Hedonic adaptation is the ‘frienemy’ of so many businesses, but what is it and how do we deal with it? Through a recent Harvard course, I discovered that the term ‘hedonic adaptation’, coined by Brickman and Campbell (1971), is the concept that humans all carry a inherent baseline of happiness that they naturally and quickly return to, despite any negative or positive events that have impacted on them. It is now more popularly referred to as the ‘hedonic treadmill’, suggesting that people intrinsically keep working for the next grab of happiness but don’t stop once it’s achieved. This theory is vital to all businesses, including aesthetic clinics.

The complexities of this theory cover such a wide scope of circumstance and individual natures that, like most, it cannot be applied to everyone. One of the first studies to examine the concept was ‘Lottery winners and accident victims: is happiness relative?’ by Brickman et al (1978), which explored the long-term happiness impacts of lottery winners and severe accident victims (paraplegics) on 51 subjects. The study found that both groups had made a relatively quick return to their previous natural baseline of happiness.

But what does this have to do with aesthetics? I would argue absolutely everything—in particular how we practise both financially and ethically. If we look at the journey of any given patient, we must understand what motivated him or her to approach us in the first place. Some will say insecurities, others will say self-preservation, and some even cite the classic keeping up with the Jones’. I believe it is a combination of all these ingredients. However, the problem we face as practitioners is how to keep patients satisfied and where to ethically draw the line and put an embargo on excessive unsuitable treatments or allow them to explore more invasive measures.

The typical timeframe of most of our aesthetic treatments can also lend itself to the adaptation cycle. For example, in the study ‘Interrupted consumption: disrupting adaptation to hedonic experiences’ (Nelson and Meyvis, 2008), subjects were forced to break off from pleasurable activities such as massage, which prevented their mindset to adjust to these pleasures as being ‘the norm’. If we compare this to an average botulinum toxin treatment, when we advise most patients that the return treatment time is around 4–6 months, the patient is forced to wait for that next youthful boost.

So how do we retain our clients years down the line? How can we prevent them from getting bored of the hedonic treadmill and seeking a bigger ‘fix’ which may or may not be necessary? In some cases that facelift could be the next logical stage for the patient. In my opinion it is not our job to dissuade but appropriately guide, and if surgery is a suitable answer then so be it. Giving patients an honest opinion will establish a level of trust that will help ensure their return.

The other issue we face is desensitisation of our practice, as it has become so prevalent to the media, and on an individual patient level where the effects of their treatments have become so very regular to them. To deal with this I have to be pre-emptive; I treat each client as a work in progress and managing expectations at those initial stages of treatment is essential. Do not sell your client a facelift and blepharoplasty when what you are really offering is toxin and tear trough filler. Be realistic about results and positive about the effects you can create. Be pragmatic and don’t forget basics like before and after shots. If your client is not feeling convinced of their progress, present these photos and remind them of their journey so far, pointing out a marked difference.

Also be sure to ask questions; understanding the reason for patients’ restlessness will help you to guide them. When we are impacted emotionally by a life circumstance, we instinctively try to fix ourselves on the outside with easy measures—a new hairstyle is often the first victim, and medical aesthetics can be another form of this expression. By now you should have a level of trust with your client and if you make an effort to tell them that more augmentation won’t help then they are likely to listen.

It is important move with the times, keep on top of new developments and make sure you direct them towards your target demographic. When a loyal client is reaching out for the next level of satisfaction, don’t rebuff the notion instantly; genuinely consider what you have in your artillery to help them, make a plan with treatments and products, and maybe suggest a middle measure such as thread lifting when surgery is not yet the answer. Make your client confident that you are their go-to person for skin and anti-ageing by presenting them with new options.

**References**


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