, it means that we're not really satisfied for a long time. And the question is, can we find kind of a middle ground? Can we find how to dishabituate so that we can feel the joy from the things around us, that we really should feel the joy, and at the same time still be motivated to change?

LT: And how can we do that? How can we rekindle interest in the things around us and get them, to use your wonderful word, to re-sparkle?

TS: To answer this question I will read you a quote from Jodi Foster. She tells about this situation where she's out filming for six months in a different country, and then she comes back home. And she says, I came back from somewhere that is amazing and beautiful. But you know, you long for really dumb things that you're just used to, that six months ago, I'm sure I was bored by. But right now, I'm like, my god, avocados are amazing! Or, I'm so glad I get to go to the gym again. Things that six months ago were sort of what I was trying to escape from, now everything is amazing.

TS: And of course, the life of Jodie Foster is not an ordinary life, right? But I think in this case, she touches on a principle that is true for all humans, which is if we break from our normal life, if we leave, for a certain amount of time, then we come back, we have dishabituated. Then we're better able to see those wonderful things around us that, before were just mundane and things that we kind of took for granted, right?

TS: So she talks about avocados or about going to the gym. And so that is one way to dishabituate because habituation is our response going down and down and down to things that are constant, that are always in front of us. And so if you take that thing that you've habituated to, and you go away, it's not in front of you anymore. And so by definition, you will dishabituate. And once you're again confronted with that thing, whether it's an avocado or your comfortable home or your partner, which you haven't seen for a while, then those feelings that you first had will, again arise.

LT: What gives people more pleasure, material possessions or experiences and why?

TS: I think a lot of listeners will probably have already heard this finding which says that people get more joy from experiences than material goods, right? [More pleasure] from a vacation, from going to a concert, than [from] buying a fridge or a T shirt or whatever it is. But I think we don't really know why.

TS: Why is that, that we get more joy from experiences than material goods? And I think there's a few different reasons, one reason we think is that you are more likely to habituate to the material goods than to the experiences because the experiences are relatively fleeting. You go on vacation, perhaps it's a week. You go to a concert, it's a few hours. You go on a lovely dinner with your partner. These things are very short. So we tend to not have the time to habituate to them. In contrast, if you buy something, whether it's like a fancy car, big screen TV, a new dress, it's always in front of you. So you habituate to it relatively fast. While the experience have, like, the peak of joy.

TS: And it's not constantly in your mind. It's just once in a while. And we think that's one of the reasons why people actually gain more pleasure from experiences versus material goods. And in fact, the shorter the experiences, the less likely you are to habituate. So you might actually, when you recall something that has been short in time, you may actually consider it to be more joyful, more fun, more good than something that was a little bit longer in time.

LT: So fascinating. So essentially experiences sparkle, not despite their fleetingness, but really because of it.

TS: Absolutely.

LT: What about risk? Do we see risk clearly or does it somehow become distorted due to habituation and can you give some examples?

TS: What's interesting about habituation is that we habituate not only to the things that are external to us, but we also habituate to our own behavior and to our own actions.

TS: And that is true of risk. when you're first about to do something very risky, think about a little child who is about to jump into a pool for the first time, maybe jump off a board into the pool. They're very scared and they do it very, very carefully. But then, after they jump the first time, they go back up, And now they're less scared, so they might do a little run and jump. And the third time, they're even less scared. They might even do a little flip and jump. So every time when we do a behavior that could be risky, we become less and less and less anxious. And therefore take more and more and more and more risk. On the surface, this absolutely makes sense, because if you took an action and there was no negative outcome, then you should learn. You're learning that this is a pretty safe behavior. The problem is that there are a lot of behaviors that are truly risky. But the fact that you're going to do them, but nothing's going to happen to you on average, does not mean that they're not as risky.

