

HAPPINESS:

What it is and what it is not

Happiness. Subjective Well-Being.

A state of being involving choice, beliefs, gratitude, and accurate appraisal of self, others, events. Happiness involves emotions but is not an emotion and also requires the ability to effectively manage emotions. Happiness is not the result of good things happening to one.

Positive Psychology: Understanding and building human strengths.

Goals of positive psychology: To enhance experiences of love, work, perseverance, originality, responsibility, civility, altruism, and tolerance.

Basic Goal: Optimize Life

Happiness requires effort, whereas unhappiness is easy.

Life is full of tragedies and loss; happiness or unhappiness is not predicated or determined by one's personal tragedies or losses.

In fact, it has been demonstrated that happiness is not correlated with the circumstances of a person's life.

Happiness is not determined by money or success.

BARRIERS TO HAPPINESS

1. Dissatisfaction and insatiability: There is such a thing as enough: enough money, enough housing, enough things.
Needs vs. Wants: Basic needs need to be met for happiness, but not wants. Basic needs include: shelter, food, clothing, transportation, love. Wants include everything else.
Unnecessary dissatisfaction: dissatisfaction over something that is unimportant or something that is unchangeable.
2. Comparing ourselves and our lives to others, either negatively, leading to decreased self-esteem or positively, leading to jealousy and unnecessary dissatisfaction.
3. Believing incorrectly that something or someone external to ourselves will make us happy. Happiness is an inside job. Someone or something can add to or detract from our happiness, but no one and nothing else can create that state for ourselves.
4. Images of perfection: the tendency to think about one's life, job, partner, self, etc. in terms of what "should" be as opposed to the reality what actually is and/or what is reasonable. This is influenced and fostered by advertising and societal expectations. One can either alter the images to fit reality or change one's reality and it is important to know the difference.
5. "Missing Tile Syndrome": with images of perfection, there is the correlated tendency to fixate on whatever is flawed, without seeing and appreciating the overall picture. Since perfection is impossible, one can always find flaws. Further, if one can imagine perfection in something or someone, one will always imagine that something is missing.
6. Expectations: This is similar to the above. Expectations more often lead to unhappiness, because when expectations for one's life, self, partner, etc. are not met, one tends to be

unhappy about this; however, if one's expectations are met, the ability to be grateful is diminished and gratitude is an essential ingredient for happiness.

7. Seeing oneself as a victim: this automatically precludes happiness. Victims abdicate control of their lives which leads to unhappiness and blaming others for one's unhappiness leads to anger and anger makes happiness impossible. Victims also cannot allow themselves to enjoy life because enjoying life challenges the perception of victimhood. Unfortunately victimhood is appealing because it is easier to blame others and not assume responsibility for one's life.

Ways to be a victim:

- a) Victimization by parents - parents are imperfect people and make mistakes, sometimes egregious, harmful mistakes. Become an adult.
 - b) Identification with a victimized group, i.e., ethnic minorities, women, gays/lesbians; One can blame one's unhappiness on how this group is treated or on whatever makes one different.
 - c) Victim of perceived slights - due to hypersensitivity, personal insecurity and poor self-esteem; tendency to take one's self too seriously, and to take things too personally.
 - d) Victim of one's own behavior - engaging in behavior(s) that lead to negative consequences and blaming those consequences on others, i.e., getting a DUI and blaming the police for losing one's license.
8. Genetic predisposition and biochemical factors - Some evidence that about 50% of variability accounting for a tendency toward unhappiness, depression, anxiety may be genetic. However, this leaves another 50% over which some personal control can be exerted: through therapy, medication, learning accurate thinking skills and emotion management, changing one's environment, and improving coping skills.
 9. Seeking unconditional love - Basically this does not exist in this world and people, being imperfect creatures are not capable of this. The closest that we come to this is a parent for a child.
 10. Erroneous beliefs about happiness:
 - a) Success does not lead to or create happiness.
 - b) Money does not lead to or create happiness.
 - c) Fun is not the same as happiness and having fun constantly does not lead to happiness.
 - d) Avoiding pain does not lead to happiness.
 - e) Avoiding fear does not lead to happiness.
 - f) Avoiding responsibilities does not lead to happiness.
 - g) Avoiding commitment does not lead to happiness. Basically, avoidance is limiting and whatever serves to limit precludes happiness.

