

Happiness - hype or helpful?

by Patricia Allen-Garrett

Abstract

“This article is intended to look at what happiness is, how it seems to hold a paradoxical place in our lives and what its psychological background is. By drawing on work of the major theorists and researchers in the field of positive psychology the author proposes the role that happiness could play in enhancing our lives and presents her own three-tiered approach to happiness and the value it has can have in our lives. It addresses practical aspects in terms of how we can increase our happiness at each of these three levels. Further it posits the view that in our very uncertain and scarcity-fuelled world, we risk being drawn deeper and deeper away from sufficiency and further into the depths of scarcity if we neglect this approach which focuses on resilience, hope and action.”

What do you think of when you think of ‘Happiness’? Do you see images of hammocks and perfectly still seas? Or perhaps the picture you see is of whole-sale delusion, of the ‘fake-it-til-you-make-it’ approach to life? Whatever our view,

there has been much talk of late of happiness, from Maureen Gaffney’s bestselling book ‘Flourishing’ to laughing yoga to the whole positive psychology movement growing across the world. What I would like to do in this article is to give you the

background to the scientific study of ‘happiness’ – the positive psychology movement, my view on happiness, also briefly outline some ways where happiness can be increased in our lives and make the case for why in our troubled times it can

be an important resource.

Interestingly I've found that happiness/positivity/well being seems to attract a lot of resistance and cynicism which seems quite paradoxical. Perhaps it's cultural? Certainly we come from an old traditional ethic that says that working hard is good and that leisure and fun can be bad. There may be some truth in that. And yet we all look to be happy – sometimes in the ways that aren't the healthiest but we certainly try – so we are conflicted around happiness. I'm reminded of Marianne Williamson's wonderful words when I think of our conflict and our resistance:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
 Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
 It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.
 We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?
 Actually, who are you not to be? (Williamson, 1996)

Cynic, Sceptic or Believer?

Some healthy scepticism is fine – when I first heard about positive psychology and happiness as concepts back in 2005 I was dubious, and thought that it was just another fad, an enhancement of the Polyanna-esque way of positive thinking – you know the sort of stuff, trying to believe in very cheerful statements (different to affirmations) such as “every day in every way I'm getting better and better!” regardless of the fact that there may be no evidence to support such a statement or even contrary evidence. Worse, for me as a therapist was the dread that perhaps this new thinking would deny or play down that so-called ‘negative emotions’,

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depression, loss, etc., were real and I knew that in the therapy and counselling sessions with my clients that we sit with very real pain that people feel and that telling people to ‘look on the bright side’ would not just be unreasonable and unrealistic but it would also be very cruel.

But the more I read the more I realised that in fact positive psychology (the science of happiness, positive emotions, strengths and traits) is very much evidence-based and has its roots in the work of pioneering psychologists and therapists such as Rogers and Maslow. It is a ‘strengths psychology’ and for those of us who are humanistically-trained, it has many of the same beliefs around self-agency and autonomy which we hold. As far back as Freud the focus in psychology has been on the study of what was seen as deficiency, character weakness, anxiety, depression, etc. – all of which were very necessary to look at. But what this new body of psychology has done is enhance our understanding of the circumstances which can promote positive emotions and a better level of wellbeing so that we have a more balanced understanding of the human experience and the value that positive emotions can bring. Additionally it attempts to add to our knowledge of the essence of human nature and looks at interventions that can both relieve suffering and increase happiness. So in effect what

positive psychology is seeking to do is rather than have us think of how we can go from - 5 to 0 in terms of feeling a little less miserable each day, it focuses on trying to help us go from + 2 to +7 so we can build strength and provide guideposts for finding what Aristotle called the ‘good life’.

So as you read this I'm going to ask you to hold on to some of your healthy scepticism but I'm also going to ask you to also consider being open to a different emphasis, an emphasis that looks towards exploring what happiness is and how it can enrich all of our lives at many different levels.

There is no doubt that happiness is a big topic, it has emotional, spiritual, cognitive and creative aspects. It is also big business - all you have to do is to go into any book shop and see the amount of titles that proclaim to offer something new on it. However what I have found from reading many of those books is that the message from all the research is very similar, the emphasis varies in terms of what the individual writer finds important but the messages are surprisingly similar.

