

A LOOK AT THE MANY FACETS OF HAPPINESS

06/25/2022 Randy Grumpelt

My friends, it has taken me several hundred hours of work to produce this report. I am slowing down. However, I try to make my reports interesting, accurate and a good synthesis of complex information. It takes a lot of time.

I believe that humans, using reason and science, can answer most of humanity's questions. Even looking at something as subjective as happiness, I will turn to science for answers.

A long time ago, I published scientific research and taught college level science courses in psychology. Just maybe I can still make a presentation of worth. O. K.

Happiness: You can slice it & dice it in many different ways. This is my attempt to look at a very complex subject.

Happiness has been a goal of humans for thousands of years. It is even proclaimed by America's founders in the Declaration of Independence that we all have an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That means you and me.

Unfortunately, there are limits on our ability to be joyful and content.

If we have experienced abuse or deprivation in childhood, sustained happiness is problematic, difficult. If we have lost loved ones for any reason or lost our home due to some catastrophe, it is also difficult to feel any prolonged contentment. But we will not consider these factors in this report. Here we will consider the average person who has not been a witness to extreme adverse events.

Barring those major negative events, we can train ourselves to be happier. The majority of us can learn how to be joyful, content, cheerful & lighthearted. But we must know how and then work at it.

Which reminds me of a short story. Martin Seligman is a famous man. He has been characterized as the father of positive psychology. A few months before he was elected president of the American Psychological Association something happened to him. Here is a quote:

“I was weeding the garden with my five-year-old daughter Nikki. She was throwing weeds, singing and dancing while I was actually trying to get the weeding done. I yelled at her, she walked away, then came back and said: Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? I was a whiner. I whined every day. When I turned five, I decided not to whine anymore. That was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch.”

Dr. Seligman decided to stop being a grouch and instead he became a leader in teaching people how to achieve a happier life.

Let’s start with a look at a broad picture of the wellsprings of happiness.

The *World Happiness Report*, (2022) is the product of the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network. Economists studied six features in comparing countries on their relative happiness levels. This is at the country or nation level:

- GDP per capita – Average purchasing power/person.
- Social Support – Having family, friends or neighbors to count on in times of trouble.
- Healthy Life Expectancy at birth. This means a long and healthy life, free of pain and constant trips to doctors.
- Freedom to make choices about one's life. (e.g., education, job, marriage)
- Generosity --- Donated money to a charity or personally helped others in the last month.
- Corruption – If corruption is widespread in government and in business happiness is diminished. When one believes he/she is being cheated, it is more difficult to feel contented.

Surveys using comparisons in these areas with large samples of people from different nations find that those having the highest ratings of happiness are the citizens of Finland. Then comes Denmark, Iceland, Switzerland, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Sweden, Norway, Israel and New Zealand. The US is 18th out of the 156 countries surveyed. Lebanon and Afghanistan are the least happy, perhaps due

to the violence and treatment of women in those nations. According to Dr. Jeffery Sachs, an editor of the report, most of the top ten countries are social democracies in which the citizens “believe that what makes people happy is solid social support systems, good public services, and even paying a significant amount in taxes for that.”

But there is another side too: *what do we have some control over?* This is the issue that I really want to home in on in the next section of this talk.

My First Point: Decide to be happy. Make it a priority.

Think of Nikki, that five-year-old who changed her dad. You can change your moods. You can take charge of your life. You can increase the amount of control within yourself. It means saying, “I am not at the hands of the fickle finger of fate.” To some extent, of course, we all are. But the more you think you have control, the more assertive you become and the more control you have.

But how can you take charge and change your moods? Here is a specific way of increasing that control to increase happiness, even if you have had a rough time in the past. This is one of those bridges over troubled waters. In a study by J.B. Neztek and associates, (*Happiness Studies* 2018), the researchers followed 131 participants for two weeks, using daily self-assessment of spontaneous gratitude. They checked to see if there was a relationship with self-esteem, depression, optimism and stressful events each day. They found that gratitude proved to be a real buffer for stress.

Even on days with the highest levels of stressful events, gratitude could bring with it a strong sense of well-being. I’ll repeat that. Even with high stress, gratitude produces well being.

And here are two personal accounts that illustrate that finding. Dr. Kristin Layous is a college professor who comments that writing a letter expressing thanks and delivering it in person is one of her approaches to expressing gratitude. She writes that “Gratitude letters can be so moving, but I also just think that taking note of what’s good in your life is quite powerful (like counting blessings). I don’t keep a journal of my blessings, but just sometimes when my mind wanders or seems to be skewing negative, I try to re-focus to the very real good things in my life, and it helps me not to dwell on the bad.” Gregory Fricchione, a psychiatrist with Massachusetts General Hospital shared his way of tuning in to happiness as

follows: “It’s all about feeling grateful for being connected to my family and community. It is what I choose to meditate on.”

