Full text of psychologist Douglas Lisle's talk: *The Pleasure Trap* at TEDxFremont conference.

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TRANSCRIPT:

I'm Doug Lisle. I'm a psychologist. Wasn't my first choice.

Wanted to be an artist and should have been, but my father refused to give me the emotional support, more importantly the financial support that my talent so richly deserved. History will judge him.

As much as I'd like to process my issues about that this morning, which, believe me, I would, that's not what I'm here to do. I'm here to do this psychology thing.

So, what we're going to talk about is we're going to try to shed a little light on a puzzle. And that puzzle is: "If we were bright enough and alert enough and conscientious enough and lucky enough, and we had heard the right message about health, and we had heard someone like Dr. John McDougall or T. Colin Campbell or Caldwell Esselstyn or Dr. Neal Barnard, if we knew the right direction to go, why is it so hard to go there?"

That's what we're going to try to explore today.

So, I'll be using some scientific concepts and some charts and things like that, and I'll even use a few tricks from psychology.

But more than anything, I'm going to be using my artistic skills to try to help bring this home.

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So we're going to begin by asking and answering one of the great philosophical questions of all time. We're going to be solving the problem of what I call "the pleasure trap," which is this force that pulls us the wrong direction, but we have to begin here.

Everybody knows what this is of course. Don't all answer at once.

Of course, it was a bird man; that wasn't ever in doubt. This is a great shrike. This is a proud bird of prey of the Middle Eastern desert. This one's a male. You can tell by the distinctive markings.

And what this little guy does all spring long is he goes around and he kills bugs and he pokes them on thorns inside of his territory, which leads us to one of the great philosophical questions of all time, which is, "Why does the male gray shrike kill bugs and poke them on thorns?"

Guesses, anybody?

[Audience: Sex.]

Somebody said sex. He just jumped right to the point.

Yes, it turns out that that's correct. This is exactly why he does this.

And this is because after he pokes all these bugs on thorns, then the females come in later, and they fly around, and they see which guys have the most stuff in their tree, and then they mate with the guys with the most stuff.

What a shock this is!

But this helped us solve a very puzzling sociological question here in Silicon Valley during the first boom time: Why suddenly there were so many BMWs parked in trees?… but we figured that out.

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Now, it's going to turn out that there's a whole orchestration of how it is that he knows how to go about doing this. This is all about him activating these instincts, or the environmental cues activating instincts so that he does things that are conducive to the biological problems of survival and reproduction.

And so this is kind of how it is that he works: He's built by genes, but not just his body is built by genes, also his brain is built by genes, so therefore, his whole life experience is being orchestrated ultimately by the genetic code.

So he has instincts that are built into his neural circuitry, but those instincts are now sensitive to environmental cues, so that's when he sees a little worm wiggling, he'll go and kill that worm. That's what he does.

If he sees a mate, then he shows off or does whatever he does.

But the point is that those neural circuits are sensitive to these inputs, and then what happens is his computations are run in what you and I would call "thought."

It's not the kind of thought that we think through, but it's the same process ultimately, that he's essentially activating information in an ancient library built by the genetic code where he figures out what's the right moves to make.

But the way he knows what to do is he has feelings, and feelings now arise in the system that compel him to do behaviors, and the behaviors he does, as we see, are circular.

And the fact that they feed in now to the statistical increased likelihood of the genes being on the planet. That's why he has the thinking and the feeling and the behavior that he does; it's because they're all part of a symphony that increased the likelihood of those genes being here.

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Now, so as a psychologist, what I'm really most excited about is I'm excited about feelings because I have a lot of feelings — I'm sure you have feelings — and all of that's what I'm interested in is feelings.

And what feelings are is something that I did not know as I was going through graduate school.

So in the 1980s, if you asked a psychologist, "What are feelings, and what are they for?" they couldn't have told you, because they didn't know.

So we now know that what feelings are is they're signals. They're actually evidence. But signal to the organism when something in the environment, some environmental cue, is evidence of something that's either good for the genes, or good for the statistical likelihood of genes' survival, or bad for it.

So feelings are either good or bad depending upon whether or not they serve the interest, ultimately, of the substances that built them the entire machine in the first place, which is the genes.

So feelings are signals, and that's what they are.

Now, the way these basic signals work is as follows: All kinds of creatures have a tripartite motivational system, and that is pleasure seeking, pain avoidance and energy conservation. These are the ways that creatures go about doing what it is they do in the business of life.

So, the main positive incentive the creatures seek is they seek pleasure, so this thing's flying around the landscape basically with a neon sign flashing in its head, saying food, sex, food, sex, unless it's a male, then it's sex, food, sex, food.