The Three Levels of Happiness

And so I came to distil it down to my take on it and the more I have looked at happiness/positivity/wellbeing, the more it seems it comes in different shapes, sizes and depth. I think

one of the big mistakes we have made is to try to approach it as one big generality – that one size fits all and that we will all get to whatever we consider happiness to be if we take a specific route. I don't think it works like that – we are far too individual, complex and quirky for that. Plus happiness needs a little more thought and work than that.

For me it feels like there are three levels to happiness and they address three main parts of ourselves – the cognitive, the emotional and the spiritual/relational. We can increase happiness in each part separately and it will raise our happiness levels in that part, or we can work on increasing happiness at all three levels which will certainly have a stronger impact on our overall wellbeing. We can nourish each of these parts through happiness – but in different ways – i.e. to build more happiness in the emotional part we will use different tools than the ones we will use to increase the happiness in the more cognitive aspect of ourselves and in turn we will use different tools to increase our happiness levels in our spiritual/relational life.

Sincerity

Let me dispel one myth immediately - clichés like “grin and bear it”, “don't worry, be happy” are just superficial wishes. In fact we now know that sincerity is hugely important in happiness. Wishing for it or casually mentioning a few insincere positive words or forcing a smile won't do it – it must be sincere. Positive psychology, happiness/positivity/flourishing, whatever you want to call it runs a lot deeper than smiley faces and wishing. It consists of the whole

gamut of positive emotions from appreciation to love, from amusement to joy, from hope to gratitude and others too.

Why be happy?

So, why be happy? Research carried out by Barbara Fredrickson (2009), Martin Seligman (2002 & 2011), Tal Ben-Shahar (2008), Sonja Lyubomirsky (2010), Csikszentmihalyi (1992) and many others have highlighted that when we are happy:

- (i) our thinking benefits,
- (ii) our creativity benefits,
- (iii) friendship, relationships and love blossom; and
- (iv) resilience and health grow.

Perhaps a better question is why not be happy?

The first level of happiness

In my ‘Happiness Ratio’ workshop, when I ask the question – “what makes you happy?” it yields a plethora of answers ranging from wine, to sex, to music, George Clooney, a movie, to chocolate. And this is where the first distinction around happiness comes in. Many of these things give us pleasure, they are what Seligman calls ‘the hedonistic treadmill’. They are immediate, fleeting and don't need a lot of thinking about or interpretation. And as a result because of their momentary nature it seems these things do not lead to lasting happiness and in fact they raise happiness levels only briefly – e.g. in less than 3 months major events such as being promoted lose their impact on happiness levels, wealth has a surprisingly low correlation with happiness levels, e.g. real income in the US has risen hugely over the last half century but the level of life satisfaction has been entirely flat there (Seligman, 2002).

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Even physical attractiveness does not have much effect at all on happiness. It's a bit like addiction, we get used to them quickly and we often need bigger doses to get the same kick as we did the first time.

So what should we do?

It doesn't mean we shouldn't engage in them but we need to realise that in the greater scheme of things they won't give us enduring happiness. So for me, this pleasurable aspect of happiness slots in, in my view and model, at the cognitive level or the first level of happiness. There are things we can do to make them hold on to their intensity a little more. Certainly indulge them but spread them out, let more time pass between them than you usually would, this stops us becoming so used to the pleasure that it loses its impact. Secondly, really savour experiences, bring them into your conscious awareness, share them with friends.

The role of optimism and pessimism at the first level of happiness

Another very important aspect of developing happiness at this psychological and cognitive level is our ability to be optimistic rather than pessimistic.

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As Seligman says - optimism isn't about positive phrases or images of victory, but in the way you think about causes of things and their outcomes (Seligman, 2002). Pessimists construe their set backs in a very limiting way - they tend to think that the cause is permanent, pervasive and personal. And when things go well pessimists presume that it's all a fluke! According to Seligman, one of the key strengths of the optimist is that they can interpret their setbacks as surmountable, specific to a single problem or cause and resulting from temporary circumstances or other people. Optimists are up to 8 times less likely to become depressed, they do better at school, sports and most jobs, they have better health and better interpersonal relationships (Seligman, 2002). It's not wrong to be pessimistic - but it won't help your happiness levels!

