



WELLBEING
WITH KATIE BYRNE

Knowing when enough is enough

In what areas of your life are you striving for the impossible, asks **Katie Byrne**

IT was hard to shop the winter sales in Brown Thomas when the SS16 collections were already on the shop floor.

My mother and I had every intention of rifling through the heavily discounted rails last month, but our attention kept drifting towards the shiny new stock.

"I just want the entire Phillip Lim collection," I sighed. "If I won the Lotto, I'd blow it all on clothes," my mother replied. "And we probably wouldn't be any happier," I added.

Our conversation soon turned to the Hedonic Treadmill, otherwise known as Hedonic Adaptation. The latter term was coined by psychologists Philip Brickman and Donald Campbell in their 1971 essay, *Hedonic Relativism and Planning the Good Society*.

It posits that we each have a stable baseline or set-point of happiness. They found that we experience a short-lived boost of happiness when we acquire a new item, but we soon return to our default state.

These days it is known as the hedonic treadmill, to describe the never-ending conveyor belt of materialism that we step on to prolong those short bursts of happiness.

We all know that retail therapy is a temporary fix. We only have to take a tour of our attics to see the items that we once couldn't live without covered in dust and taped up in boxes.

There's always a better watch, a faster car and a bigger house, just as there's always another club to join and social rung to climb. My mother went on to discuss the women that can afford the entire Phillip Lim collection. No doubt they yearn for haute couture.

And the women who can afford haute couture? I imagine they hanker after an invite to one of those private viewings that large fashion houses put on for their wealthiest customers.

It's worth noticing the hedonic treadmill

every now and again. It's also wise to honestly ask yourself how much is enough. If you don't know the answer, it points to the possibility that you'll never really be satisfied.

The hedonic treadmill doesn't only apply to material possessions. It's the same psychological impetus that makes us believe we would be happier if we had a wedding ring on our finger or a cabinet full of trophies. It's the fallacy that drives us towards being five pounds lighter or 50 Twitter followers stronger.

As Daniel Kahneman, author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, writes: "People are exposed to many messages that encourage them to believe that a change of weight, scent, hair colour (or coverage), car, clothes, or many other aspects will produce a marked improvement in their happiness. Our research suggests a moral, and a warning: Nothing that you focus on will make as much difference as you think."

This even applies to lottery winners. A 1978 study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that lottery winners were no happier than non-winners in the long-run — and only slightly happier than people who had suffered horrific accidents which left them physically impaired.

This isn't to say that we can't permanently change our happiness set-point. We can. The trouble is that we're searching for lasting fulfilment in all the wrong places.

According to many recent positive psychology studies, community-based lifestyle changes considerably improve our overall well-being. Instead of endlessly pursuing money, status and beauty, we should be nourishing our friendships, partaking in more social activities and helping

those who are less fortunate through volunteering. These pursuits are proven to make you happier than a new handbag — even a Chanel one.

Positive psychologists advise that we live a meaningful life of self-realisation rather than ascribing meaning to the latest phone or laptop.

They also recommend that we put more energy into following our passions than we do to furthering our careers (assuming your career isn't your passion).

As Robert Greene reminds in *Mastery*: "In order to master a field, you must love the subject and feel a profound connection to it. Your interest must transcend the field itself and border on the religious."

Elsewhere, Dr Martin Seligman, the pioneer of the positive psychology movement, recommends identifying one of your strongest character traits and using it every day in the service of others.

Positive psychology is a relatively new field, but the idea of hedonic well-being is not. It can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which differentiates between hedonic (sensory-based) and eudaemonic (moral) well-being. Like many of his successors, the Greek philosopher concluded that hedonic well-being doesn't lead to long-term happiness.

This isn't to say that we should supplant the hedonic with the eudaemonic. The hedonic treadmill is the machine that runs the capitalist economy and it's near on impossible to opt out entirely.

We can integrate the two, though. This is one way to tame the endless pursuit of more and learn the inherent satisfaction of delayed gratification. It also helps us focus more on what we have than what we don't have.

The truth is that we probably won't be any happier with our lot than we are right now — so we may as well learn to enjoy it.

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