Embarrassment as a Health Design Strategy

Via Springwise comes word of a couple of intriguing ideas about how to enable people to shame themselves toward better health. The first, a refrigerator magnet from Brazil attaches to your refrigerator, and will automatically alert your social network any time you open up your fridge for a late night snack—in an effort to make you eat less. The second, a photo sharing app, automatically shares an embarrassing photo of you with your social network if you fail to accomplish your stated goal—in an effort to make you stick to your goals, whatever they are.

These are both examples of something that neuroscientist and author Mark Changizi has described as smart pain—in effect, the idea that by inflicting a small amount of pain in a clever way now, designers can help people avoid a much larger amount of unpleasantness in the future.

As he argued:

Pain is crucial, of course, because it keeps us safe, and prevents us from engaging in acts that injure or slice off parts of ourselves. Although wishing for a world without pain sounds initially alluring, one quickly realizes that such a world would be hell — it would be a world of the walking bruised and hideously injured (unless you’re into that)

Pain is designed to be elicited before injury actually occurs, with the hope that it prevents injury altogether... More importantly for our purposes here, pain is rigged to be elicited in scenarios that would have been dangerous for our ancestors out in nature. A great example of what happens to animals who encounter injurious situations they have no pain mechanisms to deter them from is when natural gas accumulates in low spots. One animal gets there and dies. Another animal sees an easy meal, and also dies. Soon there are many dozens of dead animals there, lured to their death, with life-snuffing injuries sneaking up on them without the benefit of warning pain.

And there’s your problem! We no longer live in the nature that shaped our bodies and brains, and the dangerous scenarios we now face aren’t the same as those our ancestors faced. Electricity, ban saws, nail guns, stove tops, toasters perched next to bathtubs, and countless other modern dangers exist today, dangers that we’re not designed to have safety-ensuring pain to protect us from (until it’s too late).

Changizi’s examples are technological, but I think food—and the refrigerator—is an even better example. We evolved in a world where food was scarce and now, at least for most of us in the United States, the challenge is to stop indulging in food that tastes good before those indulgences harm our long-term health.

Taken together, though, these examples are representative of the broader point that Changizi made: that, in effect, we are gaining the technological capacities to smartly inflict pain, whether physical pain or social pain, on people in order to shift their decision-making. What I think these signals highlight, though, is that one of the most powerful kinds of “smart pain” might be using social forces, like embarrassment, to make better long-term choices.

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