



The Pursuit of Happiness

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August 6, 2017

Are you happy? Here's the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire.
On a scale of 0 to 10 are you usually a

10: Extremely happy, (feeling ecstatic, joyous, fantastic,)

a **5:** Neutral, (not particularly happy or unhappy,)

or a **0:** Extremely unhappy, (utterly depressed, completely down.)

Well, if you're on either extreme of this scale, feel free to give me a call.

If you're a 0, I'm available if you need someone to talk to.

If you're a 10, you're either falling in love and I'd love to hear the news—
or you're having a manic episode and need your meds.

By the way, the average score for Americans, is 7: mildly happy.

In his book, *Authentic Happiness*, Martin Seligman compares what the psychological world knew about happiness in 1967 and what we know today.

Then it was believed that happy people were well paid/ married/ young/ healthy/ well educated/ of either sex/ of any level of intelligence/ and religious.

Half of this, he says, turned out to be wrong, and half right.

Money, for example, is *not* an indicator of happiness. That is, once the gross national product exceeds \$8,000 per person, added wealth brings no additional satisfaction. "real purchasing

power has more than doubled in the United States, France, and Japan, but life satisfaction has. . ." not changed at all.

Individuals in committed relationships are more happy than singles, but people in bad relationships are less happy than singles.

Youth is a *negative* indicator. People actually get *happier* as they age.

Except in the cases of severe illness, health is just *barely* significant. It's our *perception* of how healthy we are that makes a difference.

As for education, climate, race and gender, none of these seems to matter much.

Religion *is* a factor. A religious community is a support network, and religions "instill hope for the future and create meaning in life."

Seligman cites a study by Shreena Sethi Iyengar, a blind undergraduate who traveled across the United States to do her senior thesis. She visited one congregation after another, measuring the relation between optimism and religious faith. She visited churches representing eleven prominent American religions. She gave questionnaires to hundreds of congregants, recorded and analyzed dozens of weekend sermons, and scrutinized the liturgy, and the stories told to children.

Her first finding is that the more fundamentalist the religion, the more optimistic are its adherents: Orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Christians and Muslims are markedly more optimistic than Reform Jews and Unitarians, who are more depressive on average."

Probing more deeply, she separated the amount of hope found in the sermons, liturgy, and stories from other factors like social support. She found that the increase in optimism which increasing religiousness brings is entirely accounted for by greater hope."

So to summarize, if you want to lastingly raise your level of happiness by changing the external circumstances of your life, you *should* do the following:

- Live in a wealthy democracy, not in an impoverished dictatorship (a strong effect)
- Get partnered (a robust effect, but perhaps not causal)
- Avoid negative events and negative emotion (only a moderate effect)
- Acquire a rich social network (a robust effect, but perhaps not causal)
- Get religion [fundamentalist if possible] (a moderate effect)

As far as happiness and life satisfaction are concerned, however, Seligman says that you don't need to do the following:

- Don't bother trying to make more money (money has little or no effect once you have acquired the basics of food, clothing and shelter, and the more materialistic people are the *less* happy they are.)
- You don't have to get healthier, since it's *subjective* health, not *objective* health that matters.

- Don't strive to get as much education as possible—studies have shown that there's no effect.
- You'll also be happy to know that you don't need to change your race or move to a sunnier climate—neither has any effect on happiness.

But what about the downsides of happiness? In the NY Times Magazine Jim Holt pointed to some of the attendant problems in an article entitled, "Against Happiness."

Holt's suggestion that happiness is not only overrated but sometimes even dangerous seems downright un-American. After all, one of our founding documents claims its pursuit as a God-given right. What's the problem?

Well, the case against happiness is that happy people are irrational and judgment-impaired. They overestimate their control over their environment; they have an unrealistic estimation of their own achievements and abilities.

Holt cites a study that found that "children who are cheerful and optimistic end up having shorter lifespans (perhaps because they take more risky chances.)"

A recent Australian study has shown that people in a negative mood provide more accurate eyewitness accounts than people in a positive mood state.

And that study indicates that people in a positive mood such as happiness were shown to have relatively unreliable memories, and show poorer judgment and critical thinking skills.

By contrast, those who experienced a negative mood such as sadness were shown to provide more reliable eyewitness accounts and exercise superior thinking and communication skills.

One of the most alarming accusations against happiness is that it may lead to bigotry. Researchers at Northeastern University studied the effect of our emotions on our judgments of people of different races or social groups.

They found that anger increased the likelihood of bigoted responses. But surprisingly, so did happiness. It seems that happiness, the sense that all is well, reduces our motivation for analytical thought. This makes us more likely to fall back on stereotypes - including malicious ones. (Holt.)

In fact, British psychologist Richard Bentall has argued that happiness meets all reasonable criteria for a psychiatric disorder. "It is," he wrote, "statistically abnormal and consists of a discrete cluster of symptoms; there is at least some evidence that it reflects abnormal functioning of the central nervous system; and it is associated with various cognitive abnormalities--in particular, a lack of contact with reality. Acceptance of these arguments leads to the obvious conclusion that happiness should be included in future taxonomies of mental illness, probably as a form of affective disorder." (Harper's Magazine, Jan, 1993.)

