



The Feel Good NOW Handbook

SHORTCIRCUIT COMPULSIVE EATING BY TURNING ON YOUR BRAIN'S 5 HAPPINESS SWITCHES

Harriet Morris

Contents

INTRODUCTION **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Part 1: The 5 Switches 3

Part 2: The Neuroscience Behind Comfort Eating 6

Part 3: Turn The DOSER Switches On 7

FINAL WORDS 15

Introduction

When you are feeling utterly compulsive around food, it seems that you only have one choice: instant pleasure or miserable deprivation.

It is this black and white thinking that often tips us over the edge and straight to the junk aisle. In that moment we can too easily lay to rest our best-laid plans.

This handbook is the antidote to such nonsense.

Here is the truth: no matter what your external circumstances are that may trigger cravings, no matter how compulsive you feel in the moment, **you can change your state in an instant - and walk away from the junk.**

Imagine the following scenario: you get your car stolen on the way to work. Then you get fired or lose your biggest client. Then the love of your life texts you to tell you it's all over. As you are standing on a street corner reading this text and reeling in disbelief, someone whips your phone out of your hand and makes off with it.

A pretty terrible day, I'm sure you'll agree. Absolutely nothing (save the return of your car, work, lover and phone) could improve it. Life seems to have lost all joy.

Then between your legs darts a toddler. She is laughing insanely and running towards the traffic (and imminent death) metres away. Behind you, you hear an ear-piercing scream: the child's mother.

Before you consciously realise what you are doing, you lunge forward and grab the child by the waist. Together you fall to the ground, dizzy but unharmed. As the cars rush past, the mum (who is now shrieking with relief) hugs her daughter to her and grateful words tumble out of her mouth. She insists on buying you a drink. As you sit sipping your coffee (or something stronger), do you still feel that life has lost all joy?

Of course not. And the reason is because of the neurochemicals that have flooded your system in the last half hour. Your problems are still pressing, but your state is completely different.

This handbook is all about how you can use what I call the 5 happiness switches in your brain to change your state whenever you want, no matter what your external situation is or how much emotional turbulence you are suffering. And you don't even need to save any lives to achieve this!

Part 1: The 5 Switches

The 5 switches in your brain that can instantly change your state (and so shortcircuit comfort eating) are:

Dopamine

Oxytocin

Serotonin

Endorphins

Relaxation Response

Together they form the acronym DOSER. The first four are neurochemicals, and the final one is the default state our bodies were designed to be in. You may think that the relaxation response needs a couple of hours of yoga and a massage to get going; this is completely wrong. You can switch it on as quickly as the others.

Neurochemicals are messengers that tell the brain and nervous system to behave in certain ways for certain reasons.

We will start by briefly introducing these switches:

DOPAMINE

...stands for drive. It motivates you to take actions that your brain perceives will produce the other neurochemicals. A stock market trader is often fuelled by dopamine, with the intention to produce serotonin when s/he makes a killing later that day.

OXYTOCIN

...is the bonding neurochemical. We produce oxytocin when we fundraise for a good cause, when we join a club or even have a 20-second hug.

SEROTONIN

...stands for security and status. Our brains produce it when we get a promotion, do well in the interview or feel accepted in any way by a group.

ENDORPHINS

...are produced when we exercise and have sex. They block pain, and can create euphoria (think of the runner's or post-coital high).

RELAXATION RESPONSE

...is the state we need to be in for all healing, maintenance and repair to occur.

The REAL Point of These Switches

I call these the happiness switches because that is what they do - they make you feel good.

However to really make the most of them, you need to understand why they exist.

It isn't to make you happy.

It is to ensure your survival.

We live in a fast-moving world, where technology allows us to do things that a couple of decades ago seemed inconceivable. I grew up in the seventies and eighties. If you had told 15-year-old me that I could have a video call with anyone anywhere in the world in between my lunch and writing this chapter (which is what happened today), I would have laughed in your face. If you'd have told me it would cost nothing I'd have thrown you out of the house.

Our brains and bodies are lagging way behind technology by millennia. On an evolutionary level, we are still cave dwellers. These DOSER switches are part of the way we were wired to survive an insecure, dangerous - but much less socially complex - world than the one we live in today.

How did each of the DOSER switches originally help us survive?

DOPAMINE - gave us an extra spurt of energy to act on an environment that we could not control

OXYTOCIN - helped create bonding within the tribe, especially as children were looked after communally. Today we like to say 'no man is an island', but in those days without the tribe you were effectively dead.

SEROTONIN - helped us feel as secure as possible in an insecure world, and gave us motivation to work for the tribe. Also promoted social cohesion by getting everyone to respect tribal hierarchy.

