When the Blues Won’t Go Away

A new way to beat chronic discontent

It can be a familiar and uncomfortable feeling: You're frazzled, discontent and looking for something to make you happy and fulfilled. You may become enthusiastic about something new in your life—a job, a relationship, a home—but in time you completely lose that excitement and joy. Nothing seems to satisfy you. Maybe you occasionally explode over something small and insignificant.

Psychologist Alan Downs calls this form of low-grade depression “chronic discontent”—and he has suffered from it himself. “For a good 10 years, from the time I was a young adult, I suffered from it,” he says. “And I did a number of things to try to manage it”—including changing jobs, relationships and cities. The condition, technically called dysthymia, can trigger a number of symptoms, including feeling frustrated, stressed, irritable, discouraged, cynical, overwhelmed and fed up.

Real-life examples

Here are two examples from Downs' book, The Half-Empty Heart: A Supportive Guide to Breaking Free From Chronic Discontent:

* John is always taking up a new sport or becoming obsessed with a new high-tech gadget—but none holds his interest for long, and all the trappings wind up in his closet.

* Annette has just broken off her third relationship this year. Each romance seemed promising initially, but after several months she became dissatisfied.

The origins and the results

The bottom line with chronic discontent, Downs says, is dysfunction in the way an individual feels and handles emotions. The result is difficulty feeling anything meaningful. Left untreated, it can develop into a more serious psychological problem, such as major depression. And the seeds of chronic discontent, he says, often go back to childhood when “instead of experiencing our true feelings, we learned to hide them from the world around us.”

An interview with Biography magazine

* **Biography**: What was the hardest part about handling your own chronic discontent?

  * **Downs**: What brought me to the brink was realizing what I had done to so many personal relationships in my life. This was coupled with the obligation I felt as a psychologist to have known better. It was a double whammy.
Symptoms

*Biology*: What are some symptoms to look for?

*Downs*: For one, there's constant disappointment, and also feelings of helplessness, lack of motivation and passion.

*Biology*: We all get irritable from time to time, and complain about our jobs or want a new house or new car. How can you tell the difference?

*Downs*: Chronic discontent is an ongoing trend. You can't find anything that makes you happy for any length of time. That's different from going through a bad patch for a couple of days, which all of us do. However, the person with chronic discontent never wakes up from that bad patch.

*Biology*: So what makes someone suddenly realize she has the condition?

*Downs*: When something hits us—a relationship falls apart, we lose our job—and it throws us into depression. That's often the wake-up call.

An effective tool

*Biology*: In your book, you recommend five weeks of journal writing as a way of lifting chronic discontent. Why?

*Downs*: Journaling has a hidden power that we don't realize until we do it. Sometimes what you feel doesn't hit you until you see your thoughts on paper. Think of journaling as a backdoor approach to becoming more familiar with feelings you haven't allowed yourself to express.

*Biology*: How does someone get started?

*Downs*: List the relationships that mean the most to you. Then focus on one relationship a day in your journal. Write what you really feel about that person, looking for a balance between the positive and negative. If you can't find it, you need to write why that is.
Digital Masters

How South Korea's Samsung rose from also-ran to leader of the worldwide race to digitize your life

Lee Jong Jin has little reason to leave his sofa. In a corner of his 50-inch TV screen, he can link to his online bank or control his air conditioner—all while interacting with a game show. Lee is one of thousands involved in trials of Samsung Electronics' Home Network, which allows digital products to “talk” to each other.

Over the last decade Samsung has become the leader in the global market for color televisions, VCRs, liquid costal displays (LCD) and digital memory devices. Since 1999, revenues have doubled, and profits have risen 20 times on the strength of a unique strategy. “To catch up with the early birds, we had to be the fastest in commercializing original technologies,” says CEO Yun Jong Yong.

Speed is everything

As Asian contenders race to control the digital age, companies from all fields are drawn in, blurring old battle lines. Consumer-electronics giants are teaming with software firms while computer brands like Dell and HP are redefining themselves as consumer-electronics companies. Those slow to converge get run over. Motorola has lost market share to rivals that have been quicker to add snazzy digital accessories, such as cameras, to phones.

While Sony battles the likes of Microsoft and Nokia in the courts to control proprietary standards, they have yet to secure their place. Samsung, in contrast, waits for others to develop winning technology; then it improves on it, and pumps out a greater variety of finished products faster than anyone else. CEO Yun says speed is the key to all perishable commodities, whether sushi or cell phones. “Even expensive fish becomes cheap in a day or two,” he says. “For both sashimi shops and the digital industry, inventor is detrimental. Speed is everything.”

Commercializing original technologies

Samsung is well-suited to today's lightning fast business cycles. It didn't invent the cell phone, but makes the largest variety: 100 new models a year versus Nokia's two dozen. It didn't pioneer the “flash” memory used in MP3s or digital cameras (Toshiba did), but now controls this profitable market.

As a result, Samsung has overtaken archrival Sony in profits and total stock market value. Sony ruled a slower age when it could bring out a new gadget like the Walkman as a luxury item, then gradually lower the price and widen the market over time. Now, companies need to bring out a stream of new products that sell immediately at high volume for a relatively low price before being quickly displaced by the next new things. Samsung is king of this age—the fastest-growing brand name in the world, according to Inter-brand consulting.
Samsung’s rise

Its rise dates to the mid-1990s, when chairman Lee Kun Hee set out to transform Samsung from a second-tier manufacturer into a first-rate brand. When the Asian financial crisis hit in 1997, Samsung was already in reform mode. The company quickly axed 40 percent of its work force. The one thing it didn’t cut was R&D. While rivals trimmed back, Samsung boosted research spending in growth areas like semiconductors and LCD screens.

Today, nearly a quarter of Samsung’s 88,000 employees are researchers. They blitz the market with digital products, each with a twist—color LCDs on cell phones, phones with PDAs. On the other hand, many experts say that simplicity—figuring out how to make all these gadgets easy to use—is the key to being competitive in the digital future. That’s a task that plays to Samsung’s strengths.