

SECTION 4

WHAT MAKES US HAPPY?

"Pursuing the Science of Happiness"

by Andrew Guest

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"I just want to be happy." It sounds like such a simple, noble goal. When I overhear it in discussions by the generally earnest and well-meaning college students I teach, my first reaction is to think that worries about rampant materialism among today's youth are vastly overstated. But my second, more considered reaction is to wonder what they mean. Being happy, I want to tell them, is much more complicated than it sounds.

That considered reaction, that hesitation about a most American ideal—the inalienable right to "the pursuit of happiness"—is born primarily from my work as an academic psychologist. But the reason I do that work in Oregon is born of my own pursuit of happiness: Portland seemed like a place I could be happy. It may be a little out of the way for academia, but it's got a good quality of life—the trees are green, the coffee is rich, the ethos is a certain type of friendly. After six years here I sometimes think that has worked out. Sometimes.

I have, of course, had many happy moments in Oregon. The clichés have proven true: I've enjoyed beautiful mountain vistas, engaged with good friends and loving family, savored a fine meal accompanied by a hearty microbrew, felt part of conversations that might somehow

contribute to a better community. Portland has even been good for idiosyncratic things, such as my soccer addiction: when the Timbers slice another slab off the victory log, it makes me happy. But am I a happier person?

My answer to that question is inevitably biased by some of my research experiences. About a decade ago I spent the end of my graduate school years searching for happiness in unlikely places, including Angolan refugee camps. Ostensibly I was doing a dissertation in developmental psychology and focusing on the distinct cultural roles of play, games, and sports for children in marginalized communities. But implicitly, in the guise of social science, I was trying to figure out what it means to be happy—I was fascinated by the relationships between human psychology and the circumstances of our lives.

At the time, Angola was a paragon of bad circumstances; it was rated by the United Nations Children's Fund as the "worst place in the world to be a child" thanks to a twenty-seven-year civil war, decimated health care and education systems, and massive income inequality. The camps were hardscrabble patches of ruby red dirt and quasi-permanent mud-brick homes, teeming with families bereft of tangible opportunities. And yet, when I asked the refugee youths in formal surveys about their psychological well-being, more than three quarters reported being generally happy. This is not meant to romanticize poverty, because the people I worked with were decidedly *unhappy* with their objectively dismal material realities. They wanted real schools, decent shelter, and opportunities for their parents and their future. They deserved a life expectancy beyond fifty years and the power to choose what they would do with their lives. But they did not necessarily internalize those problems; on a day-to-day basis they played with their friends, laughed with their siblings, and lived their lives. They found ways to feel happy.

Ironically, at that point in my life I was not sure how I would rate my own happiness. I was a lonely graduate student pining over a distant, ill-fated relationship and wracked with anxiety about whether I

had any future in academia. I'm usually not an early riser, but during my six months in Angola I regularly woke at 4:00 in a lukewarm sweat only to stare for hours at the gritty white mesh of my mosquito net, listening to the spasmodic traffic in Luanda's old town. I genuinely appreciated the experience, and I felt deeply engaged with the research and the community, but I couldn't wait to leave. I wanted to settle in a place like Oregon to teach classes full of earnest and well-meaning college students eager to discuss the psychology of happiness. And fortunately, for the sake of that discussion, no matter how hard it is to live the science, a large and growing body of research has offered me a few things to say.

The modern science of happiness often goes by the name "positive psychology" and presents itself as an evolution away from psychology's historical focus on dysfunction—a focus seeded by Freud and fed by a desire to help the mentally ill. As University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Martin Seligman, the generally acknowledged founder of positive psychology, framed it in a 2004 conversation with the Edge Foundation, "In the same way I can claim unblushingly that psychology and psychiatry have decreased the tonnage of suffering in the world, my aim is that psychology and maybe psychiatry will increase the tonnage of happiness in the world."

The core belief of positive psychology as a field is that science will lead the way. In the last decade new peer-reviewed scientific journals of happiness studies and positive psychology have appeared, which mostly dispense with the anecdotes and intuitions of self-help gurus. Institutions such as the august University of Pennsylvania have started offering degrees in applied positive psychology, and organizations such as the Templeton Foundation have invested millions of dollars in grants, conferences, and awards.

Amidst this flurry of modern science, however, lies a classical challenge: there is no widespread agreement about how to define happiness. In fact, some contemporary psychologists go back to ancient Greek philosophic debates about *hedonia* and *eudaimonia*. In the

2001 *Annual Review of Psychology*, for example, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci contrasted contemporary scholarship taking “the hedonic approach,” which focuses more on measuring subjective feelings of pleasure, with “the eudaimonic approach,” which emphasizes the satisfactions of a meaningful life and self-realization.

