

# Needs, Wants and Desires

By Oliver Burkeman

- 1 As anyone who counts a three-year-old among their acquaintances will know, there's a fiery purity to the will of a small child that's difficult to oppose. Once my son has figured out that there's ice-cream in the freezer, and decided he wants some for dessert, my role is equivalent to that of the ineffectual UN diplomat attempting to persuade a major nation-state to stockpile fewer weapons. Yet frequently, on receiving the ice-cream, he'll decide to let it melt – then forget about it completely. He wants ice cream, monomaniacally, with a force his little frame almost can't contain. But he doesn't like it so much that some other absorbing activity can't banish it from his mind.
- 2 I only clearly grasped this distinction – and realised how it applies to me, too – when I encountered the findings of a study of coffee drinkers reported on the Research Digest blog. Using various psychological tests, researchers showed that “heavy” drinkers had a much greater desire for coffee than those who consumed less of it, or none. But they took roughly the same, far lower level of pleasure as light drinkers when it actually came to drinking it. More serious addictions – to alcohol, or hard drugs – are characterised by a similar split between wanting and liking: you want the substance more and more, but like it less and less.
- 3 The ancient idea that what we desire isn't necessarily what we enjoy has received support from modern neuroscience, which indicates that the two processes involve distinct circuits in the brain; dopamine, the so-called pleasure chemical, is probably better understood as a desire chemical, which can be triggered in huge quantities in the near-total absence of pleasure.
- 4 **10** From your genes' point of view, it's helpful that things like sex, or eating a meal rich in sugar and fat, should be pleasurable – but what's really crucial is that they're alluring. It's much more important that you should want them, than that you enjoy them once they arrive.
- 5 Just bearing this distinction in mind, as you trundle through the day, can be surprisingly empowering: there's at least a chance you'll remember, next time you're gripped by the urge to check your phone, or have a second cocktail, that you might not enjoy it as much as you predict. It's not that desire needs to be squelched. It just needs to be understood as a not-useful guide to an enjoyable existence. Wisely or not, I've also found myself surrendering to the three-year-old's demands. That way, wants arise and move through him, like a passing storm, and soon enough we're back to enjoying ourselves. It's a lot easier than trying to fight the weather.



*Guardian Weekly, 2020*