

happiness

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“*The Constitution* only gives people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself.”
Benjamin Franklin (Benjamin Franklin Quotes, n.d.)

“Happiness comes from spiritual wealth, not material wealth... Happiness comes from giving, not getting. If we try hard to bring happiness to others, we cannot stop it from coming to us also. To get joy, we must give it, and to keep joy, we must scatter it.”

John Templeton (Heart Quotes, n.d.)

What is Happiness?

Happiness is primarily a subjective phenomenon “for which the final judge is whoever lives inside a person’s skin” (Myers & Diener, 1995, p. 11). The ancients believed happiness was not achieved, but either god-given or due to chance. If happiness was experienced, it was not a function of the individual but rather was generously bestowed upon them by the cosmos. At what point in time did happiness change from a divine gift to a self-evident truth? Enlightenment thinkers believed that happiness could be attained in *this* life. If one were not happy, the logic went, the prescription was to alter one’s beliefs, customs, government, or living conditions. Happiness as a self-evident truth is reflected in *The Constitution* and remains today. Peruse the self-help section of a local bookstore, and books on happiness abound. But is being happy as easy as people are led to believe?

People typically equate happiness with the yellow smiley-faced icon. Happiness, many maintain, is about feeling “good.” It is about massages, lazy Sundays, and poolside margaritas. Hershey’s has even recently marketed a dark chocolate bar that has *happiness* imprinted all over it. Consumers are presumably meant to believe happiness will engulf them with each morsel. After all, eating chocolate *is* followed by joy. However, happiness is not solely synonymous with intense pleasure; that is too shallow a conceptualization. Happiness is much deeper.

Aristotle’s notion of eudaimonia is an example. Eudaimonia (i.e., happiness) comes from the Greek *eu* (good) and *daimon* (God, spirit, demon). Aristotle maintained that eudaimonia comes from identifying one’s virtues, cultivating them, and living life in accord. Happiness is beyond *feeling* good; it is about *doing* good. Cicero believed that “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others”(World of Quotes.com, n.d.). Therefore, to live a life of eudaimonia, an individual high in dispositional gratitude may embark on a gratitude visit or count their blessings. The grateful individual might send friends a hand written letter indicating sincere appreciation for the gift bestowed upon him or her—lifelong friendship. Following such practices, the grateful individual has made a concerted effort in realizing his or her virtue of gratitude. Happiness is a natural byproduct, a gift in itself.

In 2002 Martin E.P. Seligman proposed a theory of happiness that is similar to Aristotle’s eudaimonia. According to Seligman, *authentic happiness* is achieved upon identifying and cultivating one’s signature strengths (e.g., curiosity, vitality, gratitude) daily in work, love, and play. Three distinct paths exist. The pleasant path involves experiencing positive emotions about the past (e.g., forgiveness, contentment), present (e.g., joy, ebullience), and future (e.g.,

optimism, hope). Those following the path of meaning typically report a robust attachment to something larger than themselves and have a strong sense of purpose in life. Finally, individuals traveling along the engaged path often report “being in the zone” or experiencing flow. The “full life” is realized when one is fully engaged on all three paths. In 2005, Christopher Peterson, Nansook Park, and Seligman investigated the relationship between authentic happiness and life satisfaction in an internet sample of 845 adults. Pleasure, meaning, and engagement all individually predicted life satisfaction. Both meaning and engagement were stronger predictors compared to pleasure. Indeed, either having a sense of purpose in life or experiencing flow were more important in terms of life satisfaction in contrast to living a life of pleasure. Of particular interest was the finding that respondents who self-reported to be high on all three paths to happiness reported the greatest life satisfaction (the “full life”), whereas those simultaneously low on all three paths reported the least satisfaction (the “empty life”). While temperance is one of six virtues in the classification manual of human strengths, it seems that to achieve authentic happiness, more *is* better.

Another conceptualization of happiness comes from the work of Ed Diener. Happiness, which he calls subjective well-being, is comprised of three components: (a) frequent positive affect, (b) infrequent negative affect, and (c) high life satisfaction (i.e., the cognitive component). Though related, these three components appear independent.

Measuring happiness is typically accomplished via self-report. Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon Sheldon, and David Schkade maintained in 2005 that this seems appropriate and even necessary given the subjective nature of happiness. Though self-reported happiness is subjective, research supports using these measures in empirically investigating happiness for several reasons. First, subjective happiness is related to relatively more “objective” measures such as peer and family member reports of well-being, smiling behavior, ratings derived from clinical interviews, and physiological responses. Second, social desirability only modestly correlates with self-reported subjective well-being. Finally, subjective well-being measures demonstrate construct validity. In sum, researchers take seriously self-reported happiness, especially when supported by converging data with these other “objective” measures.

What’s All The Buzz About Being Happy?

