New: Understanding Our Need for Novelty and Change

Winifred Gallagher

New: Understanding Our Need for Novelty and Change

Winifred Gallagher

New: Understanding Our Need for Novelty and Change Winifred Gallagher
An exploration of how humans respond to novelty from the *New York Times* – bestselling author of *Rapt*

Why are we attuned to the latest headline, diet craze, smartphone, and fashion statement? Why do we relish a change of scene, eye attractive strangers, and develop new interests?

Follow a crawling baby around and you'll see that right from the beginning, nothing excites us more than something new and different. Our unique human brains are biologically primed to engage with and even generate novelty. This "neophilia" has enabled us to thrive in a world of cataclysmic change, but now we confront an unprecedented deluge of new things—one that shows no sign of slowing. In *New* acclaimed behavioral science writer Winifred Gallagher, using cutting-edge research and interviews with countless experts, shows us how we can use our adaptive gift to navigate more skillfully through our rapidly changing world by focusing on the new things that really matter.

New: Understanding Our Need for Novelty and Change Details

Date	:	Published (first published December 29th 2011)
ISBN	:	
Author	:	Winifred Gallagher
Format	:	Kindle Edition 272 pages
Genre	:	Psychology, Nonfiction, Culture, Society, Science, Audiobook

From Reader Review New: Understanding Our Need for Novelty and Change for online ebook

Melody Warnick says

Intriguing, densely researched book about why we crave new things.

Ruchi Chaube says

The book is the sister half of "Rapt" from Winifred Gallagher. The book is very informative and to a greater extent inspiring! Would be good to read the two books in sequence. I loved the flow while reading, got me carried away and didn't realize when I reached the half and then the end! Awesome read!!

Nura Yusof says

This book takes us through the evolution of neophilia, our affinity for novelty through the ages. The worrisome concern is that this affinity has changed from being about adapting, learning, or creating new things that matter while dismissing the rest as distractions to addiction for things that are multitudinous and yet useless.

An easy read but at times, TLDR-ish which is ironic because the readers this book aims to target, would include those who have heightened neophilia and therefore, require more scintillating stimulus of which how this book is written may not deliver.

Nancy says

As Homo Sapiens, we are hardwired to seek change and adapt. From our very first ancestors on the African continent, through the changes of the earth's and climate cycles, they adapted or faced obliteration. The Neanderthal, our cousins, had large brains and knew how to use tools. However, they were resistant to change and traveled little more than 15 kilometers during their lifetimes. When water dried up or the climate changed, they refused to change with it and died off. Meanwhile, our African ancestors, upon meeting the same challenges, migrated and eventually found themselves on every continent linking each of our human family together with this capacity to seek out new and better for the sake of survival.

Today's homo sapiens share the innate desire to survive but no longer need the skills of days of yore (that's a long, long time ago). The author deconstructs the different studies done by sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists while providing modern day (within the past couple hundred years) examples of neophiles. While the societies consist of approximately 15% neophiles (actively seeking new thrills or change), 15% neophobes (resistant to change), the majority of people lie somewhere in the middle. The author explores the biological, cultural and individual reasons for our places on the continuum.

This is not the most interesting book for a person without leanings toward anthropology, psychology or

sociology. On the other hand, there were parts that I found fascinating although much of it is theory and not hard science (hence the above stated studies). I enjoyed it in the way that I am a neophile in regards to sociology, anthropology and psychology. Always seeking the next thrill, I am. Kind of like a college professor. Just a thrill a minute.

If you are looking for a book to answer the questions of how much is too much and discuss the evils of technology and techno-addicts, this is not the book you want. The book simply discusses the way we seek out new information and why along with application to our own lives.

Well written and researched.

Stephanie Karina says

When I picked up this book, I was very excited I love reading books about the meaning of something. I liked how it sound how homo Sapiens adapt to new things and the reason behind it. I only got to the first chapter it was extremely boring in my opinion it sounded like a robot or sounded like it was a age from high school history text book, it was too boring for me I had to go back to understand and to able to find it interesting again. For me it's a one, not my cup of tea.

Molly says

Picked up "New" because I thoroughly enjoyed Gallagher's book, "Rapt," which remains a favorite on my non-fiction list. "New" is really a sidebar to the theme developed in "Rapt," what was how to focus ones attention on the things that matter (and the science of why our brains resist doing so!). Aristotle said that "we are what we repeatedly do," and if "Rapt" is about how to ignore the distractions that keep us from doing what matters, "New" is about the distractions themselves.