So it's healthier and safer to be unhappy?

A distinction between happy and unhappy states of mind was made by the author of the Australian study. "The finding makes sense in evolutionary terms. Animals that are wary of their environment are more likely to perceive threats to their survival. This supports the idea that mood states are evolutionary signals about how to deal with threatening situations. That is, a negative mood state triggers more systematic, more attentive, more vigilant information processing. By contrast, good moods signal a benign, non-threatening environment where we don't need to be so vigilant."

Martin Seligman expands on the difference.

He cites the research of Lisa Aspinwall a professor at the University of Utah. She "has gathered compelling evidence that in making important real-life decisions, happier people may be smarter than unhappy people. She presented her subjects with scary, pertinent health-risk information: articles about the relationship of caffeine to breast cancer for coffee drinkers, or about links between tanning and melanoma for sun worshippers.

"Aspinwall's participants are divided into happy and unhappy (either by tests of optimism or by causing a positive experience, such as recalling a past act of kindness, prior to handing them the materials to read), then asked one week later what they remember about the health risks. Happy people remember more of the negative information and rate it as more convincing; it turns out, than do the unhappy people. . . .

Seligman writes, "There is an exciting possibility with rich implications that integrates all these findings: A positive mood jolts us into an entirely different way of thinking from a negative mood. I have noticed over thirty years of psychology department faculty meetings-conducted in a cheerless, gray, and windowless room full of unrepentant grouches that the ambient mood is on the chilly side of zero. This seems to make us critics of a high order. When we gather to debate which one of several superb job candidates we should hire as a professor, we often end up hiring no one, instead picking out everything that each candidate has done wrong. Over thirty years, we have voted down many young people who later grew up to become excellent, pioneering psychologists, a virtual who's who of world psychology.

"So a chilly, negative mood activates a battle-stations mode of thinking: the order of the day is to focus on what is wrong and then eliminate, it A positive mood, in contrast, buoys people into a way of thinking that is creative, tolerant, constructive, generous, un-defensive and lateral.

"This way of thinking, aims to detect not what is wrong, but what is right. It does not go out of its way to detect sins of omission, but hones in on the virtues of commission. It probably even occurs in a different part of the brain and has a different neurochemistry from thinking under negative mood.

So – take advantage of the differences: "Choose your venue and design your mood to fit the task at hand. Here are examples of tasks that usually require critical thinking: taking the graduate record exams, doing income tax, deciding whom to fire, dealing with repeated romantic rejections, preparing for an audit, copyediting, making crucial decisions in

competitive sports, and figuring out where to go to college. Carry these out on rainy days, in straight backed chairs, and in a silent, institutionally painted room. Being uptight, sad, or out of sorts will not impede you; It may even make your decisions more acute.

"In contrast, any number of life tasks call for creative, generous, and tolerant thinking: planning a sales campaign, finding ways to increase the amount of love in your life, pondering a new career field, deciding whether to marry someone, thinking about hobbies and noncompetitive sports, and creative writing. Carry these out in a setting that 'will buoy your mood (for example, in a comfortable chair, with suitable music, sun, and fresh air). If possible, surround yourself with people you trust to 'be unselfish and of good will."

This is the insight that guides a group visioning process called Appreciative Inquiry. Last year we used some of its techniques in workshops, which focused on thinking and talking about your experience of when this church was at its best.

But as for the pursuit of happiness, I don't consider to be our primary goal.

The goal is rather what I think of as the Good Life. The good life is when you feel truly yourself - authentic, integrated, engaged, challenged, fulfilled. It is a life with deep meaningful connections to other people.

The good life is a life invested in something larger than myself; it is a life spent serving the beautiful, the good, and the true. It is a life committed to furthering love and justice.

We all are endowed with certain strengths, gifts, and abilities that enable us to act on the world, and allow us to be affected by it. We're here to grow a soul. It is our choice to move toward or away from this sacred task. If we chose to move toward it, growing in wisdom, commitment and compassion, then happiness may follow – but I suggest that it is a *benefit*, not a goal.

I leave you with these words from William Stafford.

Time wants to show you a different country. It's the one
that your life conceals, the one waiting outside
when curtains are drawn, the one Grandmother hinted at
in her crochet design, the one almost found
over at the edge of the music, after the sermon.

It's the way life is, and you have it, a few years given.
You get killed now and then, violated
in various ways. (And sometimes it's turn about.)
You get tired of that. Long-suffering, you wait
and pray, and maybe good things come -maybe
the hurt slackens and you hardly feel it any more.
You have a breath without pain. It is called happiness.

It's a balance, the taking and passing along,
the composting of where you've been and how people

and weather treated you. It's a country where
you already are, bringing where you have been.
Time offers this gift in its millions of ways,
turning the world, moving the air, calling,
every morning, "Here,
take it,
it's yours."
AMEN