

by Michael Wiederman, Ph.D.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HAPPINESS

Despite what any one advertisement might promise, the roots of happiness are more tangled. Understanding the inherent ways our minds work does afford us the chance to untangle some of those roots, freeing us to make better choices in how we'll invest our effort and time in the universal pursuit of happiness.

What would make you happier? Even if you are already happy, there must be something that would add a bit more. But what if you were granted your heart's desire? Would you *really* be happier? The little voice in each of our heads says "yes," but research on the psychology of happiness indicates "probably not."

During the last several years, the field of *positive psychology* has shed light on what does and does not affect human happiness. An obvious factor to examine is wealth.

David Myers, a psychologist at Hope College in Michigan, documented an interesting discrepancy between wealth and happiness in the United States. Over the past 50 years, inflation-adjusted income of Americans as a whole has tripled. Clearly we are wealthier than at any previous point in our history. Still, the proportion of Americans who describe themselves as "very happy" has remained stable at about one-third.

Despite being far better off financially than previous generations, we are apparently no happier as a whole. We are bombarded with the message that personal wealth equals happiness, but research indicates that it is not true. So, why does it often feel like a greater degree of happiness is always just out of reach? The ultimate answers may lie in our human nature.

People exhibit a remarkable capacity to habituate, or become used to the status quo. Habituation is wonderfully adaptive when we are talking about aversive conditions, such as chronic noise or a permanent disability. After a while we may no longer notice these unpleasant conditions. Unfortunately, habituation applies to positive aspects of our lives as well. Even comforting experiences, if they become constant, are adjusted to.

Nevertheless, after looking around we notice that some people seem to be happier than others. We might assume such differences are due to some people having "made it" to the good life. Psychologists, however, are ever sensitive to considering the roles of personality versus experience.

The Power of Personality

Personality differs from human nature in that it varies across individuals. At the same time, personality is relatively stable across each person's lifetime. Events come and go, but our traits and habitual ways of responding remain.

When it comes to happiness, events influence how we feel, at least in the short run. Winning the lottery is liable to prompt even the most cynical individual to experience a spike in happiness. However, people habituate to the way things are, generally returning to their own baseline level of happiness. It is this inherent baseline, or set-point, of happiness that is an aspect of personality. The trait-like level of happiness varies across people but remains fairly stable over the lifespan. So how do we explain variation in baseline levels of happiness across individuals?

Researchers David Lykken and Auke Tellegen at the University of Minnesota studied twins over the course of several years. They found that about 80 percent of the variation across individuals in this "trait" aspect of happiness is due to genetic differences among people. When most people hear the term "genetic" they tend to think "passed from parents to offspring." However, researchers use the term to mean a characteristic arising from the way genes came together to form each unique individual. This explains why traits that have a strong genetic component still may vary widely between parents and their children, or between siblings. Unless an individual has an identical twin, that person is truly one-of-a-kind genetically.

The notion that each of us has an inherent baseline of happiness due to our temperament has important implications when combined with our shared human nature. The tendency to habituate to the status quo explains why, no matter what happens in our lives, we tend to return to our own individual level, or set-point, of satisfaction with life.

This set-point notion of happiness runs counter to the American dream: that happiness (or at least satisfaction) can be achieved through hard work and determination. What is wrong with this equation?

Goals + Achievement = Happiness?

American capitalism rests on the assumption that happiness can be achieved or bought, a belief that fuels consumerism and competition. However, linking one's future happiness to achievement of particular goals may be a recipe for discontent. Unfortunately some of us link our happiness to achieving goals more so than other people. In a sense, we might characterize each person as falling somewhere along a continuum from "non-linker" to "strong-linker" of happiness to goal attainment.

The problem with being a strong-linker is the tendency to then be more obsessively focused on meeting particular goals. Because of the belief that happiness depends on reaching those goals, strong-linkers tend to ruminate until the goals are met, experiencing greater anxiety and pressure along the way.

Strong-linkers are probably relatively less happy than other people while pursuing goals, believing that happiness will be finally attained only at some future point. After all, how can you expect them to be satisfied when they have yet to arrive at their desired destination? What happens when the goal is finally met?