TS: For example, you could have a behavior where you're jumping off a high cliff, and the likelihood of having something really bad [happen], like dying, let's say it's one in a hundred, that you're going to jump and jump and jump. Most likely, and most times, you're not going to perish, right? But that doesn't mean that you should take more and more risk, because the risk itself, one in a hundred, is still there.

TS: But our perception of the risk changes because our perception is based on our own experience, which is not a bad idea, but our own experience is only a sample of one, and so it's not necessarily a large enough sample for us to make conclusions on. And so we actually

did a study where we wanted to put people in fear, like physical risk, where they'll be very, very, very fearful.

TS: But of course, we can't ethically put people in physical risk. So we did the next best thing we use virtual reality. So the one game that we chose is one that you go up an elevator - it's kind of a skyscraper - you go up, up, up in the sky and then you walk off a platform. So you're walking off this platform up in the sky and you look down and it looks really high. There are little looking cars at the bottom and there's birds flying around, and you feel like, Oh, I'm going to take one little step and I'm going to die.

TS: And your brain knows that you're on the surface, like I'm in my office walking. But at the same time, it is deceived to believe that this is very scary. And so what we find is that when people do that, we ask them, how scared are you? We measure skin conductance.

TS: If you're scared, you start sweating, and then your skin conductance goes up. And we see that people are really anxious at first, and they only take one little step. And the next time, maybe, two little steps. And as time passes, they tell us, and the physiological measures show, that they're less and less and less anxious, and they go further and further on the platform. By the 10th time, they're just jumping off.

TS: But what's interesting is, there's really interesting individual differences here. Some people habituate fast. We call this emotional habituation. How much your anxiety goes down as you experience risk. Some people, not so fast.

TS: What we found is, not only that the people who habituate fast are more likely to get to the end of a platform quicker and jump off quicker, they are also the people who tell us that in real life, they're taking more risk. We have a questionnaire that measures risk taking in real life. And we found that if you are a fast emotional habituator, you tend to take more risk in real life, whether it's driving, drugs, unsafe sex. Maybe it's financial risk. Maybe it's extreme sports.

LT: If we habituate to what's around us, how can we more clearly see our environments and the factors in our lives that are negative or unhealthy or harmful?

TS: We talked a lot in the beginning on how we habituate to the good things in life, The things that in the past has brought us joy, but don't anymore. And similarly, we habituate to the less good things in life, even the bad, even the terrible, even the horrific things in life. Now, on one hand, that's a good thing, because if something bad happens to you or if there are negative aspects of your environment and you habituate, you don't feel them anymore, you don't notice them anymore.

TS: That's good, because it doesn't have a negative effect on your well-being. But when it comes to things that you could actually change, that's not so great, because we don't notice these things around us that either change very gradually or are just there all the time. So, we don't change them, because we can't see them. Whether it's, cracks in a relationship that grow over time, or racism, sexism, just things that are the norm that have always been there - if we don't notice them, we can't really change them. And how do we then notice these things? Again, if you take a break from your environment and then come back you will then just see

things with fresh eye. It could be just spending some time - let's say it's a work environment – and maybe there are inefficiencies or some problem in a work environment. If you leave that environment and go work on a project in another division in your company, and then come back, then you'll be better able to see these things that maybe you didn't notice before. And then, you're more likely to change them.

LT: Do we overestimate the joy of a positive or welcome change and the horrors of an uncomfortable or scary one? And if we do, what are the implications?

TS: This is the impact bias I think you're talking about, I think it was first written about by Daniel Gilbert and the idea is that when we look into the future to something that's good, like a wedding or a promotion, we usually think, oh, that will make me feel so good. When it happens, it might make you feel good, but over time, you habituate to it. And so the overall impact is less than we expect and the same for a bad thing. You think about something really, really bad in the future, and you estimate that that will have a very negative impact on you. And when it first happens, it does, but then over time you habituate to it. So it doesn't have as much of an impact as you thought it would.

