

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Are There Demand Limits to Growth?

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on April 19, 2009 - 10:19am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

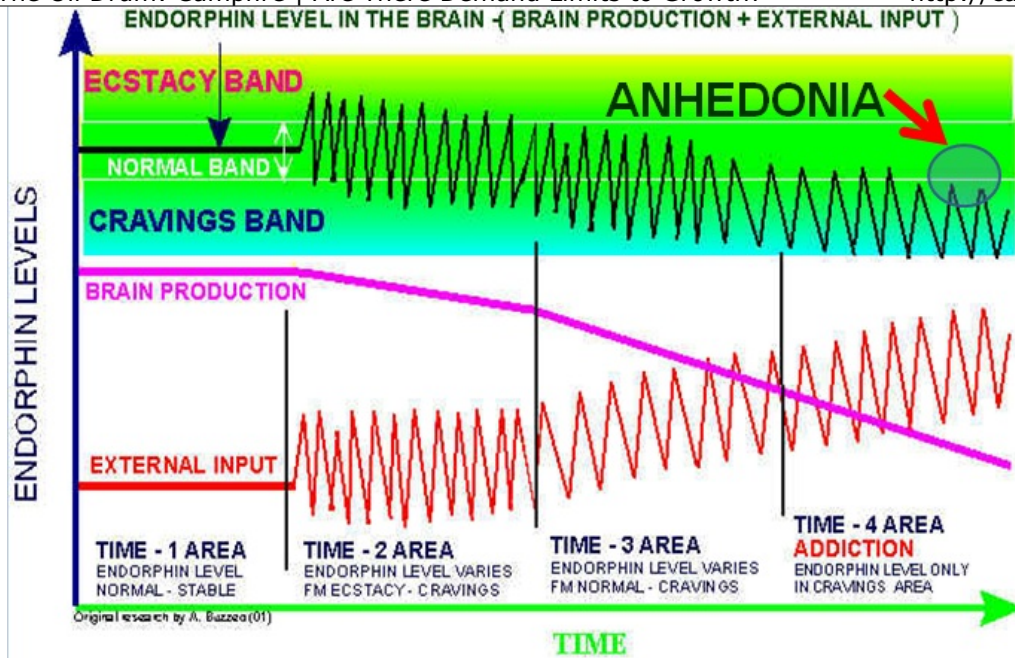
Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

Tags: [addiction](#), [consumption](#), [habituation](#), [original](#), [steep discount rates](#) [[list all tags](#)]

On this site we typically discuss the extent and timing of our energy supply limits, (as well as planetary sink capacities and non-energy input limits). Less common are discussions on our ends, and whether our current trajectory is mentally/physically sustainable irrespective of source/sink constraints on the horizon. Tonight's Campfire questions will relate to *demand* limits to growth in the hypothetical situation of unlimited resources. Perhaps from a perspective of infinite abundance we might gain insight on how best to address resource shortages.



The genesis for this post was [news this week](#) that Twitter and Facebook could affect peoples morality due to the speed at which our brains process events that historically required time to reflect on and absorb. Also this week, a friend had sent me the article [Is Google Making Us Stupid?](#) I have [written previously](#) how our brains are increasingly being hijacked by a larger and larger smorgasbord of stimuli in our modern worlds. We quickly habituate to a certain stimulation level and then need higher or different stimuli to obtain the same neurotransmitter 'feeling'. Eventually, addicts reach a point where they require said 'drug' just to feel normal. The step beyond this is when even the drug doesn't get them back to baseline, and they experience 'anhedonia', or the inability to feel pleasure.



ADDICTION PROCESS FOR DRUGS, ALCOHOL, NICOTINE, FOOD & ANOREXIA

My best friends daughter is a very bright 10 year old girl who used to be a voracious reader. Last year her father bought her an Iphone and set up a Facebook account on her computer. I have observed she now can only read a paragraph in a real book before putting it down. The neural grooves, at 10, are already habituated to the faster feedback found on Facebook. I'm sure many of you have similar stories - these young people will be our future leaders, and their attention spans will be shorter than any previous generation of our species. (I feel this trend myself, perhaps related to being very involved in this website for the past few years - I find it extremely difficult to read entire books unless they are fiction. I didn't use to be this way. I am addicted to obtaining information on the internet, but ironically, I needed to obtain information on the internet to figure this out...;-)

The larger resource depletion issues we face require us to think about the future. In economic-speak we need to choose and act upon *larger long term rewards* as opposed to *smaller short term rewards*. The more addicted we are, as individuals, and as a culture, the steeper our discount rates are and less likely we can address longer term problems. Increased cognitive load also steepens discount rates. I.e. the more we multi-task in the moment, the less we evaluate 2015. Obesity and related epidemics in the US are not noticed day by day, but over 30 years show an unbelievable trajectory. Depression prescriptions are now off the charts, etc. After all, we possess fixed neural hardware of 1300 cc and our environment is capped at 24 hour days and ~80 year lifetimes - any switch in the cultural software is bound to have physical impacts.

In a developed world where (almost) all have footprints exceeding kings and queens of old, we habituate to the usual, and unexpected reward becomes a key driver of behaviour. It really makes one wonder what the natural limits of such a cultural trajectory. In 20 more years will sane skinny people be as rare as mountain gorillas? (I doubt it - before this happens Big Pharma would put everyone on naltrexone and we will be able to consume at an optimal slower pace..)

Here is tonight's Campfire thought experiment, and questions.

Imagine for a moment, that a giant umbilical cord stretched from earth into deep space, and through it we received whatever natural resource we wanted, in the quantity and at the time we wanted. At the same time this cord would allow us to expel our waste streams into space. This process would be affordable by everyone. Unlimited means.

Some questions to ponder:

- If we had unlimited affordable resources for everyone, would anything change?
- Does the cost/scarcity of goods act as a bottleneck to which of global citizenry has

access to them? I.e. if the resources had NO cost (everything free), how would that differ from above?

- Is there a point when we begin decreasing neural returns to technology in humans? Where/when?
- Will our rational forward thinking aspects of our brains ever be strong enough to overcome our more primal short-term impulses?
- Are those who 'consume' too much, at greater risk for natural (or man-made) shock to the system?
- If so, wouldn't it behoove us to consume less, and perhaps substitute a unit of time and labor for energy/money, not because we are running out of cheap resources but because it would be better for us as individuals?
- When comes the inflection point where the mentally/physically "normal" are no longer the majority?



As is usual for this slot, these questions don't have answers, but in my opinion are worth discussing...



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