

Do You Suffer From Free Lunch Syndrome?



Send him mail.



“Insight for the Young and Unrestrained” is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

Most people suffer from a debilitating psychological parasite known as Free Lunch Syndrome (FLS). FLS is so widespread, that it is rarely ever noticed. When everyone around you is sick, your standard of health adjusts accordingly. It’s been called many other names, like poverty consciousness, or scarcity mentality, and these terms are just as appropriate. FLS is terminal in most cases; victims will carry it until the day they die. But what exactly is Free Lunch Syndrome, and why should you care about something that seemingly everyone carries and manages to get along with just fine?

Free Lunch Syndrome sufferers view all or most interactions with other people and the world as potential for loss and will attempt to avoid as much of this “risky” behavior as possible. They want to minimize loss so badly that they will go to absurd lengths to shape their lives around which courses of action will require the least possible sacrifice from them. They believe that good things and fortune happen only by occasional chance, luck, or the intervention of a force beyond their control, whereas loss, hardship, and degradation are everywhere and great attention must be put into preventing them. FLS sufferers are economic hypochondriacs. Anything that can go wrong in their life, however outlandish or unlikely, absolutely will go wrong.

People with FLS are perplexed by people and organizations who have managed to amass large amounts of wealth. Because they lack the capacity to understand how someone could go from having nearly nothing to having a lot, they invent a hazy explanation that success could only have come through nefarious means. If someone is successful, their success must have come at the expense of someone else. Because one of the side effects of FLS is a chronic tendency to victimize oneself, the delusional patient will often assume that it was he, or someone like himself, who was somehow taken advantage of in other people’s paths to prosperity. He’ll come to resent anyone with a higher standard of living than the arbitrary one of his immediate neighbors and fellow FLS carriers.

Because an FLS patient believes it is mostly, if not entirely, beyond his control to improve his circumstances in life and actually produce something of value for himself or others, he will dedicate an inordinate amount of his time and energy toward figuring out how to take advantage of the good graces or oversights of those better off than he. This is where the name “free lunch” is derived. He will not ever pay a single cent for anything he believes there may be a way to acquire for free. He lacks the capacity to see the chain of causality by which the item or service he receives for no exchange on his behalf was, at some point, created through the efforts of someone else. He only knows that the step immediately preceding his acquisition of the goods required no hardship, therefore (for him, at least) it was “free.”

His shortsightedness does not allow him to understand that everything ever produced by human minds or hands was not free for the ones who created it. He does not understand why “they” don’t just make everything free for everyone all the time. He is like a goldfish attempting to fit the mighty ocean into the perspective of his fishbowl world. He cannot extrapolate and apply his actions on an absolute scale to see that if everyone acted as he did that the world would collapse into total chaos and technological regress in a matter of moments. He maintains no proper understanding of the fact that everything must come from something, no matter how superficially insignificant it may seem.

In the long run, Free Lunch Syndrome creates a far more serious condition known as Perpetual Struggle Syndrome (PSS). PSS arises when an individual has adopted a philosophy of consumption by which he always lives exactly within his means, or as far beyond his means as he can manage to temporarily get away with. The idea of unused capital being stockpiled for some better future use, or invested in something which reciprocates back onto him over a long period of time is utterly foreign to him. He sees only that he has x amount of matter to work with, and that is exactly how much he is going to expend. He lives, as the name suggests, in a perpetual struggle for existence. Every day or week or month is about making it to the end alive and doing what must be done to survive while fulfilling his ever-changing momentary needs. It was only our ancestors’ ability to project from the present into the long-term future that allowed us to crawl out of the caves and into the developed world, and this skill is still almost entirely absent from the rest of the animal kingdom (with the minor exception of those who store food for regularly occurring times of shortage such as winter).

Many wonder where Free Lunch Syndrome comes from. How could something so blatantly counter to the survival and well-being of the individual be a natural part of our design? It’s an unfortunate carryover from childhood, a time when all of us were dependent upon our parents and the handouts of those more capable than we. Neither parents nor societal figureheads ever seem to explain to children the nature of where everything they consume comes from. They never get the point across that, at some point, for their lives and society

as a whole to prosper and sustain itself that they must make the tumultuous transition from consumer to producer. They spend their whole lives waiting for someone to take care of them, which also means they will never properly be able to take care of anyone else. The older one gets without ridding himself of the FLS they inherited in childhood, the less likely it is that they will ever overcome it.

There is only one known cure for FLS. A patient must gradually gain awareness of their disease through the negative effects it brings into their lives. They cannot take proactive steps toward a cure if they are oblivious to the symptoms. An injury which carries no pain will always go untreated. Conversely, they must also be shown the positive effects and benefits that they receive when they earn the respect, social equity, and tangible riches which follow when a mindset of self-responsibility is adopted. They've got to see that it is entirely possible to go on the offensive in life and actually make things happen by hunting down opportunity instead of waiting for someone else to bring it to them. It can be extremely difficult to bring these concepts into a person's awareness when all they have ever known is a life of perpetual struggle and mooching to survive. And if they are to become successful people, they'll have to take the even harder step of letting go of their resentment for success and the successful people they've known throughout life.

For some people, this is a radical change from everything they have ever known and every value they have held since childhood. Such a transition is never easy. No one likes admitting a long-held belief is wrong or that the actions they took while under the influence of such a belief were wasted. It requires a degree of self-honesty and humility which few people are capable of, but the sooner a faulty course is corrected the sooner they can arrive at their desired destination. It's also the only way a person can become well off and influential enough to start extending their help to others who have not yet learned how to start creating the life or society they want.

If you know someone suffering from FLS (and you almost certainly do), your best hope of helping cure them is to inspire them in whatever way you can. If you have managed to rid yourself of this disease, or were fortunate enough to have influences in your life which peacefully guided you through it, show them in terms they can understand how much better your life is because of it. Show them how much more noble and admirable it is to be a person who makes his own way in life and contributes to the bettering of others in his pursuit to better himself.

Remember that FLS sufferers will be in denial of their own disorder, and so you will have to talk to them on a level they can understand and which makes it easy to gradually bring new awareness and desire for improvement. Few people at this stage take criticism well, so be gentle in your revelations. If you can get them to respect your input and advice, you've got the power to make a valuable and productive human being out of a previously parasitic existence. It's the best thing you could ever do for them, and it's exactly what the world

needs right now.