

Are you trapped in a gilded cage?

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Having been an executive coach for the last 25 years, I've had the privilege of having intimate conversations with successful people from diverse fields of work. Despite there being differences in personalities, lifestyles, ambitions, backgrounds and motivations of those I coach, what continues to surprise me is how many people I've met who appear to have all the badges of success, yet have lost touch with what they really want from life and the trade-offs they are making. Ironically, instead of gaining greater satisfaction through wealth, many people find the acquisition and possession of money creates an even greater state of dissatisfaction and feeling of entrapment.

Money symbolizes different things for us all – freedom, choice and independence, security, power and control. It can represent winning in life – an indication of one's achievements. It can stand for recognition or shore up a shaky sense self-esteem. It can be a way of keeping score in the competitive world – in professional service firms, it was always the relative positioning of where you were on the profit share league that mattered and not the absolute amount of profit share coming your way. Money can even be used to buy love and youth. A famous clothes designer I coached has much more wealth than most but has spent so on cosmetic surgery, that she can no longer drink without a straw or speak without a speech impediment.

So, are you in the privileged position of choosing to live a gilded lifestyle or are you actually trapped inside a gilded cage?

Whatever it symbolizes for you, the development of a gilded lifestyle might be a real aspiration and truly satisfying. Many actively seek this lifestyle out and there is little downside. For them, reaching a stage in life of immense financial success and elevation from peers and society provides real happiness and lasting satisfaction in life. If you have positively and consciously run towards this lifestyle, key in hand, to lock the door behind you and live happily within its confines, how fantastic! You know what you want and indeed, positively embrace any trade-offs that come with it. You have made a conscious decision and equally you can make a conscious decision to exit out of your lifestyle.

In contrast, this gilded lifestyle incrementally and less intentionally becomes a cage by default for some who have little knowledge of its confines, or the location of the key once the door firmly shuts behind them. The gilded cage syndrome is where one finds oneself aspiring to a certain lifestyle only to become trapped by it. Wealth is seen as the road to freedom but obtaining it can turn out to be the road to slavery. A gilded cage is still restrictive however comfortable it may be. There often is quite a long period of time when the gilded cage doesn't feel restrictive – you are younger, you have more energy, you haven't overstretched and you haven't sacrificed so much. The bars are thinner and the

spaces between the bars are wider. But the longer you are in the cage the less opportunity there is to escape.

There are cages of different shapes and sizes which I hear about regularly from clients – do any of these resonate with you?

- You have committed to a comfortable, even aspirational lifestyle that requires you to remain ‘tied in’ and on a financial treadmill but you’ve lost your appetite for all that entails – you are consciously counting the years to freedom.
- You have achieved a lifestyle previously unobtainable that means you never have to work again to fund it yet find yourself suffering from a loss of direction or depression.
- You feel you have to take that next promotion to maintain your lifestyle even though it takes you away from the aspects of your job you love and comes with a price tag.
- The more money you have the more you think about the things you could do with that money – if only you had the time.
- You find yourself overcompensating by rewarding yourself. You overspend to justify what you’ve put in in order to ‘treat’ yourself. Sometimes you spend money before you even get it and so you perpetuate the cage. You can even start to suffer from oniomania*.

It’s important to know that, even though you may feel trapped, and that it may take some time to find, you do have the key. You have the choice. And if the last year has taught us anything, we have been reminded of what really matters in our life.

So why not proactively press pause to find the key and not wait until it’s too late? Find a friend or someone with an objective point of view – maybe even your Financial Advisor! Ask yourself the important questions and make conscious choices.

These five questions often help:

What are my expectations?

A common pitfall is to put ourselves under unrealistic expectations, all of which reinforce the feeling of being ever more trapped. What unrealistic expectations am I setting for myself and why am I setting them? Are they my expectations or others? Am I constantly setting ever greater expectations? What is the trade-off of these expectations? Are they worth it?

Mo Gawdat, a Google executive, was incredibly successful and desperately unhappy. Using forensic research and an engineering approach to the problem, his book ‘Solve for Happy’ shares his equation for happiness. It goes something like this, “Happiness is equal to or greater than the events of your life minus your expectation of how life should be”. Changing your thinking to manage your expectations will leave you with a better chance of your experience outweighing your expectation.

What are my needs?

Am I clear about what I need and what I want? Have I differentiated these? Have I fallen into the acquisition trap of 'having' – believing I need something that I don't actually need? Am I confusing material comforts with quality of life? Some people become so motivated by acquisitiveness that they get caught up in cycles of craving and disappointment, where self-worth is calculated according to the number of possessions acquired. Wants escalate and become obscenely overblown and life becomes a pursuit of the next big thing. In the words of someone whose desires escalated to having a private jet and a red carpet laid out upon landing, it becomes 'ridiculous' and 'meaningless'.

What am I forfeiting?

Am I forfeiting time – whilst pursuing money and material success am I mortgaging my life and missing particular moments? Am I forfeiting health – spending my health gaining wealth just to spend my wealth trying to regain my health? Am I forfeiting intimacy – the relationships, connections and sense of belonging that matter to me?

Where are my sources of wealth?

Can I redefine these? What matters to me? Is it money, pensions, lifestyle? Is it health, freedom? Is it time and energy? Is it our friendships and loved ones? Is it passion and purpose in life? Is it the small pleasures in life? A wider definition of a rich life can make a big difference. Wealth is a state of mind.

What am I scared of?

There comes decision points and choice crossroads where we can all knowingly make different decisions. But often what keeps us in the gilded cage is fear. As we become more and more successful it may be hard to find a more fulfilling life with the package we need; we worry about what others will think and how they will judge, we worry about the impact on our family; as we stay longer and longer with an organisation, we become institutionalized and we don't believe we can be successful 'on the outside'. What are your fears and how realistic are they? What stops you saying no? What stops you saying enough? What stops you drawing the red lines?

Reflecting on these choices and preferences will help you proactively take control and redefine your priorities before it's too late or you need a health scare to jolt you. This way, you can renegotiate with yourself, work out what you need to have the life you want without feeling too trapped and so keep your eye on the prize – whatever that is for you. It may mean no change, a conscious commitment to the choices you've made or it might be to act.

And if you listen very, very carefully, that sound like a 'click' might just be the key, turning

in the lock of your gilded cage.

*‘Trappings’ comes from the Middle English trap, trappe (“personal belongings, owndom, household goods”)., “horse-cloth,” from Middle English *trappe* “ornamental cloth for a horse” (c. 1300), later “personal effects” (mid-15c.) *

*Gilded Cage – a place where someone [appears](#) to [live](#) in [luxury](#) but where he or she has very little [freedom](#)

*Onimania – compulsive buying disorder

Further Reading:

Solve for Happy Mo Gawdat

If you’re so smart, why aren’t you happy? Raj Rahunanthan

Steve Jobs – Stanford Commencement Speech 2005

Happiness by Design – Paul Dolan

Cathy Walton has been an executive coach for the last 25 years helping individuals reflect on their working lives and the choices they make.