

'should be mandatory reading for everyone' *Will Self*

Affluenza [æflu'enza]

n a contagious middle class virus causing depression, anxiety, addiction and enmity, a global tour of infected minds by a renowned psychologist in search of the secret of being successful *and* staying sane. ***Oliver James***[†]

[†] The author of the bestselling *They F*** You Up*

Affluenza

Oliver James

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Affluenza Oliver James

There is currently an epidemic of 'affluenza' throughout the world - an obsessive, envious, keeping-up-with-the-Joneses - that has resulted in huge increases in depression and anxiety among millions. Over a nine-month period, bestselling author Oliver James travelled around the world to try and find out why. He discovered how, despite very different cultures and levels of wealth, affluenza is spreading. Cities he visited include Sydney, Singapore, Moscow, Copenhagen, New York and Shanghai, and in each place he interviewed several groups of people in the hope of finding out not only why this is happening, but also how one can increase the strength of one's emotional immune system. He asks: why do so many more people want what they haven't got and want to be someone they're not, despite being richer and freer from traditional restraints? And, in so doing, uncovers the answer to how to reconnect with what really matters and learn to value what you've already got. In other words, how to be successful and stay sane.

Affluenza Details

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From Reader Review Affluenza for online ebook

Jafar says

Halfway through this book I thought: Why does this guy remind me of the guy who wrote *They F*** You Up*? I checked the names, and both books have the same author. I don't have a good memory for authors' names; otherwise, I wouldn't have picked up this book given how much I didn't like the other one.

"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." The Virus and its vaccines are the essence of this book, which – mind you – is over 500 pages. While I personally don't have much problem with his description of the Virus and the problems that it can cause, I thought this book was totally lame.

James promises "scientific research" in the outset, but he's already reached his conclusion right from the start. He's moralizing, judgmental, and pontificating all through the book. What he presents as "research" is mostly long and boring interviews with subjects whom he often (and not so subtly) pities and despises. His politics is grotesquely tainting his "research." His anti-Americanism is hysterical (it's amusing to see him treat the number of Starbucks in a country as a measure of mental distress), and his romanticizing of Denmark and all thing Danish is near-comical.

Dave Catherall says

I read this book back in 2008, when I was busily running around trying to do everything at work, not really succeeding, and not having time to do much else either. Although it's not a particularly scientific effort (there are a couple of scattergrams showing emotional distress v income inequality in the appendices), it is an interesting read, and points out some of what should be important in our lives - friends, family, doing things because you enjoy them rather than to impress other people, but which can be pushed to the back of the queue by the pressures to be seen to be doing better than others, have a better car, iPhone, possessions, husband, wife, house whatever it is. All of those are ultimately just stuff (if you just have the husband/wife for trophy/bragging purposes), and don't really make us any happier.

Although I've never been particularly materialistic, the amount of time I spent at work made me less able to devote much time to other equally important things, to the extent that it took over my life, and caused me to leave in the end through stress.

Since then I've done lots of different things, met lots of new people, and have an altogether more balanced and interesting life. Although I'm still getting to where I really want to be, I've been a lot happier in the process. So although I wouldn't go as far as to say this book changed my life, I could relate to what it was saying. It's a reminder to not worry too much about the material things in life, although everyone needs to have at least their basic needs met, which is not happening for too many people right now, but that's a different story altogether...

Huyen says

I set out reading this book already believing what he tries to say, that materialism is bad and doesn't fulfil you. But I find this book annoying, full of endless boring anecdotal interviews, confirming what he already decides from the start instead of serious rigorous research. I also suspect he secretly pities his interview subjects instead of feeling compassion for them. This book is a yawn-fest with this tirade of "rich people are horrible, selfish, greedy, materialistic, unhappy workaholics" while poor people are so much better. I didn't feel I was learning anything new or insightful from this book. I suspect the world is more nuanced than this. So I decided to quit after 300 pages. Many times, he mistakes correlation and causation, for example: the number of advertisements has gone up in the past 3 decades, while the level of trust among Americans has gone down, so advertising must be the culprit. It is full of over-simplifying generalizations like this. I am also very sceptical of some aspects of his analysis of the Chinese culture to explain why they can be materialistic without being so depressed. Generalizing China using Shanghai, America using New York is at best simple-minded, and at worst insulting to these hugely diverse countries.