Not just email, although that's part of it, but all sorts of hits of novelty and change. On one hand, we're fortunate that our brains are wired for neophilia, else we'd never have left the Savannah! But, to borrow from Neil Postman, we're "amusing ourselves to death" with new electronics, web sites, digital entertainment, etc ... and we're awash in triviality. But, there's also a thread of neophobia that runs through society, and Gallagher makes an excellent point that this has kept us from solving head-on the big problems of our time (and points to the civilizations in history that resisted change, and collapsed: Rome, France …).

She goes into the science of neophobic and neophiliac brains - pros and cons. In short, "New" is a reminder of individual self-government and in making smart compromises as we navigate society's mania for the new. We've all heard this, but can use a reminder.

After reading the book, and making a renewed vow to limit time on email and curb impulse shopping, I suggested that our family turn off all devices and sit down to play a board game (remember those?), which was super fun. It's all about the balance.

Katie Lynn says

I already knew I was a neophile before reading this book. No question. When going out to eat, you're likely to hear me say "that sounds disgusting; I'll try it." When it comes to activities, if they could totally tank or be surprisingly awesome, I'm totally for it. And my fashion sense I say is borderline hideous because I'm going to take something few others would and rock that look! Anyone out there who doesn't know me just thinks I'm annoying and freakish now. Meh.

Paul Silvia - "by becoming more curious and interested in life, you'll also have a more curious and interesting life."
Talk to strangers! Especially the ones you think you have absolutely nothing in which you could relate.

"When you don't feel in charge, you're vulnerable to the senses of hopelessness and helplessness that over time can spiral downward into depression."
But I guess some of us feel like taking risks is taking charge. Or the new and unknown leads us to predictable and pleasurable emotions. Or we just don't want to live in fear and so we smack it in the face before it can hit us and hope for the best.

Sensation seekers (according to Marvin Zuckerman)... yep. I think I am one. He conducted an experiment in the 1960s in which he put people in a dark, soundproofed room for hours. That's supposed to sound boring, I guess, but it sounds like a great time to let your imagination explore itself and nothing else to me! Back to Zuckerman's sensation seekers: "...they shared a pronounced inclination toward novel, varied, complex, and intense experience." "Sensation seeking isn't just about the quest for new experience but is also about the degree of emotional intensity, energy, and concentration--the zeal--with which it's pursued."
Don't just go on a trip... go on a trip, go to a foreign country where you are not fluent in the language, by yourself, for 6 weeks, with no agenda.

Vartanian -"Novelty seeking is talked about as if there's a new object out there somewhere that you find, but usually it's the perceiver who has to interpret it as novel. Creative people can see things in a fresh way and produce new ideas because they can relax the usual perceptual and conceptual constraints that define entities."
One of the reasons I read such varied subjects.

'At first glance, a life of fewer possibilities may not seem appealing, "but what really enables us to exercise our freedom is having freedom within constraints," says Schwartz. "Many people found the old traditional norms too constraining, but the answer to too much constraint is not no constraint, which can produce a kind of endless distractibility."'

Andrea McDowell says

New is a lovely pop psychology read; not as good as Gallagher's *Rapt*, which remains one of my favourites, but good nonetheless. In it, Gallagher tackles three things. The first--why are humans obsessed with the new?--she brings back to our evolutionary period on the African Savannah, of course, and how having a constant eye open for threats and opportunities is a pretty good survival strategy. Her discussion here about why we differ in our preference for novelty and how those differences play out globally was pretty cool. The second--how is this playing out today?--was interesting and mildly depressing, as she chronicles a long list of

celebrity-scandals-of-the-week and disposable consumerisms and what this is doing to us individually and as a species--i.e., turning us into vapid idiots with a limited shelf life.

The third issue--wouldn't it be great if we could do something constructive with our neophilia?--she summarizes as "too much dumb new stuff, not enough good new ideas." Pretty much. I'd love to believe we could have a collective cultural awakening and decide, in unison, that we now have enough new charger plates and scented candles and maybe it's time to learn something new about, say, gardening, economics, darning socks, local bird species, bread recipes or Bach fugues, but I'm not holding my breath. Would it be good for us? Yes. Would it contribute to longer, happier, more interesting lives? Yes. Would it save us a ton of time and money? Yes. Would it stand us in good stead when this neverending party of industrial capitalism comes to a screeching halt? Yes. Does it require effort, and therefore appear in the moment as less fun and more work than picking up some new bit of plastic crap on the way home from a long day at work when you need a quick pick-me-up? Yes. Verdict? Cheap plastic crap it is.