And research findings support the thesis that **having positive emotions, whatever the cause, is accompanied by longer life, improved health and larger social networks.**

For instance, empirical research found that nuns who express positive emotions more intensely and frequently in daily journals tend to outlive those nuns who do not. Even smiles in high school yearbooks predict midlife marriages and richer social lives. Furthermore, many studies indicate that positive emotions are related to improved health as indexed by lower levels of inflammation, and higher levels of antiviral and antibody responses. (Barbara Fredrickson, *Biological Underpinnings of Positive Emotions and Purpose*, Chapter in J. Forgas & R. Baumeister (Eds). *The Social Psychology of the Good Life*, 2016). *Let me repeat that.*

So, it looks like positive emotions cause happiness not happiness causes positive emotions. Did you hear that? Positive emotions cause happiness, not the other way around.

Perhaps at this moment you personally can’t think of things to be grateful for. Let’s look elsewhere for a moment. Stephen Pinker recently published a book describing what has happened to human beings over the past 200 years. The book is a strong endorsement of human progress. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism & Progress*, 2018. He provided evidence that using reason and compassion to solve problems has resulted in reduced poverty and secured for themselves both better health & a longer life. Some of the specific findings are:

- Currently 2/3rd of people on the planet live in democracies
- IQ scores have risen 30 points in the past 100 years, in part due to better nutrition. 30 points is a huge amount.
- Better medicine and sanitation have resulted in healthier and extended lives. That’s similar to the conclusion in the World Happiness Report.
- We are 96% less likely to die in a car crash because cars are safer.

- The world is 100 times wealthier than 200 years ago.
- Even the poor of most of the world are doing significantly better. A majority of poor Americans have luxuries unavailable to the Astors and Vanderbilts of 150 years ago. In developed countries, most of the poor have electricity, some kind of air conditioning, color tv and mobile phones.

Pinker points out these are things we can be grateful for.

Second Point: Develop & Keep Positive Relationships

What else can we do? Psychologist David Buss informs us that we need to increase our closeness to our relatives, develop deeper friendships and find a mate with similar values. For instance, he finds overwhelming evidence that married men and women are, on average, happier. We profit from closeness.

By the way, Dr. Buss has completed several studies that find people are happier if they have the personality traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experience. I'll repeat that: agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experience. Perhaps you could increase your level of agreeableness and openness to new experiences. "Hey, honey, let's take a riverboat down the Mississippi. We could take your parents and the kids. Quality time & not one of us has to drive. We just enjoy each other, eat well and enjoy the scenery." You get the idea?

David Myers (*The Funds, Friends and Faith of Happy People*, 2000) is another psychologist who has studied happiness.

Having a supportive network of close relationships increases happiness. Our social scientists tell us such things as: "those who enjoy close relationships cope better with various stressors, including bereavement, rape, job loss and illness."

And here is an interesting finding. Those people who prefer high income and job success over very close friends and a close marriage are twice as likely to describe themselves as unhappy.

Let me tell you about another famous psychologist, Ed Diener, who has been nicknamed "Dr. Happiness". He also found that strong ties with friends and family result in increased happiness. But he went further and discovered that **positive**,

committed, and stable relationships produce the highest level of happiness. (However, he found that having children are a mixed benefit.)

It may sound strange but, on average, people in South America report feeling happier than us in North America, even though their incomes are significantly lower. Experts guess that the focus on family and friendships in South America confers pleasurable benefits.

Here is another approach to looking at happiness. Several years ago, researchers studied the happiness levels of contemporary hunter-gatherers. They do not grow crops but instead live off the land by collecting wild fruits and vegetables. They hunt for meat. We were all hunter-gatherers a few millennia ago. Today it is estimated that there are still around 50 hunter-gatherer groups in remote parts of Africa and another similar number in South America. They usually have somewhere between 20 to 50 members, including children. Women are generally as influential as men and there is no social stratification. Leadership falls on the best person for the specific task at hand. All take care of infants. Children of 3 and a half to four years of age generally aid with picking berries or fruit. The data are scattered and sparse but there is some confirmatory evidence that the close bonds and brotherhood of the people in these groups produces increased feelings of contentment and happiness.

So, there you have another way to go.

But there is one big problem and Dr. Buss focuses on it. In his book titled *The Evolution of Happiness*, (2000) he tells us that one of the most significant problems in this world is that we continually make us vs them comparisons. Media depictions that show the wealthy having the good life, add to the problem. Think of the elegant new car outside the gorgeous house and you begin to grasp the us versus them problem. The media experts know you are competitive, and they use that knowledge to entice you to buy things that support your sense that you are somehow “better” than many of the people you know.

Our competitive drive may help us to prevail in this world but there are strong negative consequences. We quickly adapt to new riches and new material things. And we hate to lose more than we love to win. Think of \$100 lost versus the same amount won, and you understand what I mean.

