

## ■ ARE YOU SUFFERING FROM AFFLUENZA?

In his 1997 film *Affluenza*, producer John de Graaf claims there is a virus loose in society that threatens our wallets, our friendships, our families, our communities, and our environment.

Each year it costs us hundreds of billions of dollars, wastes our precious time, ruins our health, and adversely affects our quality of life. What is affluenza, exactly?

De Graff defines it as “a painful, contagious, socially-transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.”

He argues that too many of us are working ourselves to death to accumulate an endless array of goods and services we don’t really need.

This creates stress. Stress, in turn, creates health problems, including headaches, stomachaches, ulcers, depression, even heart attacks.

Medical research shows that people in industrial nations lose more years from disability and premature death due to stress-related illnesses than other ailments.

Affluenza drives up healthcare costs, tears at the fabric of families, and shortens our stay on the right side of the daisies.

Before you mistake me for the national scold, however, let me make a couple of confessions.

First off, I’m a libertarian at heart. I realize that personal consumption—roughly two-thirds of all economic activity—drives

the economy. Moreover, if someone really wants to devote his life to accumulating more, more, more, that's his right.

As John Maynard Keynes put it, "It is better that a man should tyrannize over his bank balance than over his fellow citizens."

(Although, personally, I've never met anyone who obtained lasting satisfaction with a Visa or Mastercard.)

Second, I'm not immune to the occasional bout of affluenza myself. I rarely pass a bookstore or record shop, for example, without poking my head inside. And whenever I leave Barnes & Noble, the clerk at the register always asks the same thing:

"Would you like us to double-bag that for you?"

We all have to consume to survive, of course. But Madison Avenue is right there beside us, aiding us, abetting us . . . giving us a not-so-subtle push.

Marketers want to convince us that our lives would be so much better if we would only just drive this car, drink this lite beer, use this antiwrinkle cream, or fly these friendly skies.

Every day we are bombarded: billboards, Internet banners, TV and radio commercials, newspaper and magazine ads. You can't even get away at a public beach. Single-engine planes criss-cross the sky trailing banners, "Joe's Crab Shack: All You Can Eat \$17.99" or "2-for-1 Drinks All Day at Bennigan's."

Advertisers are getting more sophisticated, too. The new science of neuromarketing is designed to help retailers unlock the subconscious thoughts, feelings, and desires that drive our purchasing decisions.

Using magnetic resonance imaging scanners to record brain activity in minute detail, marketers now measure how their products affect the brain's pleasure centers. In short, they are creating products and advertising that stimulate the production of dopamine.

And it works. Today psychologists routinely talk about "retail therapy," where consumers shop just to get a short-term high to ward off boredom or the blues.

How do we resist?

First by recognizing our limits, both financial and material. After all, it really doesn't really take a lot of money to meet our needs.

Many of the other things we covet don't hold our attention long. Recognize that and you may conclude that they aren't worth the time and trouble it takes to acquire them.

As the philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote, "The man who acquires easily things for which he feels only a moderate desire concludes that the attainment of desire does not bring happiness. . . . He forgets that to be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness."

A well-lived life cannot just be about competing against others for resources. He who dies with the most toys *doesn't* win.

As Laurence G. Boldt writes in *The Tao of Abundance*,

The psychology of plenty differs fundamentally from the psychology of scarcity. If I view my life as a struggle to sustain my existence in an unfriendly world, then intimidation, competitiveness, and greed make sense. If I view life itself as a gift, attitudes of praise, thanksgiving and responsibility naturally follow.

It's only human to want to better our material conditions, of course. But the relentless quest for more often undermines our quality of life. Successful lives are built not bought. And an over-consumptive lifestyle ultimately limits our choices.

As Russell said, "It is preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else, that prevents us from living freely and nobly."

Curing affluenza means dropping the chains of mindless consumption. It means recognizing that lives based on having are less free than those based on doing or being.

Wise men and women have known this for millennia.

In 400 B.C.E., the Greek philosopher Diogenes taught that no man needed much—and that we shouldn't complain of material loss. He once went to Athens with his slave Manes, who ran away. Diogenes shrugged off his ill fortune saying, "If Manes can live without Diogenes, why not Diogenes without Manes?"

In *It's All In Your Head*, Stephen M. Pollan and Mark Levine relate another story about the famous ascetic:

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Diogenes is sitting on the side of the road eating his simple meal of porridge. A court philosopher sees him and comes over to chat. “You know, Diogenes, if you learned to play up to the king like the rest of us, you wouldn’t have to live on porridge.” Diogenes doesn’t even glance up from his bowl; he just says, “If you learned to live on porridge, you wouldn’t have to play up to the king.”

Reasonable, affordable consumption means less struggle, less debt, less hassles, less stress.

It also grants us more time—and with it the opportunity for new experiences, better relationships, and greater personal freedom.

As Oscar Wilde said, “The true perfection of man lies not in what man has, but in what man is.” ■