Going back to human nature, after cherished goals are met, habituation takes over and strong-linkers return to their previous baseline level of happiness just like everyone else. With the disappointment of realizing that one's level of happiness has not changed comes two possibilities: realize that lasting happiness will not result from achievement or conclude that increased happiness still lies just over the next horizon.

Here is another point where human nature gets in the way. People are especially good at deceiving themselves about the future. We tend to believe that our prospects for increased happiness are better than our current circumstances. This tendency is nurtured by mass media and advertising that promises greater satisfaction with certain purchases or achievement. People, who persist, as strong-linkers tend to choose new goals, convinced that this time they have found the "real" path to happiness.

Is There Hope for Increasing Happiness?

What can we do to increase happiness? First, we need to dissuade ourselves of some core beliefs instilled as part of our culture; namely that happiness can be achieved or bought. Even though we may intellectually reject consumerism as the royal road to happiness, we are still faced with our inherent human nature. As difficult as it might be, we need to be vigilant against that internal voice that whispers, "But you'd be a bit happier if."

One strategy is to occasionally reflect on times when we were convinced that a certain accomplishment or possession would bring greater happiness; yet found that ultimately our emotional lives were not transformed. After such reflection we might be tempted to conclude that the earlier quest for happiness was simply misguided. *Now*, however, we are more savvy about what will *really* make us happy. Do not fall for it.

Second, we should rethink our very beliefs about the nature of happiness. Instead of equating happiness with pleasure or fun, we would do well to think of happiness as a state of contentment and relative lack of anxiety and regret. Experiences of great joy stand out in our memories, and it is easy to conclude that being truly happy means being in that state of joy most or all of the time. However, if we were, we would habituate to it. The very reason we savor and remember times of great pleasure or joy is because they are not the norm.

Perhaps Eastern notions of mindfulness come closest to a state of contentment. Mindfulness involves being nonjudgmental and conscious only of the present by being fully engaged in what is happening right now. Unfortunately this is not the norm for most of us; instead it is a skill that requires practice. Meditation is one such way to increase control over the focus of one's mind.

The Eastern concept of mindfulness has become integrated into Western psychology through Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's study of what he terms "flow." Flow experiences are those that are inherently motivating for the individual because he or she becomes totally absorbed in them. That is not to say that flow experiences are fun (although they can be), but rather that flow involves being fully engaged. The task at hand is not too easy (boring) or too difficult (frustrating or anxiety-provoking), but rather sufficiently challenging to demand our full attention.

What does flow have to do with happiness? Well, people who report experiencing more flow also tend to be happier. Why? It may have to do with the fact that flow experiences demand full attention to the present. When we are totally engaged in what we are doing right now, it is impossible to focus on the past or future, or to feel self-conscious — all of which tend to undermine satisfaction with life.

Third, we should recognize the powers of relativity and perspective, taking active steps to tilt things in our favor. There will always be other people who seem better off than we are, and comparing ourselves to them usually results in dissatisfaction.

Psychologists refer to our tendency to compare ourselves with those who are better off as "upward comparison," and it is known to result in feeling dissatisfied. Conversely, downward comparison (to those who are worse off than we are) tends to make us more appreciative and satisfied. Unfortunately, upward comparison seems to come more naturally, a tendency that may be fueled by advertising.

One antidote to upward comparison seems to be volunteering to help those in need. People who volunteer more tend to report being happier. Perhaps it is because working with those less fortunate prompts us to more readily appreciate what we have. Plus, volunteering often results in a sense of satisfaction and esteem as we feel engaged in worthwhile work and are appreciated by those we serve.

Last, to combat habituation, we might try to build into our lives a good deal of moderation. Since we will automatically grow accustomed to the status quo and most readily notice differences from it, we should plan accordingly. For example, ten days of vacation time may be more enjoyably split into two or three smaller vacations compared to one large one.

The results of the growing body of research on happiness do not point to any simple answers. Despite what any one advertisement might promise, the roots of happiness are more tangled. Understanding the inherent ways our minds work does afford us the chance to untangle some of those roots, freeing us to make better choices in how we will invest our effort and time in the universal pursuit of happiness. ▼

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