The Myth of Happiness: Part 1 : What is It Really?

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Everyone wants to be happy, or so they say. The problem is that “happiness” is so elusive that many of us have a hard time defining it for ourselves. To some, happiness is characterized by peak moments of joy--those little flashes of happiness spread throughout a day. To others, happiness symbolizes a long-term sense of peace and contentment. And, then there are those individuals who believe that happiness is expressing and receiving love and meaning in life.

I personally define happiness as “an exalted state of mind that is contented, joyous, and peaceful, despite the circumstances.” In this definition happiness has a resilience element: No matter how bad things get in our lives--even when we have money, love, health, or relationship problems--we can still maintain a steady state of goodwill, pleasure, contentment, and joy.

Yet, no matter how we define “happiness,” we know that being happy brings many added benefits. Research shows that people who are consistently happy are physically and mentally healthier, live longer, make more money, do better in their careers, have more satisfying relationships and marriages, and contribute more to society than either unhappy or moderately happy people.

Now, new psychological research sheds light on exactly what happiness is and how to make sure we have enough of this delicious state of mind and body.

In Part One of this blog, we will examine what happiness is, or more specifically, three routes toward that exalted state we call happiness.

The three routes are:

1. Pleasure or “Hedonic” Happiness

Hedonic happiness is based on the pursuit of pleasure, ranging from appetite fulfillment (food, sex, money, substance use) to sensual pleasure (massages, hugs, lovemaking with a loved partner) to aesthetic pleasure (watching sunsets, playing in nature with children or animals, appreciating art or music). Although Hedonic Happiness can offer us a strong sense of enjoyment and pleasure, it also has a significant limitation: The Hedonic Treadmill Effect.

The Hedonic Treadmill Effect tells us that there is a bounce-back limit to Hedonic or pleasure-

based happiness; in other words, after a while we come down from the high pleasurable level to our previous feeling state. Let's say, for example, that we win $1 million in the lottery, and we go out and spend a bunch of money on our favorite goodies and fun experiences: cars, houses, clothes, gadgets, traveling, shopping, and high living.

We feel great for a while, but then the pleasure wears off. After a certain period of time, our happiness level will usually go back to what it was before the wonderful event (lottery win) that gave us so much initial pleasure. Therefore, we have a certain "happiness set point"-- a genetically determined level of happiness that we will more or less go back to after experiencing a positive or pleasurable event.

It's like being on a treadmill; we keep running but we don't make any significant progress or change. Thus, no matter how much pleasure we have or can get, we always revert back to our initial happiness level after the pleasure wears off (the party ends, the lovemaking stops, the money is spent).

2. Be the Best You Can Be or Eudaimonic Happiess. Aristotle's concept of Eudaimonia is "doing and living well." It is commonly interpreted as being the best you can be in your inner self--identifying and cultivating your virtues--and then sharing them with others to attain a higher sense of meaning.

When we develop what is greatest within ourselves--in Latin culture we call that our Don, or God-given talent--and use it in the service of others, we experience a tremendous sense of fulfillment, joy, meaning, and ultimately, happiness.

The great thing about Eudaimonic Happiness is that it doesn't suffer from the Hedonic Treadmill effect; there is no "letdown" or "hangover" after experiencing this type of happiness. It is a pure form of happiness that can build upon itself. The more you develop your talent or "Don," and use it to help others and achieve higher purposes, the more content, satisfied, and happier you will feel.

3. Flow (or experiencing joy from a treasured activity) is a happiness route that combines elements of Hedonia and Eudaimonia. Flow, as articulated by psychological pioneer Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is a state of committed engagement in some activity that results in a heightened sense of joy and bliss.

During this flow or "natural high" you lose yourself in an activity--time, place, and person no longer seem relevant; it's like an out-of-body experience. Those joggers who experience the "runner's high" know this feeling where they lose track of time and even their bodies, as they seem to float with a sense of joy and freedom.

Similarly, those who listen to, or compose, music, explore nature, or engage in a pure act of creativity, love, and expression are likely to experience this peak state of "flow."

Athletes call it "being in the zone," when everything they do on the athletic field seems to work

perfectly. Everything goes in; all the plays are made with very little effort.

Flow boils down to a supreme natural feeling--a sense of freedom, joy, relaxation, playfulness, and creativity that far surpasses the mundane moments of everyday living.

All three of these states we just discussed are legitimate routes to what we call happiness--that consistent state of joy, serenity, peace, love, passion, and freedom we all desire. In the next blog, we will learn how to attain and maintain this desired state--HAPPINESS--for the rest of our lives. Till then, be happy because happiness is contagious and attracts more of itself: Be happy now, and you will be even happier later.

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