Also lacking is an account of how this virulent form of Selfish Capitalism arose and what social changes it has brought about. I recently read another book called "The Life of I" about the rise of narcissism which explores this topic more satisfactorily.

Another thing that bugs me about him is he seems to be saying that as long as your goals don't have extrinsic motives to impress other people, then it's okay, you'll be happy. It doesn't matter that your greed ruins the world as long as you find your work fascinating. I simply can't swallow this. I think happiness is a wobbly overrated concept and there should be higher values to our life rather than our own happiness. There should be objective ideals such as compassion, justice, adventure and truth that we should work towards and happiness comes as a by-product of such pursuits. I don't know if he gets to explore it because I'm already fast asleep after 300 pages...

MargeryK says

Read this book.

Been waiting to read this book for a couple of months after requesting it from the library. Was initially inspired to read it by Radio 4's 'Book Club' and dallied with the idea of buying it, but after reading the blurb in a bookshop, I decided borrowing it would be the most authentic option. After all that, I saw it in a charity shop in Forest Hill for £1 and had to get it.

What a refreshing read. James argues that there are three traits that make someone immune to the emotional distress brought about by Selfish Capitalism, and these are; vivacity, authenticity and playfulness. It also helps if you live in a non-English speaking world.

Buy what you need rather than what you want. Enjoy motherhood and spend time with small children. Try to do activities which give you 'flow'.

It finishes with an imaginative chapter with some brave ideas. The one I liked best was the idea to nationalise estate agents.

Oliver James is my new hero.

Dierregi says

This book is about the alleged evils of a virus called "*affluenza*" and how it can be cured. According to the author, the English speaking world is swept by this terrible virus. The most infected are also the most affluent. Since the richer you are the more likely you are to catch this horrible virus, I am in no danger whatsoever... From the first lines, I started to think that I made a mistake buying this book. The impression was confirmed when I finished the first chapter, where we are told the tale of an obnoxious multi-billionaire, who is always dissatisfied with his life, while a poor taxi driver, illegal alien, married with kids, would not swap place with the billionaire, because his life is so happy.

It sounds incredibly corny and it is. The rest of book is divided in chapters which follow the same structure: interviews with obnoxious people, all rich, young and beautiful but fatally infected by "*affluenza*" and then the odd one out, the guy (or gal) who should also been infected but isn't. You may wonder why, and the answer is because of mummy. It turns out that the epidemic of "*affluenza*" is mainly caused by the fact that women nowadays receive an education and want to work. Once they start working, they become so selfish as to want to spend all their money for useless things, like cosmetics, handbags and larger breasts, rather than just expecting to get married and have children. If they would just stay home and take care of their kids, there would be no problem at all.

The author goes out of his way to prove that children with working mothers are nothing short of sociopaths. Surely we must agree... think about the good old days when women used to stay at home... but was people really happier and the world a peaceful place? Think about the Middle Ages, the crusades, colonisation, genocides of entire civilisations, witches burnt at stakes

To make matters worse, the author also likes to point out how privileged and upper-class his life is. Unfortunately, I do not care if he is used to drinking tea with the queen and went skiing with the king of Siam. I was expecting a serious piece of work about real situations and I found a book about a world that is as foreign to me as Mars, populated by super-achievers perennially depressed, despite the huge amounts of money they make.

To conclude, if you want some answers about the problems of life, read some philosophical essays, if you have too much money and are very unhappy get yourself to a shrink, but do not waste your precious money to buy this book. My copy ended straight into the trash and it was the best moment, since the day I started reading it.

^ says

This book could usefully be subtitled '*Consumerism and why it's bad for us and bad for Society*'. But that would not be nearly as neat, eye-catching and memorable as '*Affluenza*'.

Oliver James writes with great observation and thoughtfulness. This is not a book to be read cover to cover in minimal time. This reader sought to match thought to thought with the author, and then to think beyond that: an interesting exercise in itself, yet a worry latent with wondering just how many people are actually capable of deep personal changes of which they're unaware that they need to make if they too are to enjoy happier and productive lives; so that we may all contentedly live, debate, work, and make love in that warmer, happier, openly friendlier and productive society.

Wendy Palmer says

And here was the interesting experience of being in complete agreement with the author's stated hypothesis and yet arguing with him on nearly every page because I hated the way he was shoehorning data and anecdotes to fit his theory.