On this one the Victorians had us beat nine ways to Sunday. When the rich boys got all the toys they thought they needed and their houses were full of goodies (and, it must be said, servants), they didn't then run around replacing it all on a seasonal basis with something marginally more up to date. They decided to teach themselves geology, biology, or chemistry, or pursued some artistic calling, in any case putting their time to something approaching good use. Why don't we do this anymore?

Not that this is in the book--I am getting off track. To sum up: it's a fun and quick read (I got through it in about two hours), and there's no better introduction to psychology and neuroscience than Winifred Gallagher, who writes clearly and well on her chosen topics. It's a good subject, well covered, well written, and worthwhile. But I'd bet my own personal mountain of useless crap that we as a culture keep on shopping while the ship we're on goes down.

Laura says

This starts with an interesting example of how we relate to technology as neophiles or neophobes, and goes on to talk about that continuum. Given the push to embrace the Neat! New! Improved! tools that can assist with teaching in schools (note: some people actually think this can improve teaching, but these are only *tools*), I was particularly interested in this topic.

There are two problems with this book: the first is that he hammers points home, repeating and repeating and repeating so that there's no chance we don't understand, and the second is that some of the comments about how "popular" culture has changed are simply incorrect (many sitcoms, for example, still use laugh tracks - clearly we haven't evolved that much).

Still, this is food for thought and could possibly help those with different comfort levels understand the other's discomfort with those opposite them.

Alexis says

I did not read the Kindle edition of this book, but that's the one that popped up first.

Anyway, I read about this book in the Globe and Mail and was fascinated. I thought I was a strong neophile (love of new), but I actually am a moderate with strong tendencies, which probably makes me more balanced. Neophilia is the fascination with the new or novel and it was necessary for human evolution and adaptation. However, it can also result in flighty or risk taking behaviour.

After talking about the characteristics of neophiles and neophobes, Gallagher goes on to talk about how we can stay sane in a world that throws information at us in a dizzying fashion. She also talks about how our brains have adapted to take in more new information than ever before.

This wasn't really what I signed up for when I picked up this book, but it was still interesting.

Julie says

meh...ironically, i didnt encounter any new insights fom this book.

Ryan Miller says

My notes:

"New argues that our rewards will far outweigh our frustrations if we stay true to the evolutionary purpose of our neophilia, or affinity for novelty: to help us adapt to, learn about, or create the new things that matter, while dismissing the rest as distractions.

Alexander Pope's advice: "Be not the first by whom the new are tried, no yet the last to lay the old aside."

For example, the frequency of a certain gene that's linked to robust novelty seeking varies greatly around the globe. Its prevalence among Westerners of European descent is a hefty 25 percent, for example, yet it's very rare in traditionally conservative China.

To thrive amid unprecedented amounts of novelty, we must shift from being mere seekers of the new to being connoisseurs of it.

A wonderful little story about five-year-old Albert Einstein, who was very slow to speak and whose parents feared he was none too bright, shows us how neophilia works and what it's for. One day, when he was sick in bed, the boy was given a compass to fiddle with to keep him occupied. The new plaything made him wonder about magnetic fields, which got him interested in physics, and, well, you know the rest. Few of us are Einsteins, but all of us have that same capacity to be curious about something new that sparks the learning and sustained interest that lead to achievements great and small.

To survive, you must be aroused by the new and different. To be efficient and productive, however, you must focus your finite mental energy and attention on those novel sights and sounds, thoughts and feelings that somehow matter and screen out the rest.

Sometimes, you just need the missing piece of the puzzle, and something that seems irrelevant can lead you to a major discover. A change of venue - taking a walk or breaking for a meal - means new stimuli, one of

which may show you the way.

The late economist Tibor Scitovsky, who studied the relationship between happiness and consumerism, argued that buying lots of inexpensive "pleasures" - arousing, gratifying things that, like a fresh bouquet or a great piece of chocolate, always evoke a wow - is a better investment in your quality of life than spending on "comforts," or more serious, usually more expensive things like kitchen appliances that you soon take for granted. You can also enjoy more ooh-la-la's if you take a short break during a pleasurable event. Like an intermission at a concert, a pause during lovemaking or a break for a glass of water during a massage interrupts the adaptation process, so you can reexperience the arousal of the activity's novel delights.

The explosion of novelty in the contemporary world has greatly accelerated the dynamics of arousal and adaptation, and thus the cycle of change, on the social as well as the individual level. We now get used to and over the latest, hottest thing almost as soon as we get excited by it. The top ten movies, DVDs, and music downloads are apt to shift every week, not because of improvements in quality but simply because they're new. If something is to sustain your interest in this culture of been there, done that, it must somehow delay or short-circuit the adaptation process. One way to effect that is what MIT anthropologist Grant McCracken calls "throwing something into the signal that doesn't quite make sense.