Definitions aside, happiness was not always a central focus in psychology. In a 2003 recount of modern life, Greg Easterbrook provided several intriguing hypotheses as to why happiness is a popular field of study in today’s psychology. Westerners may be suffering from *catalogue induced anxiety*. While objectively living a life the “greatest generation” could only dream (e.g., air conditioning, two cars per household, frequent dining out), in comparison to our neighbors, people may think they are “slumming it.” With McMansions (i.e., a house built on a large scale, but considered ostentatious) and “bloated homes” prolific in contemporary suburbia, a three car garage seems essential. In this spirit, there also appears to be *the blurring of needs and wants*. As George Will aptly put, a need “is defined, in contemporary America, as a 48-hour-old want” (as cited in Easterbrook, 2003, p. 136). Here, the virtue of temperance seems helpful. Finally, *the nice-hotel room factor* is paralyzing. While people have more personal freedom, Easterbrook argues, they work longer hours, many to support materialism. Longer office hours may breed feelings of isolation. Sure, the hotel room is gorgeous, but people are not having a good time because no one else came on the trip. Relatedness being a basic human need, conspicuous consumption can erode happiness. With depression having increased 10 fold since the 1950’s and life satisfaction not budging (though real income has more than doubled), it is no mystery why happiness has become a hot topic.

Can We Make Ourselves Lastingly Happier?

The objective indicators movement of the 1960's and 70's investigated the relationship among happiness and demographic variables, such as age, sex, ethnicity, and education. Decades of research unequivocally show that demographics bear a smaller relationship with happiness than conventional wisdom may lead one to believe. In 1976 Frank Andrews and Stephen Withey determined that less than 10% of happiness could be explained by demographics while in 1984, Diener indicated 15%. In 2005 Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade maintained that life circumstances, which include demographic factors, account for 10%. While demographics affect happiness, the impact is negligible.

Like most other psychological phenomena, genetics plays a role. In 2005 Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade argued that happiness is partly determined by one's genetic set point. This central value within the set range is stable over time. So if one is jumping for joy today, he or she will likely be smiling from ear to ear tomorrow. In 1996, after examining twin and adoption data, David Lykken and Auke Tellegen concluded that happiness was 80% genetic. They maintained that becoming happier was as pointless as trying to be taller; conserve your energy. Lykken has since changed his view. He told *Time* in a 2005 special issue on "The Science of Happiness" that suggesting that increasing happiness was futile was a "dumb" statement. He now believes happiness can be changed for the better or worse. The more accepted figure for genetic contribution to happiness is now 50%. With demographics eating up 10% of the variance in happiness, and genetics devouring another 50%, people are gratefully left with 40% of wiggle room.

The surest route to happiness is quality social relationships. With many today feeling overwhelmed and living through "just in time" schedules where every second is accounted for, resources are scant. If people aim to become happier as effectively and efficiently as possible, then people should put energy into family, friends, romantic partners, and colleagues. Researchers including Michael Argyle, Diener, Lyubomirsky, Seligman, and David Myers assert that social relationships may be the "greatest single cause" of happiness. In 1992 and 1999, Myers concluded that individuals in close relationships report better physical, mental, and emotional quality of life, as well as more adaptive coping responses to stress and adversity. If people aim to be happy, they should enjoy a latte at Starbucks while catching up with an old buddy. Social relationships matter!

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, Michael Fordyce attempted to increase empirically happiness with his 14 "fundamentals for happiness." Aside from cognitive interventions (e.g., "develop positive, optimistic thinking"), participants were instructed to "keep busy and be more active," "get better organized and plan things out," "spend more time socializing," and behave in ways consistent with the idea that "close relationships are the number one source of happiness" (1983, p. 484). Participants reported that although the cognitive interventions were extremely instrumental in enhancing their happiness, the other interventions related to socializing were also deemed just as effective. This was psychology's first glimpse at the powerful effects of volitional activity on happiness.

Lyubomirsky and colleagues are the prominent figures in uncovering the mystery to achieving sustainable happiness. Research demonstrates a strong relationship between kindness and self-reported happiness. When kind to others, we may feel a greater sense of interconnectedness, more confidence in our ability to help, and pride. Kindness seems like a perfect prescription for happiness. However, research by Jonathan Haidt and colleagues in 2002 (as cited in Haidt, 2003) demonstrated that the reverse may not be necessarily true—happiness is

perhaps not the surest route to kindness. Elevation is a positive emotion described as a warm, uplifting feeling people experience when they see others unexpectedly act prosocially. College students induced to feel elevation reported wanting to help others more than students either induced to feel happy or neutral emotions. In a 2005 meta-analysis of over 300 happiness studies Lyubomirsky, Laura King, and Diener found that the relationship between kindness and happiness appears bi-directional. While kindness leads to happiness, happiness may also lead to kindness. If the goal is to increase kindness, data support inducing either elevation *or* happiness.

In 2004, Lyubomirsky, Chris Tkach, and James Yelverton experimentally investigated random acts of kindness. College students were randomly assigned to 1 of 2 conditions. Half were asked to perform five random acts of kindness a week for 6 weeks. Examples of such random acts included dropping coins into a stranger's parking meter, donating blood, or visiting a sick relative. The other half served as controls and just completed the measures at pre and post-test. The controls experienced a decrease in well-being over the 6-week period and those who conducted random acts of kindness experienced a significant increase in well-being over the 6-week period. Being kind can feasibly make the person *and* the recipient happier.