Best example: "the advent of Selfish Capitalism in New Zealand might have destroyed immunity to the Virus...this does not seem to have happened... Most New Zealanders have not been seduced by Selfish Capitalism... Here is a country with a government doing its best to infect its citizens with Affluenza, but with a long-standing culture that may have provided a measure of immunity" followed -- in the very next paragraph, mind you -- with "the nation goes straight into second place in the league table of mental illness... It would seem that, despite public opposition to the Selfish Capitalism governance, the Virus has taken hold and distress has spread..."

So, rather than accept that his assumption of a correlation between his personal opinion of whether or not a country suffers from "the Virus" and its mental health rating is not upheld in New Zealand, he just decides they must be suffering from the Virus anyway. His whole "mind tour" was nothing but an exercise in confirming what he had already decided.

This whole concept was covered much much more convincingly by Clive Hamilton, probably with just as much personal bias, but at least with a nod to looking at data objectively, and with much better examples too.

On the other hand, the discussions on attractiveness vs beauty and on motherhood were timely for me and gave me some new ways of thinking about the topics (if only in mentally arguing with him), so despite being within a whisker of DNFing this book, I am glad I persevered.

Donal Keady says

(2.5 stars)

The author makes some interesting observations, and some of the real people that he interviews are truly disturbed and disturbing. As the title suggests, the author compares the relentless (but ultimately empty) pursuit of material possessions to a contagious disease, "Affluenza". He takes this idea further by observing how certain countries and societies are less affected by this disease. Within the social fabric of these places there may lie the answer to avoiding the problems evidently caused by Affluenza, namely a "vaccine" against what he refers to as Selfish Capitalism.

Personally, I found the whole affluenza/vaccine metaphors wore thin on my patience. There's a huge amount of information in this book, and it's all very interesting, but thankfully I don't feel a part of the rat race. And I don't feel the author needed to beat me over the head with the word Affluenza every three or four pages (it's in big letters on the front cover, after all!) Some sections, like Ch.9 for example, are thought provoking. Doubtless, this book may be a much-needed awakening for some.

Choong Chiat says

This book provides a thought-provoking, candid, incisive and insightful account of how, plagued by consumerism and materialism, individuals living in contemporary society, especially those living in countries which are English-speaking or have been influenced by Americanisation, are experiencing or have become especially susceptible to emotional/psychological distress or dissatisfaction.

This, as the author argues, is a result of people becoming fixated with pursuing external/material goals for the wrong motivations. For example, the author criticises the manner in which people are eager to work in high-paying jobs not because they enjoy the work but because of the high salaries and/or high socio-economic status these jobs offer.

However, although he may not have intended it, it would appear that the author, at different points in the book, seems to think himself superior to the various Affluenza-infected individuals he interviews. Indeed, especially in the chapter about childcare, the author appears to give a sense of himself being a more-knowledgeable-than-thou, if not a know-it-all, expert.

Also, while the author mainly identifies what he terms as "Selfish Capitalism" as being the primary cause of Affluenza, he however does not really give an account of how this particular variant of capitalism emerged and entrenched itself in contemporary society.

Ultimately, it is the author's main argument that there needs to be a mindset change away from "Selfish Capitalism" to what he terms as "Unselfish Capitalism". Perhaps an aspect of the latter would be for individuals to grasp the truth and wisdom of the saying that contentment breeds happiness (???).

Dannii Elle says

This book details the virus of 'affluenza' that haunts the modern-day individual. The selfish capitalist societies we belong to have honed in on our ever-increasing desire for the material and use this to their own monetary advantage and our own emotional entrapment. humanity's future is envisioned in all its monstrous bleakness here, unless we begin to accept our condition and learn to control our shallow impulses and derogatory treatment of the self.

I found myself agreeing with much of the book's beginning section, which detailed the virus giving real-life examples from across the globe. Whilst this was a little repetitive in nature it was still an interesting read. Many other reviews cited this portion as a vast oversimplification, as individual cases were often used to prove his theory of the entire population, which I did feel but it wasn't enough for me to completely disagree with his theory.

The central section, however, was far less insightful. What begun as a clever and unique sociological theory soon turned into an unremarkable self-help guide. I found this portion just as repetitive, but with age-old wisdoms rather than with itself. Nothing new was provided here and my interest waned. In what is already a hefty non-fiction this could have perhaps benefited from the earlier oversimplification being provided here, instead.

