

Fix Your Craving Mindset  
& Rewire Your Habits  
to Thrive with Enough

SCARCITY  
BRAIN

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*Author of* THE COMFORT CRISIS

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Rewire Your Habits to Thrive with Enough



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## INTRODUCTION

# Our Scarcity Brain

**Qutaiba Erbeed**, my fixer in Iraq, is the most full-of-crap person I've ever met. That's how he'd fast-talked us into a fortified police compound on the outskirts of Baghdad.

We were sitting on a hardwood bench in a makeshift waiting room. Photos of terrorists and drug kingpins filled the wall behind us. Each picture showed a man standing in handcuffs with confiscated weapons and chemical compounds all splayed out in front of him. Big bags of pills, bricks of powder, AK-47s, makeshift bombs, rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Captions in Arabic listed the person, the place, the haul.

A closed-circuit TV hanging in a corner displayed a live feed of the holding cells. One heavily guarded cell contained eight of the region's most wanted and dangerous men.

We were waiting to speak with Mohammed Abdullah, Baghdad's head of drug enforcement. Erbeed had lured me to Iraq with a detailed "itinerary." It said he'd arranged all sorts of important meetings, one of which was to ride along with Abdullah's A-team as they raided drug and terror cells.

But after four days in Iraq, nothing had happened. When I'd arrived and paid him, Erbeed admitted, "The itinerary was...um...*proposed*. Yes, it was a *proposal*."

But now, it appeared, Erbeed had perhaps talked Baghdad's finest into letting this ride along happen. "They say it's okay, but we must wear flak

jackets,” Erbeed said, pleased with himself. “We now wait for the final response.”

As we sat, Iraqi narco detectives—plain clothes, thick mustaches, with pistols in the waistbands of their jeans—emerged from offices like coyotes, all trying to sniff out why this gangly American was sitting in their waiting room. They circled me but didn’t engage. Instead, they all chatted, chain-smoked, and side-eyed me.

Eventually one stepped from an office and approached us. He began talking. “Ride alongs?” he said. “Who told you this can happen? No. This cannot happen. Too dangerous.”

“How dangerous?” I asked.

“I was shot three times last week,” the officer said. Erbeed and I tried to appear unruffled.

“The dealers are becoming more violent,” the officer continued. “Many are transporting and selling quantities of drugs large enough that the penalty is the death sentence. So they will fight to escape.”

Erbeed and I collected ourselves, huddled, and considered this. We then explained that we accepted the risk and would stay well in the background.

The officer looked me directly in the eye and held it as he methodically pointed to three spots on his chest. “I’d be dead if I weren’t wearing a vest last week,” he said.

Then he shrugged. “But, okay, I will ask.”

He tiptoed to Abdullah’s office, knocking lightly on the door and bowing his head as he entered.

Baghdad is generally considered a good place for solo journalists to get kidnapped and sold to ISIS, whatever they’re there for. I was there for the drugs.

I was investigating the dramatic rise of a new, methamphetamine-like street drug called Captagon. It’s hardly known in the United States, but it’s wreaking havoc in the Middle East and spreading. How I ended up in Iraq, however, takes some explaining.

The short answer: it was the pandemic, and I wasn’t thinking rationally. But there’s a longer answer.

As a science journalist and professor, I'm interested in understanding human behavior. Everyone likes to focus on developing good new habits. But I want to know how we can resolve the behaviors that hurt us most. Because here's the thing: it doesn't matter how much gas we give good new habits; if we don't resolve our bad ones, we still have our foot on the brake.

And I'd begun noticing a unique signature of the behaviors that hurt us most. We can quickly repeat them. The worst habits are things we can do over and over and over in rapid succession—eventually to our detriment. These behaviors are often fun and rewarding in the short term but backfire in the long run.

We all do stuff like this to some degree. And even if we realize that these behaviors have turned counterproductive, we find it hard to stop.

Everyone knows any behavior is fine in moderation. But why do we suck so bad at moderating? Why do we keep eating when we're full? Why do we keep shopping when we own too much? Why do we keep drinking when we're already tipsy? Why do we scroll social media when it makes us miserable? Why do we binge-watch another episode even when we realize a more meaningful life beyond the screen is passing us by? Why do we get stuck? Stuck doing the same thing we regret over and over and over.

I learned that these behaviors are usually reactions to feelings of "scarcity." And all it takes is a small "scarcity cue" to incite them.

A scarcity cue is a piece of information that fires on what researchers call our scarcity mindset. It leads us to believe we don't have enough. We then instinctually fixate on attaining or doing that one thing we think will solve our problem and make us feel whole.

Scarcity cues are like air: all around us and inside us. They can hit us through advertising, social media, news, chats with co-workers, walks in the neighborhood, and so much more. They can be direct and all encompassing, like a sagging economy or global pandemic. Or they can be subtle and slight, like our neighbor buying a shiny new car.

