



Hike your way to happiness **(or why deliberate discomfort is good for you)**

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The other day a friend and myself spent three hours preparing to do an overnight hike. We packed a huge range of things into two large rucksacks – things to keep us warm, to cook with, to keep us dry, to stop us from getting lost. In fact, all things that I would already have if I stayed at home.

We then had my wife's father drive us 20 miles from my house and we walked back. And not the shortest route either. Or the flattest. In fact, we went out of our way to make the walk as arduous as possible.

So why did we do it?

It's a question we pondered as we laboured along under 40 pounds of load, peering bleary-eyed through sweat at the magnificent scenery around us. Why would two grown men, both reasonably sensible at other times, load themselves up like pack mules and ask to be abandoned miles from home?

And as we mulled it over, we started discussing the fact that much of modern life is geared towards making things easier. And there are many benefits to that:

- hot water straight from the tap, no campfire required
- heat on demand, no shivering necessary
- light at the flick of a switch to extend your day as long as you want
- food all in one place so you don't have to hunt all over

No-one would argue that these are advances that have left us able to conduct more comfortable, fulfilling and hopefully useful lives.

But what happens when we take it to extremes? We must remember that human beings have developed to struggle and overcome. Nature/God/evolution has enabled us to progress this far by ensuring we feel good when we reach a goal or solve a problem.

Our brains and bodies have evolved a wonderfully subtle built-in reward system to keep us achieving. Be it climbing a mountain or cleaning the house, our biology makes us feel good in order to keep us trying.

A vacuum of effort, meaning - and happiness?

So what happens when people stop making effort? When they stop stretching themselves? Take lottery winners for example; a year after their win, their happiness levels are the same as before it. Happiness does not come from having lots of money. Happiness comes from leading a satisfying life despite the fact that you have lots of money and can afford to sit around and do nothing.

In fact, with a little thought it is obvious that happiness does not come from the things that many of us in the West focus on every day. There are millions of happy people around the World who have little in material terms.

Why did we put ourselves through all that suffering?

So why go through step after step, mile after mile of burning muscles and aching backs? Because it made us feel good. And it made us feel good because:

- we set and achieved a goal
- we completed something arduous enough to stretch us and expand our perceptions of our own capabilities
- the exercise released serotonin, and that combined with the exhaustion made us sleep better
- we ached for days, reminding us of just how hard we had worked

Of course our friends and family have stopped talking to us because we won't shut up about how tough we are, but that's a small price to pay. ;-)

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