Each approach tells us something about the human experience of happiness, but each has its limitations. The hedonic approach, for example, risks seeming superficial, while the eudaimonic approach risks unfair value judgments. From a research perspective, how can I decide whether someone’s life is meaningful? In most cases researchers get around the thorny problem of judging meaningful happiness by keeping their measures as general as possible. The most common measures of what scholars call “subjective well-being” or “subjective happiness” essentially just ask people to define it for themselves, responding on a scale of 1 to 7 to prompts such as, “In general, I consider myself not a very happy person” (1) to “In general, I consider myself a very happy person” (7). A researcher can then aggregate results and suggest variables that do and do not correlate with happiness.

What those results rarely report is that most people in most places subjectively perceive themselves to be reasonably happy. For example, in her book *The How of Happiness*, University of California psychology professor Sonja Lyubomirsky mentions in passing, amidst various prescriptions for becoming happier, that the average adult scores around 5.6 on her 7-point scale; college students score lower—only around 5 out of 7.

What’s more, our subjective perceptions of happiness don’t tend to change much over time—even when our lives change dramatically. In one oft-cited 1978 study, for example, researchers from Northwestern University interviewed people at two extremes: people who had won the lottery and people who had been paralyzed in accidents. The point of the study was that, when asked, people in those groups agreed that the initial events had made a great difference in their lives: winning the lottery was joyful, becoming paralyzed was agonizing. But after

six months or a year, the events seemed to make little difference. The lottery winners had settled into new stresses and burdens; they took less pleasure in the mundane realities of daily life. The people who had been paralyzed gradually found new satisfactions, challenges, and opportunities. They were nostalgic about the past, but also optimistic about the future. People in both groups adapted.

Combining the results of that study with findings from more recent research, Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert, in a 2004 TED conference talk, went so far as to say, "If it happened over three months ago, with a few exceptions, it has no impact on our happiness." This phenomenon has been much discussed and is occasionally controversial among psychologists, even garnering its own scientific-sounding name "hedonic adaptation," or sometimes, the "hedonic treadmill." The idea is that the more steps we take in our pursuit of happiness, the more we stay in the same place. There is, for example, an old newspaper poll finding that when you ask people making less than \$30,000 per year how much income it would take to fulfill their dreams, they say \$50,000. But when you ask people making just over \$100,000 the same question, they say it would take \$250,000. The technical terms for these ever-adjusting dreams are "relative deprivation" or "reference anxiety." The more human term is "jealousy." The end result is the same: we adapt.

Is this good news or bad news? Probably a bit of both. Our psychological ability to adapt means we can often cope better than we might expect with many of life's inevitable challenges, but it also means that our successes are more temporal than we might hope. When my team loses, it is never as devastating as I worry it might be, but when they win the joy is almost always fleeting.

In my mind, however, the most profound implication is what hedonic adaptation means for the pursuit of happiness over a lifetime. If I want to know how happy the students in my classes will be in twenty or thirty years, I could try to collect a lot of data: What will they do for a living? Will they fall in love? Have kids? Live in a vibrant

community? Suffer tragedy? Make a lot of money? Have a fulfilling spiritual life? Make an artistic contribution? Cheer for the winning team? Get soft, wet kisses from a puppy? I could try to learn about all that, but I don't need to. If I'm trying to make a statistical prediction of their future happiness, all I need to know is how happy they are now.

Researchers studying happiness sometimes talk about this phenomenon as a genetic "set point" for happiness, or perhaps a deeply rooted psychological dynamic—an emotional predisposition around which we vary from time to time, but to which we usually return. The idea of living in Oregon may have once made me happy, but based on my own predispositions, I might as well be back in Illinois or (shiver) Ohio.

Fortunately, however, the story is not quite that simple: the set point is, if anything, a set range within which there is much room for negotiation. As such, positive psychologists such as Sonja Lyubomirsky assert that although something around half of our happiness is determined by hardwired dispositions, another forty percent is shaped by voluntary activities. Of course, that means a mere ten percent is down to the circumstances of our lives. In fact, in my reading, the science of happiness has as much to say about what is *not* likely to make us happy as what is.

Take money, for example. The voluminous (and sometimes controversial) research on wealth suggests that having more money correlates with happiness only up to a point. Being very poor creates hardships that can affect well-being, and having enough money to satisfy basic needs is important. But beyond a certain point (which seems to vary according to relative standards in different communities and cultures), more money seems to have little to do with happiness. In fact, according to statistics reported by Nobel prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues, more than 80 percent of Americans at all income levels report being either "pretty happy" or "very happy."

What about other circumstances idealized by the popular imagination as being keys to happiness: Youth? Beauty? Intelligence? No.

Nope. Not really. There are certain social advantages to being young, beautiful, or smart, but happiness does not seem to be one of them. In fact, compelling evidence suggests that our psychological well-being is highest in old age because we've dropped the pretense of wanting to be more attractive or intelligent than we are. Older adults tend to be more accepting of themselves and, in some cases, that can override even the challenging physical health problems of aging.