REQUIREMENTS FOR HAPPINESS

1. **GRATITUDE** - This is the most important component to happiness and largely dependent upon the belief and realization that what we have in this life should not be

expected and certainly is not an entitlement. There is a tendency to take many things that we do have for granted, such as a home, a car, a job, a partner, health, etc. It is important to realize that we do not have full control over all the circumstances of our lives and over many of the most important things in our lives, such as our health, the health of the ones we love, how long we/they will live, whether we get the job we really want, the house we desire, etc. It is thus important to be grateful for what we do have. It is also important to be aware of what we can control, such as how much effort we expend, our behavior - including civility, decency, kindness, morality. We can also learn emotional control and how we choose to appraise situations.

Gratitude -(minus) Expectations and Entitlement are primary ingredients to happiness.

2. LOVE - All humans need to love and be loved, to feel connected to other humans. This includes family, parents, partners, siblings, children, friends. Love and emotional connections also can include God and animals. However, there is no such thing as unconditional love from other humans and this expectation precludes happiness. Loneliness also makes happiness difficult at best, and unlikely in most cases. Love can also be an obstacle to happiness as well, including problems in relationships, death, illness, or the loss of the one who is loved. In order to make love and connections with others last: forgive them their flaws, no one is without them; have reasonable and modest expectations and communicate these expectations as well as communicate one's needs, and do not expect clairvoyance from the other - no one can really read minds.
3. SELF-ACCEPTANCE and concomitant accurate self-appraisal. Accepting oneself in a positive and accurate manner is crucial for happiness. If self-rejecting, happiness is automatically rejected as a possibility as well. One does not have to be perfect to be acceptable or worthwhile; to be 'good enough' does not require perfection; the fact is, perfection is impossible. (So, give it up!)

Objective self-esteem scale:

0 _____ 5 _____ 10

Jeffrey Dahmer

(Morally Ambivalent)

Mother Teresa

Few of us are Mother Teresa's and equally few of us are Jeffrey Dahmer's. People who are morally ambivalent do not deliberately set out to harm others, but would steal if they would not get caught. So, where are you? You may be pleasantly surprised to find out that you are better than you think you are.

4. ACCURATE APPRAISAL SKILLS - Learning fact-based thinking skills. It is unusually not the event that is as upsetting as the negative judgments, beliefs, attitudes, or 'self-talk' that we formulate in response to the event. This includes jumping to conclusions, magnifying the situation, taking things personally, assuming the worse, etc. Such self-talk is almost always worse than the actual event or situation. 'What if...' thinking also is a flawed way of coping, in that the myth is that if

one can anticipate all of the terrible things that could happen, then one could either prevent the occurrence of such things or deal with them better if they occur. This is a myth and only generates anxiety. These incorrect ways of thinking obviously serve to exacerbate stress and diminish happiness.

5. **OPTIMISM** - This is a corollary to fact-based thinking and accurate appraisal and is the belief in the reality that bad times never last and things are bound to improve. This is not to be confused with an unrealistic Pollyanna approach to life with associated unrealistic expectations.
6. **EMOTION MANAGEMENT AND SELF-CONTROL** - This is essential for true adulthood and necessary for happiness. If emotions are in control, you aren't. And, unruly and unstable emotions do not lead to happiness.
7. **MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE** – One needs to develop a guiding philosophy, religious faith, or spirituality to make sense of why we are here and what is important to accomplish. Having a set of values to guide behavior is also necessary. A sense of rudderlessness and 'just going with the flow' does not lead to happiness and usually no where else one wants to end up, either.
8. **DO GOOD/PERFORM GOOD DEEDS** - Altruism is important. There is an emotion known as 'elevation' which results from witnessing others performing good deeds and from performing them ourselves. It is also a protector against self-absorption, which hinders happiness. Contemplating one's navel will not lead to nirvana or happiness, but it probably will contribute to “neurosis”.
9. **ENJOYING ONE'S WORK** - This is a factor in happiness. We spend at least and often than a third of our lives at work. What we do frequently contributes to our sense of identity and some portion of our self-esteem. Enjoying work also can contribute to a sense of purpose in life, which is also an ingredient to happiness.
10. **HUMOR** - The ability to perceive the humorous, the funny, the absurd, and the irony in daily stressors, frustrating events, and various difficulties that are inevitable in life. The physical act of smiling and laughter and the actual display of positive emotion has been found to actually mitigate depression, anxiety, and sadness (although by itself, it will not actually lead to the automatic elimination of these emotions, and certainly not clinical depression and anxiety).