What makes something interesting now is that it's ever so slightly counterexpectational.

...neophilia has been criticized in some quarters as a shallow search for quick and easy arousal. McCracken takes a more sanguine view: "Some people don't like it, but there's a growing number of us who love novelty and the chance to revisit our usual ways of thinking. That's the fun of it."

"if you couldn't get interested in new things, you'd constantly be afraid, because you'd freak out every time one came along." Whether you're drawn to explore the great outdoors or the great books, he says, "by becoming more curious and interested in life, you'll also have a more curious and interesting life."

Arguably the patron saint of curiosity, Charles Darwin made his celebrated "discovery" of evolution by natural selection not in a blinding flash but over decades of study, observation, and experimentation that produced many incremental insights. Isaac Newton was history's greatest scientist, but even he acknowledged the intellectual elbow grease that original thinking requires: "I keep the subject constantly before me and wait until the first dawnings open little by little before me into the full light."

Negaive emotional responses to novelty can protect you from harm, but they can also discourage you from learning new things and pursuing potetial rewards. All of us can look back regretfully at opportunities we failed to pursue out of fear. If only you hadn't been scared to try snorkeling on vacation, you could have seen a whole new world. If you hadn't worried about buying that great condo in a transitional neighborhood, you wouldn't be priced out of the market now. If you hadn't chickened out on that blind date, you could have ended up with the dreamboat. The twenty-first century college campus offers a dismaying and stunningly underremarked example of how anxiety about the risk associated with new ways of thinking can limit learning and stunt creativity. Virtually all the people quoted in these pages, many of whom are professors as well as researches, bemoan the dramatic increase in the number of students who are reluctant to come up with fresh ideas, argue with their teachers, or otherwise challenge the status quo. Some blame this neophobic behavior on a fear of rocking the boat during a prolonged period of economic uncertainty and increased competition for jobs and other opportunities. Others point to a coddled generation's sense of entitlement to easy As, and still others to some combination of both. Whatever the reason for the increase in the young's avoid response to new ways of thinking, Trinity College's Barbara Benedict, who has studied curiosity's representation in literature, speaks for many academics in calling the phenomenon "extremely dispiriting, an

outrage." Instead of challenging a professor's ideas, she says, "these young people want him to her to keep the authority figure's role straight, so they can keep their roles as A students straight.

Taking that job in a new city means a big raise, but what if I hate it there? The stranger at the bar is attractive, but suppose he's a weirdo? This start-up seems promising, but what if it flops? That Outward Bound trip sounds exciting, but what if it's too challenging for me? Deciding to go for it and engage with the new prospect could reward you with a career boost, a lover, wealth, or an unforgettable vacation. On the other hand, you could end up miserable, scared, bankrupt, or embarrassed. Aside from a tempermentally fearless minority of us, says Silvia, "novelty and anxiety-you really can't have just one."

All of us feel and function best when we achieve a balance between the need to be safe and the desire to be stimulated, which produces the ideal state called "optimum arousal." Too much exciting novelty and change, and you feel jittery or even panicky; not enough, and you're overcome with ennui. The level that's just right for you largely depends on your temperament, or your personality's more biological, heritable foundation.

...intellectual novelty seekers must have the toughness and drive required to withstand the opposition, even ridicule, that new ideas often evoke.

Story Musgrave, MD, who's best known as the astronaut who repaired the Hubble telescope while floating in space some 370 miles above earth, expressed the neophiliac's strong bold streak very early on his family's thousand-acre New England farm. Describing himself as a 'born explorer,' he says, 'I was in the forests alone at night at the age of three and on the rivers in my home-built rafts at five.' By the time he turned ten, he was also operating and repairing tractors and other agricultural machinery- experience that would serve him well in his future career. After dropping out of prep school, the restless young Musgrave joined the Marines and quickly fell in love with planes. In a textbook illustration of neophilia's purpose, this new interest led him to learn all sorts of skills, from flying to aviation mechanics. In ime, he would put in nearly eighteen thousand hours in civilian and military aircraft as pilot, instructor, and acrobatics specialist. He would also make some six hundred parachute jumps, including free falls to study human aerodynamics. Supplying insight into the born thrill seeker's low-idling tempermental sangfroid, he says, "I'm a restless wanderer but in a calm, serene, and mindful way - certainly not agitated or frenetic." After leaving the Marines, Musgrave focused on exploring new intellectual horizons. The high-school dropout eventually gathered postdoctoral degrees in mathematics, business administration, physiology, chemistry, literature, and computer science. For good measure, he also earned a doctorate in medicine from Columbia University and completed a surgical internship. The NASA program, which began in 1958, might have been invented for intellectual and physical neophiliacs like Musgrave. The pilot-scientists-mechanic-surgeon was one of the first eleven people chosen from four thousand applicants. His thirty year career with the agency lasted from the Apollo era of the 1960s to the space-shuttle program of the 1990s and involved everything from designing experiments to making five space walks. His personal goal has never been money or fame, he says, but simply "to live on the high ground of ultimate performance just for the sake of it, with no other gain." As to the drive that has led him to embody neophilia's high purpose of adapting to, learning about, and acheiving new things, he says only that "there's an unquenchable restlessness and curiosity driven by some energy that pushes me forward."

