

Chili Peppers and Motivation

Why do people eat hot chili peppers? To a psychologist this question is interesting as an example of motivation, with the potential to illustrate the influences that account for the initiation, intensity, and persistence of behavior. The question is also interesting because it shows us that, in some cases, the reasons for our behavior may not be what we believe them to be.

For example, seasoned fans of hot peppers are apt to tell you that they eat them for their flavor. However, this is not technically correct, or at least it cannot be the whole story, for the substance in peppers that makes them hot – a substance called capsaicin, which we can detect in solutions as dilute as one part per million - is not something that we taste. Rather, it is something that irritates nerve cells in the skin, mouth, throat, and nose, resulting in pain. Similarly, the assertion that peppers' heat accentuates the flavors of other foods has also been shown to be false. Research shows that capsaicin actually masks our sense of taste, whether a person is a pepper novice or a veteran.

Back to the question, then: Why do people eat hot chili peppers? One possibility is that people learn to tolerate and eventually enjoy peppers' heat so they can experience other qualities. Hot peppers are high in nutritional value, raise the body's metabolic rate, promote bronchial and nasal decongestion, and may even contribute to cardiovascular health. Any or all of these benefits can serve as incentives that motivate a person to overcome the burn.

Another possibility is that the irritating capsaicin of peppers stimulates our body to produce its natural morphine-like painkillers called endorphins. With increased exposure to peppers, our body's ability to oppose their effect through the production of endorphins is enhanced, leading to quicker and stronger feelings of well-being in response to pepper consumption. In this way the initially aversive qualities of peppers create what is known as an opponent process. Our production of endorphins is a process that opposes the effect of the capsaicin in the peppers such that it is not so much the peppers that motivate us to eat them, but our body's attempt to counteract them. This opponent process theory is supported by research in which endorphin-blocking drugs have been shown to cause pepper lovers to lose their tolerance for capsaicin's burn.