ENDORPHINS - allowed us to carry on fleeing the tiger even if we were in pain, and of course made reproduction (= the continued existence of the tribe) fun!

RELAXATION RESPONSE - allowed our bodies to become as strong as possible for whenever the flight or fight mode was required, say when a tiger or neighbouring tribe attacked. Another word for fight or flight is stress.

Because each DOSER switch was designed to do an important survival job, they are all deeply instinctual. They are a powerhouse of wellbeing; a good mood factory and the greatest pharmacy on earth. Coke dealers have nothing on the 100% healthy drugstore sitting right there between your ears. There are indeed other feel-good neurochemicals you can research yourself.

In chapter 3, we will open the pharmacy and you will start learning to leverage DOSER for your own wellbeing. However, we need to understand how you have unwittingly let your pharmacy be hijacked. I hope that this next section is going to liberate you and remove a lot of unhealthy guilt you have around chaotic eating.

Part 2: The Neuroscience Behind Comfort Eating

Comfort, emotional and stress eating can all have a neurochemical trigger. This is not the whole story, but it is an important distinction to have.

Sharie Spironhi, in her very readable book *Why We Are Wired to Worry - And How Neuroscience Will Help You Fix It* explains:

Behind every comfort food craving is dopamine pushing you toward the sugar, salt or chocolate...After you eat the meal, serotonin kicks in, making you feel calm and relaxed, telling you, "Good job. You will live another day!"

You've eaten, so according to cavedweller logic, you are that bit more secure. A good healthy meal will also trigger serotonin release, so let's not conclude that we shouldn't get pleasure from eating. The difference is that the junk food creates pleasure that is addictively intense and always carries an emotional price tag. I call this fake pleasure.

Comfort food cravings usually focus on the desire for that potent mix of fat and sugar, which to our cavedwelling ancestors was highly valuable and we are still wired to love the taste.

The immediate solution to comfort eating is twofold:

#1 Find other ways to get serotonin

#2 Find alternatives to the fat/sugar mix that have no pricetag. You can find these at <http://www.theshiftinside.com/sugar-replacements/>

By the way, just because you are going without comfort food does not mean the DOSER alternative has to be serotonin. *Any of the other 4 may well work for you.*

So let's dive in now and look at how you can get an instant and harmless happiness hit from each of the DOSER switches.

Part 3: Turn The DOSER Switches On

In this chapter I go into more depth about which activities turn each switch on, and we are going to brainstorm how to get your hit of each.

There are two ways to approach turning each of these DOSER switches on. First of all you can work on increasing general opportunities to saturate your brain in the neurochemicals and get into the relaxation response; and secondly how to get a hit that will replace comfort eating when you are feeling those cravings.

DOPAMINE

Remember that this neurochemical gets us to chase what our brain thinks is good for our survival, and it is what pushes us to comfort eat. In general, men seek dopamine more than women. I once heard a neuroscientist say that men fall in love because of the dopamine produced by the courtship process (in other - less old-fashioned - words, the time between meeting a woman and sleeping with her). I will leave you to draw your own conclusions about this, but it may back up many a woman's perception that to be valued by a man, she should make him wait to consummate the relationship.

Activities That Produce Dopamine

- Attending sporting events and competing
- Cheering for our team
- Complaining
- Going out dancing
- Falling in love
- Challenging others' opinions
- Challenging authority
- Watching action movies
- Planning holidays and travelling
- Roller coasters
- Singing along to a song
- Playing video games
- Drinking too much caffeine
- Pushing our children to excell
- Pursuing romantic/sexual partners
- Gambling
- Scavenger hunts
- Heated debate
- Home improvements
- Driving fast cars/bikes
- Playing the stock market
- Ranting about injustice

What else can you think of that might produce a hit of motivational dopamine for you?

This list, like all those that follow, is entirely neutral. If you are married, the last thing I am suggesting is you start pursuing a new partner to avoid comfort eating! For someone else, venturing into the world of online dating may be just what they need both as a dopamine hit to avoid overeating, and as a bigger goal that could lead to a more fulfilled life that you may be avoiding at the moment with food.

ACTION STEPS

Make 2 lists: Activities you could do more of generally to increase dopamine (eg a weekend geocaching), and Cravings Busters to divert yourself in the moment (for example, download the Last Minute Dot Com or a home improvement app and scroll through that when you feel tempted by junk).

OXYTOCIN

Reminder: this is the bonding and community neurochemical. The perfect antidote to loneliness eating.

Activities That Produce Oxytocin

- Holding hands, hugging for at least 20 seconds
- Playing with kids or pets
- Having sex
- Complimenting each other
- Joining gangs or any kind of group/society
- Mentoring a young person
- Laughing together
- Getting a massage
- Rescuing animals
- Cooking for those we love
- Looking after children
- Letting others win

What else can you think of that might produce an oxytocin hit for you?

