

## **And Now for Something *Completely Different***

GIVE YOUR BRAIN A  
DOSE OF VITAMIN *NEW*

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“Serve the dinner backward, do anything—  
but for goodness sake, do something weird.”

**ELSA MAXWELL**

IMAGINE A WORLD in which you never got bored. Netflix, video games, and our boredom-busting smartphones would lose significant appeal. You’d never have to deal with that depressing “the thrill is gone” feeling, but you’d also never feel the spark of creativity that nudges you out of boredom and into new experiences.

There’s a fancy term for why we get bored. When we adapt to what’s new and return to a stable level of contentment, we’re on what’s called a “hedonic treadmill.” We habitually jump on the boring hedonic treadmill because if we didn’t adapt, everything would seem new all the time. Imagine your new

car never losing its appeal. Also imagine never being able to get over that awful breakup. From an evolutionary perspective, we need the boredom of the hedonic treadmill for survival: if we never registered something completely different as a potential new reward or threat, we could easily miss what could help or harm us.

David Foster Wallace describes how the hedonic treadmill works in “Shipping Out,” a story about his week-long experience on a luxury cruise ship. At first he orders room service and feels he must justify his indulgence to the cabin steward who delivers it by scattering pretend work on his bed. But by the end of the cruise he’s dialing up his meal and becoming angrily impatient when his food hasn’t arrived in fifteen minutes! Another common example of the hedonic treadmill involves winning the lottery. Lottery winners feel a flush of joy when they win and will often surround themselves with luxury items, but soon these treasures become commonplace, and winners are no happier than they were before they hit the jackpot.

So the good *and* bad news is that your brain can adjust to any environment of extreme gratification—or major disappointment—and has an insatiable craving for novelty. Have you ever driven along a familiar route and zoned out to the point where you couldn’t remember most of your journey? Compare that experience with one of driving through a city you’ve never visited before, and a neighborhood that doesn’t appear to be particularly friendly. Your brain switches on and becomes much more attentive when you feed it something different. It’s that aliveness that we want to tap into with the acts of friendship in this book, which offers dozens of ways to break from routine, expand your horizons, and wake up your brain, specifically the substantia nigra/ventral tegmental area—let’s call it the novelty center—which plays a large role in learning and memory. In an “oddball experiment,” where subjects were

exposed to familiar, less familiar, and completely new things, only the completely new things tickled the novelty center and increased activity in the dopamine pathways where reward chemicals are dispensed.

Have you ever wondered why you can remember details from your teens and twenties in high definition, but trying to remember exactly what you did last weekend feels like reaching for the answer to an elusive trivia question? This phenomenon, based on a study of thousands of autobiographical recollections, has been called the *reminiscence bump*. The theory behind the reminiscence bump suggests that the reason our memories of adolescence and early adulthood are so clear is because that was when we were experiencing many life changes for the first time.

And Now For Something *Completely* Different encourages you to reactivate the reminiscence bump by doing things for the first time. Finding quirky ways to interact with your friends will enable you to jump off the hedonic treadmill, give your brain a dose of vitamin *New*, and create lasting memories. This activity involves gathering together to do three things you've never done before. Don't fret: you don't have to do anything that involves a bungee cord.

If you're drawing a blank, here's a list of completely different suggestions for inspiration:

- Dressing up in evening wear, pajamas, or a costume for no reason at all
- Having breakfast for dinner
- Using all glassware to serve your meal
- Listening to a type of music you don't usually listen to
- Inviting someone new into your social circle
- Sitting on the floor instead of on the sofa or a chair
- Eating with your hands

Having a “girls’ night in” where you dress up in evening gowns to eat macaroni and cheese with chopsticks while listening to death metal is guaranteed to perk up your brain . . . along with the brain of anyone else who finds out what you’re up to. We will never forget the night we sat on the floor in our pajamas and high heels eating quiche from crystal coffee mugs while listening to the Delta blues.

Here’s to creating some *completely* different memories.