

Habituated Unawareness

Habituation happens when repeated exposure to a stimulus reduces an organism's response to it. Habituation is observed throughout the natural world, from single-celled organisms to birds and human beings. And, indeed, it is something that is fundamental to understanding our own behavior as individuals.

Habituation

We habituate to things that are repetitive or continuous. For example, you very quickly stop noticing the sensation of clothes against your skin or your mobile phone in your pocket. What we do notice are changes. This is why ambulance sirens, for example, have an alternating sound pattern. Because despite the blaring noise, even a few moments of exposure to it can cause us to habituate and absorb it into our awareness of general environmental noise, therefore, moving it out of our conscious attention.

Habituation is then core to how we perceive our environment. It creates the familiar ground against which we notice the new and the different. It puts the regularity of your environment into the unconscious so that you can more readily notice deviations from such regularity.

“Habituation is an active kind of unawareness” – Rupert Sheldrake, Biologist

Implications

Habituation itself is not a problem as such. It is rather what you become habituated to that you must be vigilant of. The evolutionary function of habituation is probably to alert us to potential dangers, for example a loud noise that might indicate a physical threat. And, if that proves to be harmless, we habituate to it and begin to react less and less to its future occurrence.

Today, the dangers arise when you habituate to things that present no physical threat per se, but that can affect your well-being over the long term. Things less obvious, like your work environment or certain cultural norms.

Habituation takes things out of your conscious awareness and puts them into the unconscious. This means you might not even realize that you are operating within a certain harmful environment or paradigm.

Habituation to potentially harmful environments, paradigms or belief systems means that you also become naturally wary of things that are new, even if they are better. You might become suspicious of change even when it could benefit your emotional and mental health. You might feel more comfort in your habituated familiarity even when it fails to nurture you.

Active awareness

Habituation is real, and it can be very powerful. Challenge yourself to become more aware of your environment. Ask yourself:

- *What do I take for granted?*
- *What paradigms and belief systems am I operating within?*
- *How am I being affected by repeated exposure to certain environments (work, home, social, etc.)?*
- *What media/information do I consume that might reinforce any harmful habituated paradigms?*

With more awareness comes more understanding. And, with more understanding comes more choice. Choice that allows you to decide to habituate to things that nurture you, rather than harm you.