One important thing I have observed about women and oxytocin: I was always dismayed at what I perceived as the purely cultural indoctrination of girls to please men, resulting in an inability to say no and to protect themselves in risky situations. However in my research for this handbook, I learnt that females are more wired to seek oxytocin, because in the tribe, the women's job was to look after the community while the men went out and hunted.

I see many female clients whose eating problems are a way to avoid speaking their truth - standing up for themselves.

If this is you, then it is important to be aware that speaking your truth is definitely an area to work on in coaching - but don't let this stop you benefiting from this wonderful neurochemical in the meantime.

ACTION STEPS

Make 2 lists: Activities you could do more of generally to increase oxytocin (eg Look on [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) for local groups that share your interests), and Cravings Busters to divert yourself in the moment (for example, getting a hug).

Even if you are alone in the evenings, there are still things you can do to get an oxytocin hit.

SEROTONIN

Comfort eating is just an ineffective way to get a serotonin hit. You don't necessarily need to feel better via serotonin, but it is wise to experiment and see what this DOSER switch can do for you.

Activities That Produce Serotonin

- Throwing parties
- Meeting people of higher status than ourselves
- Being around those we perceive as better than ourselves
- Learning a language
- Photographing things of beauty
- Seeking a promotion at work
- Getting Facebook followers or other social media recognition
- Giving blood
- Helping others
- Posting on social media how proud we are of our kids/ pets... or anything else
- Going on holiday
- Volunteering
- Making jokes
- Talking rather than listening
- Getting fit
- Safeguarding your home

What else can you think of that might give you a serotonin hit?

ACTION STEPS

Make 2 lists: Activities you could do more of generally to increase serotonin (eg plan a social event), and Cravings Busters to divert yourself in the moment (for example, look for someone to help).

The Triple-Whammy: Events That May Produce Dopamine, Oxytocin and Serotonin

- Going to church
- Joining a political party
- Running a successful charity event
- Being at the stadium when your team wins
- Hosting an event
- Having a baby
- Saving a life
- Scoring a goal/hitting a home run
- Having sex with someone you are madly in love with
- Getting married
- Being proposed to
- Being grateful

ENDORPHINS

This is the body's natural pain relief service, but we can leverage that ability to feel better, plain and simple.

Activities That Produce Endorphins

- Exercise
- Sex
- Meditation
- Deep breathing
- Eating chili peppers or anything spicy
- Dancing or listening to music
- Laughter and even the anticipation of laughter (eg when you book tickets to a comedy show)
- The smell of vanilla
- The smell of lavender

A Word of Warning: Stressercise

I have had a number of clients who visit the gym religiously. For them exercise is the first commandment of health.

It is also a major form of stress.

I have dubbed their gym workouts *stressercise* because their whole approach to physical activity is causing them tension and therefore backfiring. As you shall see in the next section, to maintain your body in the best shape you need to be in the relaxation response when exercising.

Stressercise may not block the production of endorphins, but even if it doesn't, their wonderful effects will be diminished by the stress response.

ACTION STEPS

Make 2 lists: Activities you could do more of generally to increase endorphins (eg meditation), and Cravings Busters to divert yourself in the moment (take a bag of chili peppers everywhere you go...if you are feeling brave!).

See also 4-7 breathing and The Primitive Getaway in the next section.

THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

I promise you that this will be the most challenging DOSER switch to turn on, even though it is probably the one that is most available to you no matter where you are. It is certainly the only switch you could turn on in an important meeting.

So expect to feel resistance. But stick with me anyway.

The relaxation response is meant to be our default setting in an uncertain world.

If you ever see a herd of gazelle being chased by a lion on The Nature Channel, a curious thing happens. When the predator catches one of the herd and devours it, the other gazelle calmly return to whatever it is they do all day on the savannah.

Now of course a gazelle losing one of its herd is less traumatic than one of us losing a loved one. I am not trying to compare the two events.

The point I am making is that the gazelle accept that their existence is insecure (if indeed they have any concept of *secure vs insecure*). When threatened, they go into flight response (there is no 'fight or...'). When the threat is over, they revert immediately to the relaxation response.

This is what we should try to emulate - accept that life is uncertain, and train ourselves to revert as quickly as possible to the relaxation response after stress.

Now this may seem an impossibility. *But my life is so stressful!* I hear you wail.

This may indeed be true. We live in a world full of overstimulation. A complex world that we do not seem to manage very well either socially or environmentally. Trauma is a normal part of childhood for many. *Jobs for life* is a concept of the past. Terrorism threatens us in a way that we could never have conceived on 10th September 2001.

