

Can Absence Make the Mind Grow Fonder?

When people forgo a favorite food or activity, their longing for it depends on whether they can find a replacement.



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Of our modern marketplace, *The Economist* wrote: "[Choice seduces the modern consumer at every turn.](#)" But what happens when we stop consuming something? Does that make us want it more? Or less?

The question of whether something becomes more attractive the less you have of it depends on many factors. Having access to a favorite thing (for me, that'd be tomato soup) usually doesn't decrease someone's desire for it. Xianchi Dai and Ayelet Fishbach are authors of [a new study](#) on this seemingly simple

question: "When a product becomes temporarily unavailable, does desire for it increase or decrease over time?"

The gut reaction to reading that statement is probably: Yes! When something isn't available, it's logical to think that we'd miss it. It seems intuitive that being loss-averse humans, seeing the chance to have something disappear would be at least a bummer, and at most devastating. (Just look at [the panic the forecasted chocolate shortage is causing](#).)

But enter what economists call substitute goods—products that can take the place of the original product, without the consumer minding too much. Substitute goods potentially have a big effect on whether abstinence leads to more desire, because if there is a perfect substitute consumers can simply switch over. Another factor the researchers were on the lookout for is whether through not having something, people might realize that they are better off without it. It's not a stretch to imagine that a smoker might appreciate the health benefits once they've quit.

Dai and Fishbach conducted five studies where they tested how abstinence affected desire. They tested everything from whether undergraduates missed food from their hometown, whether Jewish participants had a greater desire of leavened foods during Passover, and even if quitting Facebook for three days would increase or decrease a desire for it. (One challenge of their study was that the researchers speculated that merely reminding participants of the product they are abstaining from might have made them miss it more at the time of the study.)

They found that the desire for a product depends on both the length of non-consumption and whether there are substitutes. For the Passover study, they found that five days in was when participants desired a substitute, such as Matzah, the most. When there was a good substitute, as there was in their social media study, non-consumption led to less desire, whereas when there was a bad substitute (or no substitutes) non-consumption led to more longing.

The researchers found it surprising that the quality of the substitute didn't seem to matter that much—as long as one existed, desire for the original waned. In the

Facebook study, 22 percent of the participants couldn't abstain for 3 days. The participants used Instagram, Whatsapp, and Wechat as substitutes, and the longer the participants used the substitutes, the more they liked them and didn't miss Facebook as much as the cold turkey participants.

The researchers note that their results go against the conventional wisdom that non-consumption leads to more desire. The time spent abstaining, and whether there are substitutes, play a big part in shaping how much we miss those things.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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