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Dancing with Dopamine
How Raves Enhance Focus and Increase Wellbeing

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In a world filled with extremes, nothing seems more fitting than the trance-like subculture of raves. The underground scene welcomes a landscape of flashing lights, fast-paced industrial beats, and, above all, that slurry of high-dopamine energy that has been the latest villainized fixation in the wellness community. While constant exposure to quick bursts of dopamine is detrimental to overall brain health, the influence of techno music and rave culture on stable dopamine release and increased focus demonstrates the benefits of contained indulgence in highly stimulating environments.

If you have opened YouTube in the last year or so, chances are you have seen the thumbnails of a few wellness vloggers shouting the phrase “Dopamine Detox.” Suddenly, everything from social media use, timed coffee consumption, and the type of music you listen to has become an opportunity for habit repair. In our hyper-productive world of extremes, a dopamine detox can be an effective tool to regain mindfulness and ultimately, the focus necessary for productivity. But where do we draw the line between pleasure and reform?

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that provides us with sensations of satisfaction and delight when we engage in behaviors that benefit our overall health. We notice these sensations because of “tonic” and “phasic” fluctuations in dopamine levels in our brains, which are influenced by how we interact with our environment. Dopamine levels are tonic when they lie at stable baseline levels, aiding the general functioning of neural circuits in this state. When we engage in pleasurable activities, these dopamine receptors rapidly fire and increase their concentration in the brain, entering the phasic state that typically lasts only 100–500 milliseconds before eventually dropping back down to the tonic level. This consistent fluctuation between tonic and phasic states is critical for human functioning because it sustains the ability to sense pleasure and more than anything, to seek it out. Dopamine levels need to gradually return to the original baseline level so that the brain can be receptive to the next pleasurable activity. This dopamine-infused reaction is responsible for our survival. It incentivizes the brain to seek out more pleasure-making activities, linking basic human functions such as eating and socializing to sustaining life. Through this incentivization, dopamine is now
considered the driving neurotransmitter responsible for motivation, as it functions not solely as the reward mechanism but as the drive to get the reward. The theory behind dopamine fasting lies in the idea of stabilizing the very baseline that is responsible for the brain’s stimulus. Under standard circumstances, the brain experiences a spike in dopamine in reaction to activities such as food intake and human connection, and then gradually returns to the baseline tonic level. However, the more frequently the brain is stimulated within one period, the higher the baseline gets. An increase in the dopamine baseline means that a much higher stimulus is needed to reach the phasic dopamine release.

Constant access to stimulation is normalized through cell phone access, with notifications constantly streaming in from emails, texts, and social media. We learn to crave perpetual stimulation, and soon, dopamine release from activities that are not instant becomes much harder to achieve. Stimulation becomes problematic when it becomes never-ending because of the increased baseline level. This ingenious neurological mechanism started to motivate us to work toward our survival but fell victim to modern technology’s hyperproductive and stimulating world.

We are, in short, addicted to being stimulated, and a “dopamine detox” is a break from the constant stimulation. Typical detoxes recommend deleting social media, turning off notifications, and delaying caffeine consumption, with some extremes even restricting flash photography to minimize stimulation from light. In decreasing the stimulation level within a given moment, we allow our brains to lower the dopamine baseline, as well as the threshold to reach the phasic state.

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A study by Dr. Martha Newson at the University of Kent School of Anthropology and Conservation examined group bonding in rave scenes using factors of ritual engagement. Newson developed a “4D” model — dance, drugs, drums, and sleep deprivation — to observe the influence of rave culture on social connection. Her research found that people who participated in 4Ds at raves felt both a personal renewal and a connection to others at the rave because of newfound liminality. This liminality expresses a departure from self-consciousness as regular social norms are abandoned through the 4Ds, increasing identity fusion as typical social guardrails are lowered.

Above all, Newson attributes the depth of social connection to rhythmic dancing and the use of psychedelics, explaining that their combined use directly contributed to the joy of group bonding found in ritual environments. Repetitive rhythms in techno music have historically been associated with ritual environments, and just 15 minutes of consistent drumming rhythms have been linked to decreased levels of cortisol, a common stress hormone, as well as increased dopamine. Repetitive rhythms found in rave music also heighten focus, as they create a backdrop of auditory familiarity and increase the brain’s executive functions. Newson also comments on the use of psychedelic drugs in rave environments, condemning drug abuse while simultaneously urging destigmatization, especially as psychedelics are increasingly used to treat mental health conditions. Overall, Newson’s findings demonstrate that rave environments directly contribute to social bonding through the relaxation of trance-like dancing and the dissolution of social norms.

Social stimuli have been observed to increase dopamine release in our brains, as our brains associate socialization with group survival and contribute to releasing the reward chemical. Rave socialization is contained, so the dopamine release that comes from its high-intensity environment is based on limited exposure, unlike the persisting exposure of smartphone notifications that contributes to increased dopamine tonic levels. While dopamine detoxes allow you to step back from the constant noise, raves urge you to jump right into it and reap the rewards of brief stimulation. So, consider the latter if you are ever deciding between a cold shower or raving in a strobe-light-ridden warehouse for an evening! There are benefits of momentary indulgence in the techno trance of the rave scene.