Rik says

Loved the whole idea of this book, and agree with its overall premise that the love of money is the route of all kinds of evil - it corrupts us and leaves us empty. This book encouraged me to ignore the lure of possessions and to focus on relationships.

Marianovsky says

This would be a great book if it were no more than 200 pages of a thoughtful critique of modern consumerist society.

There are several things that bothered me about this book:

- Constant talk about "the Virus", "infected", and "vaccines". I get it, the "Affluenza" title is clever (I really think it is), but that's where all the virus references should stop. In addition, talking about "Virus" and "infected" makes it sound that there is nothing you can do about your distress because it is a "disease" that "happens" to you (for which the author helpfully provides "vaccines"). I find it all really annoying.
- The whole process of interviewing people around the world and learning about their distress is a pointless exercise of confirmation bias. The author had already formed a conclusion before he went on these travels, and (of course) the interviews only confirmed his views. There was no detectable "discovery" of any sort. Makes me wonder why he bothered at all (of course, over a year of travelling with the family must have been really nice).
- The analysis of what the interviewees say is shallow at best, judgemental and uninterested in what they have to say (they have no legitimacy) at worst. Sweeping generalisations about national characters abound, with a very crude anti-american bias (did it ever occur to the author that the US has 300+ million people and that NY is not representative of the rest?). But, at the end we're provided with some statistics (including p-values!) to support noncentral claims. It is borderline absurd.
- It almost feels as one is reading a self-help book, with the author telling men and women how to feel and what to do to avoid distress.
- And so on.

Now, there are also several things that I liked about this book, among them is a searing critique of marketing in capitalist societies, I think the author is spot on the messages advertising sends and why they are so damaging.

I liked the focus on doing what your interests are, etc.

I tend to agree with the author on many things, but the delivery falls short and this book is not as good as it should have been.

Helen (Helena/Nell) says

I've given this book five stars in the end, although when I was two-thirds of the way through it wasn't going to get anything like that from me.

There were two reasons for my misgivings.

First, it was the metaphor. It struck me as too easy somehow -- the idea that affluenza was a virus (he is talking about Selfish Capitalism and its effects on us really) and that there might be 'vaccines' that would protect people. It struck me as a typical psychologist's way of marketing another TV-friendly theory.

Second, it was the lengthy case studies, which started to weary me slightly. Oliver James spends a couple of years of his life (well, it felt like that long -- perhaps it wasn't really) talking to people in the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, China, Russia, Denmark - and there may have been other countries - I'm not quite sure now - about their affluenza symptoms and their life styles.

I still think he spends too much time doing the case studies, because he nearly lost me. The book, which was at the side of my bed, sat there stuck in New Zealand until I had to travel for work purposes, which meant a window of time I don't usually have. Also a good night's sleep which I don't usually have time for either: and I read the end, and I loved reading it.

Here's the deal.

The Affluenza Virus is "the placing of a high value on money, possessions, appearances (physical and social) and fame."

These values preoccupy me anyway, I guess, because I work in education and in my country (Scotland) one of the fundamental flaws in the education system which has just renamed itself 'Curriculum for Excellence' is the way it suggests education is something you can pick up in units: the more you have, the richer and better you are. We can't do without the word 'skills' any more. It is indispensable. Skills are everything and we can measure them in units of study. Sigh.

Anyway, we seem to have an education system which is full of dissatisfied teachers and learners. Everybody is being measured. Sit down and they will measure your seat. Everything is transparent but nobody sees through the transparency illusion. Nobody values learning unless it has a unit number and a certificate that proves it exists, except that the certificate (ironically) often proves nothing at all.

Sorry, back to the book.

James talks about the imbalance between our wants and our needs. Our needs he lists as four:

1. the need to feel secure emotionally and materially
2. the need to feel part of a community
3. the need to feel competent

4. The need to feel autonomous - masters of our destinies to some degree.

"Virus values", he suggests, "screw us up by conflating what we want with what we truly need."

He looks at people in different cultures. The USA is by far the most afflicted. A culture is more likely to be affected by 'the virus' in direct proportion to the degree it is influenced by America: "the more Americanised a culture, the more consumerist it is". The symptoms are measured in distress: depression, mental illness, aberrant behaviour, anger.

He is really interesting on China, where the people he interviews are strongly dominated by consumerist, materialistic live styles but they are not actually distressed. Why not? He isn't quite sure. It could be repression. It could be a factor immunising them against symptoms. It could be the way the Chinese regard distress: where we see exhaustion and lethargy as a symptom of depression, they may see this as a physical illness.