At any rate, remember that you may make yourself feel momentarily good by invidious comparisons with those down the ladder from you, but those comparisons create more stress and negative feelings toward those you see as

inferior. Better to seek commonalities and alliances with others. Do good rather than harm. You could try to turn off the cultural imperative to judge people according to status and things like race and manners and attitudes. There are so many ways we can see others as lacking. As the Buddhas of the world might say, we are all only on this earth for a short length of time and we are all deserving of good will.

Third Point: Have Projects

Aristotle suggested in his Nicomachean Ethics that happiness involves being engaged. He wrote that a combination of rationality and “arête”, which loosely means pursuing excellence, brought with it positive emotions.

Congruent with Aristotle’s writings are the thoughts of a psychologist named Brian Little. Little is another noted researcher and book writer. He concluded that to find happiness we must have projects that are meaningful in some way and we must believe we have the ability to complete the required work involved.

If you are engaged in meaningful projects, health status is impacted. Ordinarily physical inflammation goes down, health status improves and happiness increases. What a benign concentration of good things. Projects you work on that have meaning and heart result in the unintended benefit of helping yourself also.

Perhaps engagement, meaningful projects and belonging all combine and fit under another area that has been investigated: religion and life.

Actively religious people are less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol. They are less likely to divorce or commit suicide. And, in the less guilt inducing religions, they are likely to report more joy in their lives. It is unclear what underlying factors might be responsible. The result could be due to fellowship or being engaged in good works or perhaps thoughts of “everlasting felicity in heaven”. Then again maybe it is all of the above combined: fellowship, good works and heavenly thoughts.

Fourth Point: Be a Do Gooder

Are there still other ways to increase happiness? Yes, being a “do-gooder” can help make you a happier person. A recent review of over a hundred years of research suggests that using your life in the service of something larger than yourself, may confer unexpected benefits to you. Apparently, altruism improves self-esteem, reduces stress and even extends life.

Stephen Post wrote a book that summarized many decades of scientific findings on this topic: (*Altruism, Happiness and Health: It's Good to Be Good*, 2005). Maybe you can find comfort in this. Altruistic people who are involved in helping organizations showed a 63% lower likelihood of dying over a ten-year period than did non-volunteers. Even after controlling for age, gender, exercise, general health and social support, the effect was still a strong 44% lower rate of dying. Let me repeat that. A survey of many studies shows that doing good in this world confers benefits. You live a lot longer.

In another study of older couples, those who provided no support to others were twice as likely to die in a five-year period as those who helped spouses, friends, and relatives. It does appear that altruism confers benefits to the giver. However, giving can be overdone! If giving over taxes the inner resources of a person, it subtracts from health, wellness and longevity.

Some have suggested that altruism is best when it is performed without a prominent "I am doing this for others" awareness. When one is "in the flow", one can lose consciousness of self and flow with the work or project. The naturalness increases the benefits.

Attempts to diminish global warming, decrease poverty, aid sick people, reduce gun violence, and especially ---- stamping out ageism. Those are all projects with heart.

Summary

For scientists, all conclusions must be tentative and circumscribed. However, if we wish to provide practical information, we must attempt to generalize and hope we do not overreach to the point of being inaccurate. Most of the information I have presented has been my attempt to provide data that does simplify and yet, I believe, is essentially accurate.

I need to emphasize some of the limits of what I have concluded. The evidence over many decades suggests that most people who have experienced severe deprivation or abuse in childhood, have difficulty obtaining a prolonged level of contentment and happiness. And the deeper the negatives in infancy and early childhood, the more difficult to go beyond ephemeral, short lived pleasures. Practicing gratitude remembrance can help recover some positive emotions but one must work patiently.

Furthermore, with people who do not have a stable living space, or don't have secure food, water, and clothing, for those people, stress and anxiety interfere with positive emotions. For those of working age, a job seems necessary for sustained contentment. A steady income is important.

Now, within those limits, let's summarize. What are the things we can do to make our lives happier?

First, we can influence our happiness levels by turning on our positive, feel-good emotions. Laugh, enjoy and be with compatible people who can laugh with you. Paramount is an attitude that says "I can change things so that I feel happier. I can adopt a positive attitude." Such an approach is correlated with higher levels of happiness.

Second, find projects with heart that you can do and commit yourself to them.

Third, I have documented that closeness with family and friends is necessary for most people to have higher happiness levels. We are a social species. We feel better if we are often with others that we like and can bond with. So, decide to spend quality time with those you care about.

Finally, those who act in a more altruistic manner toward others and the world find they not only benefit others but also benefit themselves. On average, altruistic folks live healthier, longer and more contented lives.

Problems, stresses, losses and down periods are in store for all of us at one time or another. They cannot be avoided. But I hope you have heard in this report some of the approaches that can aid you to acquire a higher level of positive feelings.

I wish you every advantage in your journey to a happier, more contented stay on this planet.

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