It's pretty much the same thing.

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The other thing it does is that it's also seeking cues from the environment to see if there's pain that needs to be avoided, so if it's a little too cold, it'll move to where it's warmer, a little too warm, it'll move to where it's cooler.

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It'll look out for predators and try to avoid those. This thing is always looking to try to figure out how to increase its likelihood of survival and reproduction, either through seeking pleasurable things or avoiding painful things.

It's also very careful with its energy, and so it makes the very best possible use of its forays. It tries to make sure that it gets as much stuff in the tree as it can because if it doesn't, then it's going to be much less likely for those genes to be on the planet 100 or 200 years from now.

So it has to be efficient. So these three things now tell us why creatures essentially do what they do.

Now, what we're going to do is we're going to mess with this guy a little bit and see if we can learn something important.

We're going to put him in a cage. In this cage, there's going to be two buttons. The blue button is going to be a regular old button and if he hits it, a door will open and he will be able to fly out into an aviary and start killing bugs and putting them on thorns.

But the red button will be a magic button, and if he hits this button, there's going to be a trapdoor inside of this cage, and through that trapdoor is going to be a female coming into the cage, all ready to rock and roll.

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Now, I want you to think hard about which button this guy is going to be pushing. We know it's the red button because it's the pursuit of pleasure but also the avoidance of pain and the conservation of energy.

So both buttons will allow him to pursue pleasure, including the one where he can fly out into the aviary, but it's not as efficient. It saves energy if he can hit the magic button, and that's the button he's going to be hitting as soon as he figures this out.

But now we're going to put him back in the cage and change things up just a little bit.

Now, the blue button is going to be the female, and the red button is going to be the magic button. We're going to put a little glass pipe in his head, we are going to drive it down into the pleasure centers of his brain.

And we're going to put in that glass pipe cocaine, and every time he hits that red button, it's going to activate the pleasure centers by flooding those centers with dopamine, and dopamine is the main chemical that causes him to have an excited euphoria that we call pleasure.

Now, let's think about which one he's going to do. We know that he's going to hit the red button. And the reason why is because he's going to save energy in the process.

In fact, if we keep putting cocaine in that, he's going to keep hitting that button so often that even if he gets hungry and even he gets thirsty and very tired and even if there's females in the cage, he won't even look at her.

What he's going to do is keep hitting that red button, and in about 10 to 12 days, he'll be dead.

So I know that you folks have heard this kind of thing before. You know

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that this is an extraordinary trap.

But I want you to pause to consider from the subjective point of view what's actually taking place inside that animal's mind. What he's actually doing is he's thinking and feeling that he's being extremely biologically successful when in fact, he's self-destructing.

That's useful.

What we've done is by messing with the environment, we've misguided the instincts and we've hijacked them so that now this creature thinks it's doing a good thing when in fact, it's doing a very destructive thing.

Now, it's not just cocaine. We all know about the ravages of drug addiction and all that. But we're going to talk about something else.

Here's me on my front porch, and this is the scene that takes place every once in a while when I walk out and I let the porch light on.

And what happened is that these moths are designed by nature to fly to the light. In fact, they're designed to fly to the moon or celestial objects, to use those for navigation.

But if they do that, if they're looking for the brightest thing in the sky and the brightest thing in the sky at the nighttime is my porch light and they keep hitting the porch light, getting disoriented and disturbed, and then they flutter down and hit it again and again and again, eventually they're going to die, okay?

So anytime we use a super normal stimulus, a stimulus that is not supposed to be in the environment, that is not characteristic of that animal's natural history, we run the threat that that creature is going to make huge mistakes, potentially self-destructive, maybe even fatal.

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Now, this is a very scientific pie chart about everything that everybody's eating. We know what people are eating today. They're eating enormous quantities of meat, fish, fowl, eggs, dairy products, oil, salt, sugar; they're eating burgers, pizza, hamburgers, etc.

We know they're doing all these things — extremely rich food — and this rich food is clogging up people's arteries, making them obese and getting them in serious trouble.

Pick a steady, any steady, and all we have is a little slice of the green, we have a little bit of healthy food that people are eating, but mostly they're staying away from unprocessed whole natural plant food, which is what this organism thrives on and what it does best.

Now, here's what we call the "**dietary pleasure trap**," and this is a chart out of Dr. Goldhamer's in my book by that same title, The Pleasure Trap.

And what's happening here is we're seeing that in the first of the five sections, we're seeing how we're supposed to have relationship to food, that we're actually supposed to be enjoying our food in a normal range.