Sensation seeking isn't just about the quest for new experience but is also about the degree of emotional intensity, energy, and concentration - the zeal- with which it's pursued, whether in work or sports, relationships or the arts, driving style or food preferences.

Whatever your characteristic response to the new, you need to understand and work with its inevitable pluses and minuses. Emily Dickenson's pained avoidance of novel stimuli was such that she confined herself to her home and yard, yet that sae sensitivity inspired her exquisite poetry.

It's not always easy to manage the ups and downs of one's own neophilia, but as Story Musgrove's adventurousness and Eleanor Roosevelt's sensitivity ake plain, the larger population benefits from our variety.

Explaining why so many explorers willingly undergo excrutiating torments on their quests, Robert Falcon (who died of starvation while returning from the South Pole) put it this way: "Every day some new fact comes to light - some new obstacle which threatens the gravest obstruction. I suppose this is the reason which makes the game so well worth playing." Underscoring this connection between the new and the pleasurable, Vanderbilt University neuroscientist David Zald says "Passionate surfers and skiers claim that the wave or the slope is never exactly the same. There's always that sense of newness and exploration.

Like dopamine, neophilia is all about anticipation, desire, wanting.

Exhibit A is the astoundingly popular phenomenon of video gaming. About seventy million Americans already indulge, and the average young person devotes ten thousand hours to the activity before turning twenty-one.

Like neophiliacs, wiggly ADHD kids are subject to boredom, which could be relived by exciting experiences as well as stimulants that raise their level of arousal.

The children in their ADHD study who carried 7R were hyper and impulsive for sure, but they had none of the neurological or cognitive impairments that many of the other kids so diagnose had. In fact, despite being the proverbial handful, these bright, enterprising youngsters struck researchers as "superkids." Once they either matured into better self-control or transferred to a more compatible school, they performed well acadmenically.

Observing that downhill skiers have a higher frequency of the 7T allele, he says "we gravitate toward things that we can do and enjoy. So maybe it's not entirely "this is how your brain was hardwired, so this is how you behave." Maybe it's subtler, as in 'people with faster reactions are drawn to different activities than those with slower reactions.' Our postindustrial culture, which rewards people who are suited to spending long hours staring at data on glowing screens, may look askance at neophiliacs in the schoolroom and office, but adventurous, explorative behavior can be highly adaptive, particularly in fluid situations.

Highlighting the fact that many neophiliacs lead successful lives - and that there's more to life than crunching data at a desk - he adds that "you wouldn't believe the amount of mail I get from people, particularly Californian entrepreneurial types, who say that they hated school and were diagnosed with ADHD, but now they're successful innovators."

...individuals who carried the allele lived longer and were much likelier to be active well into old age, playing tennis, say, or hiking into their eighties and even nineties.

...by the time you reach your sixties, your urge to experiment and take risks typically falls to half of what it was in high-spirited adolescence.

"Don't mope in your room. Go invent something. That is the American message. Electricity. Flight. The telephone. Television. Computers. It never stops."

(more)

Tingting Wei says

repetitive

---

solilyquize says

I tried. I got to page 100. I barely even got through the first chapter, which was painful enough. It read like a high school textbook. So dry and so fact filled. But the facts were not even remotely interesting - at least not to me. Very redundant. Very flat. Didn't care for the verbiage or the writing style. This book was just not for me. Not at all.

Kathy Nealen says

Describes how our attraction to change has helped humanity survive and thrive throughout history. The author also illustrates how humanity's diverse reaction to change ranging from extremely "neophobic" to extremely "neophiliac" has benefited us by allowing us to "hedge our bets" as a species. Concludes with a discussion of how to adapt to our most recent change - our ever increasing flow of information.
