[Warning: This article has several factual mistakes. I have not fixed them.—Seth Roberts]

First Watch Television, Then Have Breakfast

Seth Roberts tried strange self experiments, such as how eating habits or TV watching affects well-being - and came to surprising results.

You can do the same experiments as Seth Roberts. All you need is a clock, a standing desk, and yourself. Or a bathroom scale, some olive oil, and yourself. Or a TV, some talk-show tapes, and yourself. On top of that, a statistical program and lots of willpower.

Seth Roberts is a professor of psychology at the University of California in Berkeley. However, his passion is self experimentation, originating from accidental everyday observations. Sometimes he determines the influence of a sushi diet on his weight, and sometimes he tracks how many hours he spends standing each day with a stopwatch to determine its effect on his sleep.

That sounds like easy research, and Roberts also says that the only things that interested him were those which were easy to do. Consider another example: Roberts ate only pasta for weeks in order to examine a strange diet theory. And for four months, he drank 5 liters of water every day. "The water became somewhat difficult over time," he admits, otherwise he did not see anything unusual in his experiments.

Roberts began his attempts as a student: For example, he determined how long, he could juggle three balls with one eye closed, or systematically tested acne medicines - the ointment was much more effective than the pills.

During the 1980s Seth Roberts developed sleep problems: He woke up very early in the morning and could not fall asleep again even though he was very tired. This was a clear case for a few self experiments. But the problem proved persistent: for probably more than ten years Roberts experimented with sport, different nutrition, different lighting when waking up. All without success. Then he ran out of ideas.

In 1993 - now in the possession of a computer - if he created a graph of his sleep duration and found by chance, a pair of months previously unnoticed where there was a decrease of exactly 40 minutes, during which he had changed his diet and gained 5 kilos: He ate more fruits and vegetables and less pasta and pastry. Another increase of the fruit consumption - instead of porridge he ate a banana and an apple. Indeed, breakfast had no effect on sleep duration. However, the early waking occurred more frequently. Roberts tried to solve problem unsuccessfully with yoghurt, shrimp or even hotdogs for breakfast.

Learning from the Stone Age

Then he ate no more breakfast for the next 112 days. To his surprise he was awake now much more rarely early in the morning. Was that the solution? Since then, Roberts eats nothing before 10 o'clock in the morning.

He was fascinated not only by this idea, but also by the fact that it seemed to have come out of nowhere. He had never before considered the possibility that whether or not he had breakfast might have an influence on the time he woke up. The reason he was able to make this discovery was this: his experiment was a self-experiment. When the experimenter and the subject are one in the same person, certain effects appear that would never be noticed in a normal experiment.

Roberts speculated that the influence of breakfast on waking up had to do with our evolutionary past. “I doubt that our Stone Age ancestors had breakfast. Before the invention of agriculture they would barely have had supplies. Our brains were formed in a world without breakfast.”

This daring explanation was the basis for his next experiment. To not have breakfast is difficult, and the early waking didn’t completely disappear. Roberts decided to adapt his life more closely to stone age man with the help of a television.

“The average stone age morning began with facial contact. I, however, lived alone and often worked the whole morning without seeing anyone. Perhaps the lack of contact with people caused the early awakening.” Roberts described his considerations in a scientific paper.

One morning in 1995, Roberts woke at 4:50 AM and watched late night television for 20 minutes, without any effect on the same day. However, the next morning, he awoke at 5:01 AM, feeling strong and full of energy. Was there a connection between the late night television and his well-being? That was difficult for even Roberts to believe. But "Self experiments are so simple that one can also test strange ideas or ideas, which are likely wrong." Roberts hoped to find the correct amount of breakfast television to finally eliminate early waking. But endless tests with different starting time, duration and different programs did not show any effect. Finally he gave up and turned to the investigation of the different types of television.

In July 1995 he sketched a questionnaire, with which he examined his mood several times per day, and continued to watch television each morning. It was proven that documentary films lifted his mood less than comedies. Was humor his trigger? On the other hand, the comedy series “The Simpsons” had no effect.

After several attempts, he isolated the determining factor: Faces! The higher the “facial density” of a TV show, the better his mood the next morning. He confirmed these findings, by covering the upper two thirds of the screen on his television for a certain time, after which his good mood disappeared!

Roberts assumes that behind this effect is a kind of internal clock for the reaction on faces: At certain times contact affects his mood positively, at other times, negatively.

His most profitable experiment to date is how to lose weight. Roberts states that a few tablespoons of neutral tasting olive oil (or sugar water) between meals strongly reduces appetite, so strongly in fact that he succeeded in easily losing 16 kilos in this manner. The book, he wrote about this, became the best-seller - The Shangri-La-Diet, the no hunger eat anything weight loss program.

Olive Oil Makes You Thin

The theory behind the diet that Roberts developed, yet to be confirmed, is that every body has a set point, where his weight should be. This set point controls hunger and adjusts depending on the food available: For our forefathers it was sensible get fatter during years of plenty, and in leaner years to reduce hunger. But how does the body know how many calories are available or not? There was no calorie table for mammoth steak.

Roberts assumes that the body learns to associate a certain taste with a certain nutritional value. The stronger the taste in calorie-rich food, the more easily this connection develops and the quicker the set point value is shifted upward. Consequently today, in a world of hamburgers and french fries, hunger is constantly produced.

Olive oil gives the body calories to without raising the set point. Because it is aste-neutral, it does not make the brain connection “olive oil is equal to calories.”

Roberts, for the most part, is ignored by his colleagues. Many researchers do not take self-experimentation seriously for two reasons: because Roberts is his own test subject, he can influence the results either consciously or unconsciously, and because there is only one test subject, it is uncertain whether the results would hold true for others.

Roberts acknowledges these weaknesses, but points out the strengths of self-experimentation: it is cheap, requires little preparation, and you can also discover other slight changes in the experiment. “I watched TV early in the morning in order to improve my sleep, but instead I improved my mood.”

Roberts has further examined this effect and ascertained that it does not have to be strange faces on television. Today Roberts looks at himself for one hour between six and seven in the morning.