Counting blessings has become a classic happiness intervention. Happy people are grateful people. In a groundbreaking study in 2003, Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough asked college students to count their blessings (i.e., keep a gratitude journal) on a *weekly* basis for 10 weeks. These participants exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week compared to those who recorded hassles or neutral life events. When asked to count blessings on a *daily* basis for 16 days (only 13 were included in the observation period), college students who kept the gratitude journal reported higher levels of the positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness and energy compared to a focus on hassles or a downward social comparison (i.e., thinking one is better off than others). Participants in the daily gratitude condition also reported more prosocial behavior, namely helping someone with a personal problem or offering emotional support, relative to the hassles or social comparison condition. This finding on prosocial behavior supports the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions created by Barbara Fredrickson in 1998. According to Fredrickson, positive emotions broaden our thought-action repertoires and build enduring physical, intellectual, and social resources. Here, gratitude caused greater kindness and generosity. Over time, such altruistic behavior will likely build social resources via strengthening social bonds by fostering likeability from others that in turn increases the chances of receiving future aid through the norm of reciprocity. Finally these effects were replicated in adults with neuromuscular diseases over 3 weeks. Not only did patients who counted blessings indicate more positive affect and life satisfaction via self-report, but such advantages were also reported by their respective spouse or significant other. The powerful effects of gratitude seem to be both private *and* public.

Extending this work to early adolescence in 2007, Jeffrey Froh, William Sefick, and Emmons conducted a novel investigation. Classes of 7th and 8th graders were randomly assigned to 1 of 3 conditions: gratitude, hassles, or a no-treatment control. Those in the gratitude condition were asked to "count up to five things you are grateful for." Students in the hassles group were asked to focus on irritants. Controls simply completed the measures. After 2 weeks of counting blessings, the gratitude condition was associated with enhanced self-reported gratitude, optimism, life satisfaction, and decreased negative affect. At the 3-week follow-up, students instructed to count their blessings showed more gratitude toward people who had helped them, which in turn predicted more gratitude in general. These results suggested that counting general

blessings in adolescence may be related to appreciating specific gifts (e.g., gratitude for receiving aid) via priming them to acknowledge the specific instances of kindness in daily life. The most significant finding was the robust relationship between gratitude and satisfaction with school experience at both the immediate 2-week post-test and 3-week follow-up. Whether young, old, or coping with physical illness, saying, *thank you* is beyond manners.

With a proliferation of happiness interventions, how does counting blessings uphold against some of the other well-being techniques? In 2006 Sheldon and Lyubomirsky compared counting blessings, visualizing best possible selves (BPS), and life details in college students. The BPS exercise required participants to think of themselves in the future and consider having realized their life dreams. Controls given the life details exercise were instructed to write about the ordinary details of their life (e.g., attending class). The interventions and measures were completed at the pre-test and then again 2 and 4 weeks later. Participants were asked to continue with the exercises at least twice in between data collections. Results indicated that the BPS exercise may be better at raising and maintaining positive mood compared to the other two conditions. In this study, counting blessings came in second. It seems that engendering gratitude may be more difficult to achieve compared to thinking about accomplishing life's goals. Cultivating happiness via counting blessings may be a path of greater resistance. If one is willing to work, do not throw in the towel. People should count blessings! But if the "just in time" schedule wears people out, then BPS may be the best bet.

Future Directions

Experimental research by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and colleagues has moved happiness inquiry beyond the correlates to understanding the mechanisms, processes, and outcomes associated with sustainable well-being. Research in this vein should continue if the ultimate goal is not just to learn who is happy and why, but to identify scientifically proven paths to long-term well-being. Moderating variables such as personality (e.g., extraversion) and the person-activity fit should continue to be explored as these variables may provide insight into augmenting treatment effects. Diener and colleagues have advanced our understanding of happiness at the national level. Wealth, human rights, equality between people, the fulfillment of basic biological needs, individualism, political stability, interpersonal trust, and thinking happiness is important all predict national happiness. With happiness being shown to *cause* successful outcomes (e.g., high salaries, good physical health, supportive social networks), policy-makers should consider making the assessment and promotion of their citizen's quality of life a national priority. Research on national well-being should continue and aim to isolate the effects of individual predictors. Finally, happiness research will advance if methodologically and statistically sophisticated techniques such as multivariate replicated single-subject repeated measures designs, experience sampling procedures, and analytic techniques such as multilevel modeling are used.

SEE ALSO: kindness, joy, life satisfaction, marital happiness, meaning, positive emotions, gratitude, authentic happiness, eudaimonia, good life, pleasure, possible selves, David Myers, Martin E.P. Seligman, Christopher Peterson, Sonja Lyubomirsky

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