Now let me ask you a question.

Imagine one of your Cro-Magnon ancestors from 50,000 years ago. He wins a prehistoric time travel lottery to swap lives with you.

Would he cash in his lottery ticket?

Of course he would.

Would you be happy to take his place?

I doubt it.

You see, there is no perfect secure world that you might one day live in if you work hard enough, save hard enough and avoid taking any risks.

As R.D. Laing put it:

Life is a sexually transmitted disease and the mortality rate is one hundred percent.

Don't worry, I can see you rolling your eyes. You know this. *Of course you know this.*

Yes, but do you know it when that angry customer is demanding to speak to your manager, or you've missed the flight home, or you come to an impasse with the love of your life and realise it is over?

At times like these, when you are in the stress response, you do NOT know it. Being philosophical and phlegmatic do not come naturally under stress. Why? Because the straightforward fight or flight solution our primitive brain is wired to rely on when under real or perceived threat is now outdated for many of the 21st century problems we find ourselves facing. Primitive brain is completely devoid of the creative, 10,000 foot view solutions and perspective finding that modern life needs.

Part of getting in the relaxation response is down to reframing problems. This is work we can do in coaching sessions.

But there are things you can do to train yourself to get into the relaxation response, either as a general practice or as a response to the desire to comfort eat.

GENERAL PRACTICE IDEAS FOR THE RELAXATION RESPONSE *Incorporate these into your life as much as possible*

1. **Meditating** - even a minute is worth it. The benefit nobody ever talks about with meditation is that it helps you to develop self-discipline, because you are constantly keeping the mental chatter at bay. This rest from thinking has been amazing for me and transformed my temper with my kids for example. Start with any time you can manage, and build up from there.
2. **Slowing your eating speed**
3. **Reducing stimulation** - ration your smartphone use, turn off any screens half an hour before bed, take your lunch break (if you get one) away from your desk.
4. **Get out into nature** – anything that gets us back to cave dweller state is a good thing.

CRAVINGS BUSTERS RELAXATION RESPONSE STRATEGIES

4-7 or 5-1-5 Breathing - can be done in a meeting without anyone noticing!

<http://www.theshiftinside.com/breathe/> for more details)

The Primitive Getaway (strictly speaking this is also endorphins, but it is a fight or flight hack and hugely effective)

See <http://www.theshiftinside.com/primitive-getaway/> for more on this.

Final Words

This has been a quick tour of five happiness switches that are ready and waiting in your brain to increase your happiness. There are more, and I invite you to research the subject if you find these strategies helpful (and you will).

Three really important things to keep in mind about DOSER:

#1 It is not a cure-all. Many clients discover that food is not their problem, but a doorway through which they can walk to solve deep-seated life challenges. Maximising all the neurochemicals in the world and meditating every day is not the complete answer for them. Applying the ideas in this handbook will help you cope without the junk while you work through any issues that food has been trying and failing to deal with on your behalf. The better our general state, the more resilient we are to be able to transform these challenges into fuel for change.

#2 Some of the ideas in this book will provide instant relief, like the 4-7 breath for example. Others you may well fight. I am thinking of meditation here. For years, I prided myself on my inability to sit in a no-thought zone. This was partly an expression of my exasperation with the worst excesses of the new age/positive thinking movement, but equally it was an expression of my resistance; not wanting to *just be* with myself. No matter: I started making myself meditate in spite of my resistance. Now, two months later, I cannot manage without ten minutes every morning.

Do not discount any strategies just because you do not like them. This is change discomfort, and it will pass...because of The Pauly Principle.

#3 DOSER diversions from your cravings have one aim: to support The Pauly Principle. This states that any action, if repeated often enough, becomes automatic - and therefore effortless. More about this concept here: <http://www.theshiftinside.com/pauly-principle/>

Lastly, you may find that you can adapt these switches. A couple of years ago, when I was going through the breakup of my marriage, one thing that caused me particular pain was the amount of mail that came for my ex. Repeated requests to change his address came to nothing. At some point I started reading about loss and using rituals to process grief and separation. I started burning any letters for my ex as a kind of ritual, and it felt very healing.

Then a surprising thing happened. Over time, seeing a letter for him triggered not anger but a spurt of dopamine: it signaled a mini-burning ritual. I even put a plant pot in the garden for an mini cremation whenever his post arrived. To this day, I still get his post and to this day it gives me that dopamine hit and a real sense of satisfaction when I burn each letter!

Your Final Action Step

Write down 3 of the DOSER strategies and try them out this week. Remember that they do not need to be from 3 different categories. Any switch, not just serotonin or dopamine, can step in and give you that feelgood hit.

Anytime.

Anywhere.