

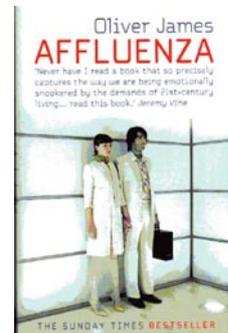
Oliver James : Affluenza – how to be successful and stay sane

Vermilion 2007

Alison Morgan March 2009

The Affluenza Virus is a set of values which increase our vulnerability to emotional distress. It entails placing a high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous.

This book offers a compelling analysis of the causes and symptoms of the virus, which affects all Western societies. It starts with a questionnaire for you to self-diagnose, follows with a series of interviews all over the world with people who are or may be infected, and makes suggestions for appropriate vaccination – including the observation that *‘wherever I went I found that religion seemed to be a powerful vaccine’*.



The Virus

Virus values screw us up by conflating what we want with what we truly need, Having with Being.

‘In a developed nation, rates of emotional distress increase in direct proportion to the degree of income inequality. Since Selfish Capitalism is the main cause of inequality in developed nations, this strongly suggests that Selfish Capitalism is not a good way to run things, if you care about people’s emotional well-being. Rates are at least twice as high in English-speaking nations as in mainland Western Europe. Since the former are far more Selfish Capitalist than the latter, this is further reason to avoid it if you do not want to have a screwed-up population.’ America is the most emotionally distressed of nations.

Banking – in this world you’ve got the haves and the have-nots, and then there’s the have-mores. As their wealth increases, their expenditure laps up the extra.

Studies from 14 countries reveal that people who strongly favour the key Virus values – money, possessions, physical and social appearances, and fame – are at greater risk of emotional distress. The reason these values are so bad for our well-being were best summarised by Erich Fromm [50s-60s].. He presented the stark choice that the American variety of capitalism offered as ‘To Have or To Be’. 13.

Packard showed in 1957 how US business shifted its emphasis after the II W War from production to marketing; as ownership increased, it became necessary to stimulate the economy by stimulating want as opposed to need. Now – the richer a nation, and the greater the inequality of income distribution, the more distressed its people are.

Wherever I went I found that religion seemed to be a powerful vaccine. Research has long shown that on average, regular churchgoers suffer less depression or unhappiness than believers. 20

The Virus impedes the meeting of 4 fundamental human needs: feeling secure, being part of a community, feeling competent, and being autonomous and authentic.

- Insecurity – comparing your lot with others is not a prescription for feeling safe
- Alienation – the Virus prevents you from meeting your need to connect with family, friends and community by relegating them to a low priority
- Feeling incompetent – however successful you are, it’s not enough
- Inauthenticity and the feeling you’ve been hypnotised – the Virus creates a barrier of false wants between us and our true desires

The Vaccines

1. Have positive volition. Lower depression in China: emphasis on effort not results, on group standing rather than individual standing.
 - Your best is good enough
 - It is not your fault that you are who you are

- Accept that the situation you are in is chosen by you, and you are a free agent with volition
 - Form a truthful view of yourself and your society, rather than living in a bubble of illusions
 - Hope for the best and expect the worst
 - Don't be scared of examining your failures as much as your successes
 - Don't take responsibility for what not your fault, or for others' achievements
 - Avoid b/w simplification, embrace complexity, tolerate contradictions
 - Be as self-concordant as possible (align your values with your life)
2. Replace virus motives with intrinsic ones. Intrinsic motivation means doing things for the pleasure of the activity, the process rather than its completion. Typical intrinsic goals are supporting others, beauty and self-expression. Virus motives are more damaging than virus goals – people with virus goals can have well-being as long as they have intrinsic motives. Eg pursuit of wealth becomes harmful if it becomes a substitute for Being, not in itself.
 - Audit your motives and goals
 - Identify work activities which have intrinsic motivation
 - Identify play activities which have intrinsic motivation
 3. Be beautiful (not attractive)
 - Rediscover the meaning of beauty by observing small children
 - When trying on clothes, forget about what others might think
 - Ask 'will this make me more beautiful' when considering cosmetic purchases
 - learn from Danish men – who choose partners on who they are, not appearance
 - become more emotionally intelligent – you need to know what you feel
 4. Consume what you need (not what advertisers want you to want)
 - Keep it real when it comes to the size of your mortgage
 - Be grateful for what you have got
 5. Meet your children's needs (not those of little adults)
 - Disentangle your parents' values from your own
 - Scrutinise how you were persuaded to accede to their wishes as a child
 - Colonise your inherited values – choose
 6. Educate your children (don't brainwash them)
 - Be aware girls more prone to prize-hunting exam fever
 - Think to what extent you were the victim of this yourself
 - Discourage them from believing the purpose of education is to launch a career
 7. Enjoy motherhood
 - Divide the care of small children between you
 - Use nannies not kindergartens
 - Enjoy being a mother
 - Don't deceive yourself about your reasons for returning to work (do you really need the money?)
 8. Be authentic (not sincere), vivacious (not hyperactive), playful (not game-playing). In our society, your sincerity is accepted if you are believed to be acting on the basis of powerful emotions (sexual infidelity, invading Iraq). Authenticity is being real, and requires wider frames of reference than the individual. Vivacity is about not being bored – our entertainment industry, parties, leisure activities are mostly an attempt to do away with the boredom of waiting in a respectable manner. Fromm remarked we save time, but then don't know what to do with it. Playfulness is what makes life worth living. TV puts us in a passive, floating, vicarious state of consciousness. In the UK, 16% of 16-

19s believe they will become famous. Edward Young: 'born originals, how comes it to pass that we die copies?'

- Don't wait for a disaster before getting real – imagine you have not much longer to live...
- Scale down your interest in people you've never met
- Develop habits that prevent hyperactivity
- Be honest with yourself about your dealings with others – do you have close friends?
- Play with small children

Wakey Wakey! Prepare to feel better:

- Sort out your childhood
- Reject much of the status quo (career, gender roles, etc). Anthony Storr on *Solitude* is good as an antidote to the idea you have to have family life to be happy

Political implications

4/5ths of us agree that 'a government's prime objective should be to achieve the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth'. Our real incomes have increased substantially since 1950, but the proportion of people claiming to be happy has not changed. 10% of our happiness is due to circumstances and 40% to our choices. UK Gambling has increased 7x since deregulation in 2001. The most important step for any government would be to challenge virus values, pressurising us to place less importance on money, possessions, appearances, fame – the opposite of what in fact happens. WE need emotionally mature MPs (perhaps each should be required to spend 2 weeks caring full time for a 2 year old?).

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