But then in the second phase, what we're going to do is we're going to introduce supernormal food, food that is hyperconcentrated, where there's far more energy or calories in it per bite. And as a result, what's going to happen is there's going to be a lift in the dopamine circuitry.

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I have to say I've never liked this chart. Here we go. This is a better chart.

Now, this is how this is going to work. You see in phase one, this is whole natural foods; these are the foods we were designed by nature to eat, and we're supposed to like them, and we do.

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However, in phase two, if you introduce junk food, all the foods that people really love, if you introduce those foods, what's going to happen is there's going to be a lift in the dopamine circuitry because that food is richer, there's more calories per bite.

Once we strip away all the healthy fiber and water and minerals and vitamins from food and we leave just behind super concentrated food, like oil, sugar, salty materials, cheese, etc.

All these kinds of really rich foods, what's going to happen is there's going to be a lift in the experience and the individual is going to say that is great — there's a more energy per bite here, this must be the right thing to do.

Now, what's going to happen is you might say, "Well, that's great. That's a nice high to live on. Why don't we just live there? If it cost me a few years, if it cost me being overweight, I get a little bit sick, look at how much more pleasure I get."

But we don't get more pleasure, because as we see, what's going to happen is we'll get used to it. Whenever you have a very intense stimulus that's outside of the normal bounds of stimulation, what's going to happen is the brain and the sensors are going to get dulled, they're going to defend themselves against that high intensity stimulus, and they're going to back it down. And we're going to wind up in a process that we call "habituation," or "neural adaptation," where we'll get used to it.

This is what happens if you go into somebody's house at Christmas time and you smell the great Christmas tree and it smells great for about 15 minutes, and then you get used to it, okay?

And so, that's what happens at stage three. So stage three is now we have habituated to this very rich food, and now we're getting about the same amount of pleasure as we always got from food, except that now we're eating food that's super rich.

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And now, here's the problem: Now, we wind up with things like obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer. These are the problems that we start to see.

And now, this is about the time that you may get lucky, where you hear a John McDougall, a T. Colin Campbell, a Neal Barnard, a Dean Ornish, you hear a Caldwell Esselstyn, you hear someone that can help you go the right direction and you recognize, "I know what I need to do now. I need to go this direction instead of that direction."

But when we do, when we go towards healthy food, we see what happens — we go to stage four. So now we have the answer to the question that we started with:

If we knew the right thing to do, why is it so difficult to do?

The reason is when you start at stage one and go to stage two, when you do the wrong thing, it feels right; and when you're at stage three and you go to stage four, you do the correct thing and it feels wrong.

Your motivational system is spun 180 degrees against this problem. Every instinct in you is telling you to seek the most pleasure for the least pain and the least effort, but when you do that in the moderate environment, you're taking in cues that are fooling the system and pulling us right into what we call the pleasure trap.

Now, how do we get out of this?

What we do is we go through the stage four to stage five, that's essentially recovering. And if we do that, we get more and more sensitive, the food tastes better.

The problem is that takes several weeks to accomplish that, and that's a several week journey that very few people will ever make.

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So in order to do that, we have to have a few tricks that can help us. Here's the first trick I have.

First trick is a glass of water, and this is not "Drink eight glasses of water a day." That's not the point.

I'm talking about going on just water for, say, 24 hours. If you do that, after you've cleaned out the last tofu that you could eat in the cupboard — I did that on Saturday night — a good thing to do is to go all day Sunday, and don't eat all the way till dinnertime, because as you do that, the taste buds get increasingly sensitive, and then healthy food will taste better.

Putting any system under deprivation for a while is a very good way to recover sensitivity.

Another trick is this — it's more complicated — we take juice, something like carrot and apple juice or something like that, and we use juice for two or three days and do a juice fast.

Again, what we're doing is we're taking all the fat and salt receptors offline, and so we're just surviving on effectively the sugar that comes from the juice.

This is another way to take those sugar – excuse me – the fat and salt receptors, give them a break and make it possible for us to recover our sensitivity.

There's other ways, other places to get support. There's websites: TrueNorthHealth.com, DrMcDougall.com, PCRM, Dr. Barnard's group, T. Colin Campbell, Engine 2. These are all places that have terrific free materials — tips, recipes — all kinds of things that can help you.

But if that's not enough, if you need experiences, these places also have wonderful experiences where you can join other people and have the

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experience of eating healthy food in a supportive environment.

And what happens is that people end up feeling really good, and then they hold hands and sing songs — not really, just kidding.

But people do feel great as they go through these transformative experiences, and this is another way to help support your journey in trying to make your todays better and your tomorrows more secure.

If you do that journey, you will get to have the life you deserve.

Thank you very much. Thanks for coming.

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