Our reaction to scarcity isn't anything new. It's an ancient behavior system that evolved naturally in the human mind to help our ancestors survive.



Scientists detailed our scarcity mindset and reaction to scarcity cues as early as 1795. And the topic is now an intense area of research for psychologists, anthropologists, neuroscientists, sociologists, economists, and biologists.

Today it's well accepted that for most of human history, obeying the next scarcity cue and constantly craving and consuming more kept us alive. We evolved in harsh environments that had one thing in common: they were worlds of less, of scarcity.

Things critical to our survival like food, information, influence, possessions, time on earth, what we could do to feel good—and much more—were scarce, hard to find, and short-lived. The people who survived and passed on their genes chased more. They defaulted to overeating, amassing stuff and information, seeking influence over others and their environments, and pursuing pleasure and survival drives to excess.

Obeying these evolutionary cravings kept us alive and still makes sense for all species. Except one.

As humans figured out how to make things faster and cheaper during the Industrial Revolution, our environments of scarcity rapidly shifted to those of plenty. By the 1970s, the benefits of this revolution had spread to most people in developed countries. They've been rippling out across the globe ever since.

We now have an abundance—some might say an overload—of the things we've evolved to crave. Things like food (especially the salty, fatty, sugary variety), possessions (homes filled with online purchases), information (the internet), mood adjusters (drugs and entertainment), and influence (social media).

Yet we're still programmed to think and act as if we don't have enough. As if we're still in those ancient times of scarcity. That three-pound bundle of nerves in our skull is always scanning the background, picking up and prioritizing scarcity cues and pushing us to consume more.

We're still compelled to eat more food than our bodies need. To impulsively search for more information. To buy more unnecessary stuff. To jockey for more influence over others. To do what we can to get another

fleeting hit of pleasure. To fixate on getting what we don't have rather than using and enjoying what we do have. We have a scarcity brain.

The science shows that our scarcity brain doesn't always make sense in our modern world of abundance. It now often works against us, and outside forces are exploiting it to influence our decisions. It's at the root of the counterproductive behaviors we can't seem to shake. The habits that put a hard brake on improving our physical and mental health, happiness, and ability to reach our full potential. Aren't addiction, obesity, anxiety, chronic diseases, debt, environmental destruction, political dispute, war, and more all driven by our craving for...more?

Humanity has experienced big scarcity cues before. But the Covid-19 pandemic occurred at a strange moment. A time when technology has accelerated to deliver abundant access to everything we're built to crave, while also giving corporations unprecedented insight into exactly how they can leverage our scarcity brain to bend our behavior. Especially those behaviors we can repeat over and over and over in rapid succession—eventually to our detriment. It's as if there's some larger behavior pattern at play...almost like a scarcity loop. I even started calling this pattern I noticed a “scarcity loop.” And it seemed to be the serial killer of moderation.

We may be out of the pandemic, but the wave of craving and consumption it caused hasn't subsided. We've always been moving toward more. And much smaller scarcity cues have always subtly steered our everyday lives. They've pushed us into that scarcity loop behavior pattern of quick repeat consumption in even the best of times.

And that's why I was in this police compound in Baghdad. I suspected that the rise of that new drug Captagon in this treacherous city held implications for the rest of us. It could help us understand what happens when our scarcity brain meets a sudden abundance of a substance that can push us into a scarcity loop—satisfying us in the short term but hurting us in the long run. And from there, I could begin to unpack what we can do about all sorts of counterproductive behaviors.

Iraq was just one place I had to go. My desire to understand scarcity brain and find solutions for it led me on a two-year-long, forty-thousand-mile journey. Besides Baghdad, I traveled to the jungles of Bolivia, a monastery in the mountains of New Mexico, labs across the country, the backcountry of Montana, and even (sort of) outer space.

I wanted to understand our scarcity brain and the scarcity loop and meet innovators who have found a way out of it. These people understand the downsides of more. But they also realize there is something profoundly wrong with how we try to solve many of our modern problems.

If and when we realize that overconsumption is causing our problems, we're often told the solution is to simply shoot for less. Eat less food to lose weight. Buy less stuff or throw out excess stuff to spark joy. Spend less time on our screens to be happier. Do less work to avoid anxiety and burnout. Spend less money to fix our finances or overhaul our business.

But less, I'd uncover, comes with its own set of problems. And some robust new research shows that blindly aiming for less can change us for the worse. There are even times we should lean into excess.

The people I met on my journey are asking the more profound and challenging questions. But their efforts are revealing the answers that work. They've found that permanent change and lasting satisfaction lie in finding *enough*. Not too much. Not too little. Some have even flipped the scarcity loop to an "abundance loop," using the loop to do more of what helps us.

Colonel Mohammed Abdullah's office door swung open. The room fell silent. Out stepped the colonel himself.

"Where is the American?" he asked. Every head turned my way.