

To Make One Happy, Make One Busy

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In Greek mythology, the gods punished Sisyphus by condemning him to roll a rock up a steep hill for eternity. But he was probably better off than if they'd condemned him to sit and stare into space until the end of time, conclude the authors of a new study on keeping busy. They found that people who have something to do, even something pointless, are happier than people who sit idly.

"The general phenomenon I'm interested in is why people are so busy doing what they are doing in modern society," says Christopher K. Hsee, of the University of Chicago. He co-wrote the study with Adelle X. Yang, also of the University of Chicago, and Liangyan Wang, of Shanghai Jiaotong University. "People are running around, working hard, way beyond the basic level." Sure, there are reasons, like making a living, earning money, accruing fame, helping others, and so on. But, Hsee says, "I think there's something deeper: We have excessive energy and we want to avoid idleness."

For the study, volunteers completed a survey, and then had to wait 15 minutes before the next survey would be ready. They could drop off the completed survey at a nearby location and wait out the remaining time or drop it off at a location farther away, where walking back and forth would keep them busy for the 15 minutes. Either way, they would receive a candy when they handed in their survey. Volunteers who chose to stay busy by going to the faraway location were found to be happier than those who chose to be idle.

Not everyone chose to go to the faraway location. If the candies offered at the two locations were the same, the subjects were more likely to choose to stay idle. But if the candies offered at the two locations were different, they were more likely to choose the far location—because they could make up a justification for the trip, Hsee and his colleagues say. The research is published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Hsee thinks it may be possible to use this principle—people like being busy, and they like being able to justify being busy—to benefit society. "If we can devise a mechanism for idle people to engage in activity that is at least not harmful, I think it is better than destructive busyness," he says. Hsee himself has been known to give a research assistant a useless task when he doesn't have anything for them to do, so he isn't sitting around the office getting bored and depressed. "I know this is not particularly ethical, but he is happy," says Hsee.