One other provocative example of a life circumstance that seems to have little relationship to happiness is having children. In the popular imagination, children are often the joy of their parents' lives, but the evidence suggests otherwise. In a phenomenon some scholars call the "parenting paradox," no matter how you measure it—looking at overall well-being, day-to-day emotional states, broader life satisfaction—people with children are no happier than people without children (unless, some research suggests, the childless people wanted to have children but couldn't). Children bring joys, but they also bring burdens and anxieties. The fact that we are convinced children will make us happy may just be another peculiar trick of human nature. As Daniel Gilbert explained to *Harvard Magazine*, "Imagine a species that figured out that children don't make you happy. . . . We have a word for that species: extinct. There is a conspiracy between genes and culture to keep us in the dark about the real sources of happiness."

Most of the modern science exploring the source of real happiness seems to come back to a formulation that Freud famously (and perhaps apocryphally) proposed a century ago: love and work. Love, in its broadest definition as healthy social relationships and meaningful interpersonal engagements, seems to matter. Social isolation is one of the best predictors of depression and other mental health problems. Being married and having friends, however, is one of the best predictors of well-being. There are many nuances to how love can play out in our lives, but at the most general level, being connected to people matters.

Work, in the sense of engaging with meaningful projects that offer reasonable degrees of challenge and a sense of purpose, also seems

important. Work does not have to be a remunerative job—it can be family responsibilities, community volunteering, artistic projects, and the like. But at its best it allows us to cultivate our strengths and contribute to something larger than ourselves.

Other statistical correlates of happiness often seem to integrate a healthy balance of these broad categories. There is, for example, convincing evidence that religious people are happier than the nonreligious, but this may be because religion often involves interpersonal connections within a community and a larger sense of purpose for our lives. It may also be the case that religion does not so much make people happy as happy people tend to be attracted to religion—teasing out the causal nature of these relationships is always as much an art as it is a science.

The presence of fulfilling love and meaningful work may also be conducive to the types of voluntary activities that positive psychologists like to prescribe for those looking to increase their levels of happiness. Practices such as showing gratitude to others, intentionally savoring small daily pleasures, and spending time in activities that use our personal strengths seem to have a significant impact on how we subjectively feel about ourselves and our lives.

So does this kind of descriptive science give us a road map to happiness? Should I just tell my students to stay connected to the people they love, worry a little less about money, find work that offers them a sense of purpose, think twice before having kids, go to church, and give thanks for their blessings? Maybe I should—but I can't. It may just go back to that classical challenge of defining happiness, but I don't think I sat in Angola pining to settle down in a place like Oregon because I wanted to boost my "subjective well-being." I moved here because I thought it would make for a good quality of life. And what constitutes good quality in our minds may not be the same thing as happiness.

In fact, the positive psychology movement has begun to generate a vocal cadre of detractors to accompany its many acolytes. Books such

as *Against Happiness* by English professor Eric Wilson offer different critiques, but fundamentally agree that framing happiness as an ultimate goal seems shallow. Here even my college students tend to agree. If I offer them a hypothetical choice between a constant, slightly positive emotional state—permanent moderate happiness—or the chance to experience a range of emotions with higher highs and lower lows averaging out to less gross happiness, most (though not all) make what classic economics would consider the irrational choice: they are willing to sacrifice some happiness for the full range of human experience.

Yet, even if we could have it all, even if we recognize happiness as dependent upon seemingly valorous statistical correlates such as healthy relationships, purposeful work, and making meaningful contributions to a community, there is room for critique. In fact, social critics including Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Bright Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America*, and Chris Hedges, in *Empire of Illusion*, argue that positive psychology and the modern pursuit of happiness are ultimately related to some of the deepest problems of modern society. Do you think gaping economic inequalities, unjust wars, and ferocious un/underemployment are problems? Don't worry, be happy.

I appreciate the critics' perspectives and worry that adopting the baser tenets of positive psychology can blind us individually to broader social problems, but I also can't help but think that criticizing the pursuit of happiness is an oversimplification. Indeed, I sometimes remind my students that the founding documents of our country pointedly do not suggest that happiness itself is an inalienable right—only its *pursuit*. So perhaps the pursuit is the thing. Perhaps in their vast wisdom the founders offered us the primary lesson of happiness: that it is a process rather than an outcome.

So when I overhear my students saying they "just want to be happy," I like to imagine that the new science of positive psychology can help them. As University of Virginia psychology professor

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Jonathan Haidt points out in *The Happiness Hypothesis*, the research on happiness ultimately distills into the wise words of Shakespeare: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." And for me, I've come to realize, there are ways in which thinking itself makes me happy.

In perhaps a final irony of my research experience, I often reminisce happily about that angst-ridden experience in Angola. I recall long days of equatorial sun glistening off the distant Atlantic Ocean, crafting amateur Portuguese into conversations with Angolans who challenged me, with their strength amidst adversity, to separate psychological well-being from structural well-being. And I think about long days in Oregon classrooms with the Willamette River flowing in the distance, hoping for chances to convey those experiences to students in ways that might challenge them to reconsider what it means to "just be happy." Happiness, I want to tell them, is more complicated than it sounds—but it is also much more interesting.