

Pursuit of Happiness

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“I think I love him. I mean, we’ve been together longer than I’ve ever been in a relationship. But, if this is love, why can’t I stop cheating on him?”

She could describe a lot of things she appreciated about her boyfriend and their life together. And she felt terrible every time she cheated. Still, she found herself swiping through Tinder regularly, sometimes sitting on the other end of the couch from him. Hanging out at home, even at the best of times, couldn’t match the exhilaration of a no-commitment secret hook-up.

My client was caught between chasing pleasure versus the pursuing of happiness. And they are not the same thing.

Pleasure depends on things outside of ourselves, and is temporary. As we indulge in something that brings us pleasure – good food, intimacy, alcohol, music – we get a rush of good feelings. But once we aren’t partaking in our pleasure, that feeling stops. With overindulgence, it takes more and more of something to give us that feeling again.

Happiness is about an internal sense of contentment. While our feelings of pleasure can spike and crash, happiness is a more stable sense of ourselves. Our sense of happiness can fluctuate over time, but it doesn’t tend to change as quickly as our sense of pleasure. We feel happy when we adopt perspectives and put our attention on things that make us feel happy.

My client was putting a lot of her attention on what would make her feel good – flirting with strangers or hooking up with casual acquaintances – but she felt terrible immediately after her “dates” were over, like a hangover. She was trading short term pleasure for longer term happiness.

Over time, our work focused on her being able to make choices that led to her feeling good without the ‘hangover’ later. She also found a 12-Step addiction recovery program to be helpful for her healing.

Happiness and pleasure are not necessarily mutually exclusive – you can be happy AND have pleasure – but it is easier to have both if you cultivate happiness first.