Basically, affluence is bad for us. It makes us want more and more *stuff*. And in order to stay affluent, we have to persuade people that the stuff they want is also what they really NEED because that's what makes economies work, which makes people affluent. And miserable .

In one chapter, James asks a whole set of affluent people how much more money they would need to feel happy and secure. The people asked are on very different income levels, but they all respond in the same way. Approximately one third more.

So hey -- what would *you* say? Because it is one of those books you read in relation to yourself, no question. And it's terribly topical. As the credit crunch crunches onwards, it is reassuring to read that the prospect of NOT selling your house to move up the property ladder could be your healthiest decision yet.

He talks about intrinsic values and the need to find them. Again, that sounds like well-meaning waffle, but this man is not a waffler. He's very precise actually. He suggests that even in your workplace, you may be able to work out which bits you enjoy most and concentrate your energies on those, not on the bits that will lead to approval or promotion -- because that will minimise your distress. How obvious. How clever.

Near the end of the book, he talks about playfulness as one of the important human qualities, one of the antidote things to distress. And then he gets much more playful himself. He made me laugh several times (quietly, you understand, not huge guffaws).

I loved it when he got really dangerous and laid into Tony Blair and New Labour. I loved his discussion of "gender rancour" and the need to get real.

Advice to women: "Part of your getting real is accepting that sex is not everything once children come along. If you end up with a man who does not ring your bell five times a night, then it is not the end of the bloody world."

Advice to men: "By definition, your partner needs to be someone you want to have sex with, otherwise there will be no babies, but you really have got to accept that she does not have to be a Babe, that after she's had the babe she will look less like one, and that sex will probably take a back seat for a few years."

Oh and (also to men): "Once you have got real and grown-up you should be perfectly capable of pouring your heart out to a woman without having to rip her knickers off or fall in love with her."

By the by, the more TV you watch, the more you are at risk from eating disorders. The statistics are irrefutable.

Throw out the telly. Read this book. Especially the manifesto that suggests that "following their election, all Members of Parliament would have to spend two weeks caring full-time for a two-year-old."

Yesssssss!

Tim says

A good idea for a book, but so padded with anecdote standing in for research (for which he is so defensive) that it cannot be taken seriously. His narrow diagnosis of the big v Virus of selfish capitalism rolls all of the world's ills to one doorstep (here in the US). But his chapters on the US rely entirely on New York City as his measure for American culture and values. Which is ridiculous and insulting to the nation as a whole.

There are some good ideas, some common sense steps mixed into this book, but too much else to wade through to get to them. His love of Denmark is also funny, until he turns on their childcare procedures in a later chapter.

So overall, the book has one argument that he has piled high and tried to tie everything to. It is a tottering edifice, not at all convincing and covered up by his too self-assured writing style and relentless use of examples and general stereotypes about particular countries.

Dan says

Affluenza promised to be a much more thought-provoking read than delivered. In honesty, I picked up the book as likely already a convert to the ideas which James is attempting to present in the work - as my role as 'choir member' I merely expected to be perhaps entertained by the sermon. Unfortunately, the book relies far too heavily upon James' own personal opinions about the differences between nations and upon anecdotes of people which he met during his world tour. So, the work ends up sounding smug and pseudo-physiological. I was frequently annoyed by the gross oversimplifications that Oliver James would throw around about some person he was analyzing. Freudian-sounding generalizations about, for example, how the stock broker's obsession with objects and reluctance to commit was surely a result of a cold and distant mother, left me rolling my eyes.

Whereas interview-style journalism can frequently be quite revealing, I couldn't help but feel that James was talking to all the wrong people. The book often mentions how much of a sway advertising has over setting the mindset of the populace, but doesn't really spend much time talking to advertising executives. Instead we get endless quotes from young 20-somethings in Shanghai, or even Danish school girls about their deep thoughts on materialism or how its "just so hard" living with the competitive atmosphere these days. Its not that I am unsympathetic or that I disagree so much as that I frequently failed to see why the interviewees were more qualified to have insight into the issue than I would be myself.

There are statistics thrown out here and there, and some of them are revealing. But most of the book is a rather dull recounting of the various pet peeves of people of the world interspersed with a healthy dose of Oliver James' personal opinions.