TS: And in fact, how fast you habituate to these negative things is related to your mental health. So it's been shown that people with depression, they tend to habituate slower to negative events. They ruminate on them more. So it seems that the inability to habituate is a key aspect of many mental health problems. It actually impacts almost every mental health condition in different ways.

LT: Interesting. Can you share your key findings from your research on the optimism bias and if it's a good thing or a bad thing?

TS: So optimism bias is our tendency to overestimate our likelihood of experiencing good events in our life, such as getting a promotion or having a long marriage, and underestimate the negative things in our lives, such as underestimating the likelihood you will be in an accident or will get sick.

TS: For example, a recent study that we did, I asked people at the beginning of the pandemic, how likely do you think you are to get COVID relative to other people of the same sex and age? And what we found was that people thought they were less likely to get COVID than other people of the same demographics. And another part of the optimism bias is that when we imagine our future - so imagine yourself in 10 years and try to really imagine it vividly - imagine your friends, your family, your work life. People tend to imagine mostly positive images. So when we think about the future, we tend to imagine these positive things more so than the negative.

TS: Now, it doesn't mean that we don't imagine negative things, but usually we find solutions to them, like, oh, this negative thing can happen, so I will do this and that so it doesn't happen. There's so much we found about the optimism bias. One interesting thing is individual differences. One individual difference is age. The optimism bias is really large in kids and teenagers, and then it goes down, down, down, down, down, reaches the lowest point in your midlife. But then it starts going up again. So, in fact, the optimism bias is quite high in the elderly and in children and teenagers and low in midlife.

TS: And one reason this may be is because it's been shown that stress is really high in midlife. Stress starts low in children and teenagers. It goes up, up, up, up, up, reaches a peak in your midlife and then starts going down. And we have shown in our lab that if you induce stress, optimism bias goes away. And I think it makes sense because stress is really a physiological response that is telling our brain, telling our body, we are in a dangerous environment. And in a dangerous environment, that's not a good time for me to be overly optimistic and underestimate my risk. If you're under threat, there's a cortisol reaction that changes the way that your brain works, changes the way you process information and eliminates the bias. For a short amount of time, then you're back in a safe situation. Now you can continue being optimistic because there's a lot of advantages to it. If we have positive thoughts about the future that's good for our mental health. It also enhances our motivation. If I think, oh, I'm going to get a promotion, I'm going to find the love, then you go ahead and try. Otherwise, you simply don't.

LT: What are the 3 takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

TS: The first one is that your life is better than you think. We all have wonderful things in our life. Maybe we have a comfortable home, a good relationship, a nice job, but I think they don't bring us as much joy on a daily basis as they should because of habituation. So when we think about our life and our feelings, they don't really reflect the goodness of it because of habituation. But I think there's things that we can do. Taking breaks and coming back can enhance our joy from what we already have. The second takeaway is, break up good experiences, but swallow the bad whole. So we talked a little bit about breaking up good experiences. The good stuff, break it into bits. Now with the bad stuff, it's the opposite. So if you have to do something that you don't like, maybe it's a household chore, maybe it's grading papers, any admin [administrative] work, we often like to take breaks, right? We'll grade a few papers, do something else, grade a few more papers. But by doing that, we are interrupting the habituation to the bad stuff. We want to habituate to the bad, so it feels less bad. If you hear annoying noise altogether, no interruptions, you actually suffer less, because you habituate. But if you hear annoying noise for a little bit, take a break, annoying noise, then you dishabituate every time. And so, the suffering goes up every time. So chop up the good and swallow the bad whole. And the last takeaway I would say is one way to counter habituation is to diversify your life. Because if you do different things - you live in different places, you talk to a variety of different people, you work on different projects - if you induce variety into your life, you are fighting habituation. So go and learn something new.

LT: Tali, thank you. This has been wonderful. I really enjoyed your book, Look Again.

TS: Thank you so much. Thanks for having me.

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

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