Importantly optimism feeds into hope - being able to find permanent and general causes of good events together with temporary and specific causes for bad fortune. And when we can do this we bounce back from troubles easier and faster and we get on a roll when we succeed once - we take full advantage of the positive outcome rather than assuming it was a fluke. And all the research at this first level points to the fact that this is the way to build longer-lasting psychological happiness.

The second level of happiness - the emotional

At the second level, the emotional level of happiness, the key messages are about decreasing the negativity that corrodes, becoming more mindful, inviting joy, gratitude, love, awe, inspiration, amusement, interest, love, etc.,

into our lives. And we can do this by really savouring goodness, being kind, dreaming about our future, building challenge into our lives, finding out about our strengths and applying them. It's about being in 'flow' which is Csikszentmihalyi's concept (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Being in flow means we are engaged in things that engage us completely, we become immersed in them, and absorbed by them and we lose self-consciousness and often a sense of time. It lasts longer than pleasures and is underpinned by our strengths. Flow visits us for a few minutes on several occasions, when the challenges we face and our ability to meet them are perfectly entangled and it's a powerful stepping stone towards emotional happiness.

This concept of 'flow' links in very much to learning what our strengths are (Seligman offers a tool to do this on his website authentichappiness.org). Seligman and his team selected 24 strengths which increase wellbeing and psychological happiness and what he says is that there are two parts to increasing your happiness emotionally using your strengths - firstly, learning what your strengths are will give your happiness levels a boost temporarily. But if you want to boost your emotional happiness in a way that is much more substantial and more lasting you must find a way to use your strengths every day in your work, your relationships and your general life. If you can do this they will buffer you against your less-strong areas. And remember Seligman's words that if this all feels like too much work then maybe you are doing it the wrong way because:

"Building strength is not about

learning, training or conditioning, but about discovery, creation and ownership, use your strengths every day in the main realms of your life to bring abundant gratification and authentic happiness" (Seligman, 2002).

Emotionally we are being hit again and again at the moment, the feeling of anxiety and scarcity in our world and which we are definitely encountering in our therapy rooms is very real. And for ourselves we are working in a sector/area which is offering less and less certainty in terms of our jobs or roles and there is no doubt that it's a very difficult time. We are seeing more and more of our clients struggling with economic aspects of day to day living that we genuinely can do nothing about, and that's really tough. Try as we might to not get drawn into it, we can very easily get seduced into the day-to-day negatives of our lives. This seduction is everywhere - it's almost as if the whole economic downturn has become velcro for anxiety, negativity and depression. So for me, this whole area of happiness has become even more important. If at this second level of happiness we don't take the time to really be grateful and allow ourselves feel joy, then we don't have anything to keep us going when the bad times do happen.

Right now we are living in unprecedented uncertain times and our media is fuelled by a feeling of scarcity. But if we stay locked in a feeling of scarcity then we miss its opposite - sufficiency. If we can pay attention to the areas where we have enough and let go of the areas we feel we will lose or experience scarcity in then we change how we think about our circumstances. And when we do this we have far more

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opportunity for creativity and openness rather than a feeling of fear and not enough. So for me, happiness is far from redundant.

The Third Level of Happiness

Finally the deeper level of happiness is about engagement with that deeper core of our life, it's about connection, compassion and courage (Browne, 2010). It's about recognising that if we are to live a life that brings us deep and enduring happiness then we must learn to create deep connections with others whilst still having the courage to be who we are, because that's the only way that true connection happens.


Connection isn't just a 'nice to have' - all the evidence coming from the exciting field of neuroscience tells us we are hard-wired for connection. In fact one of the greatest learnings we have is in the whole area of attachment - that our earliest experiences of attachment and connection in relationship literally shapes our brains and impacts the way our brain develops and performs. What this means is that our need and search for connection is not some sort of emotional fuzzy, warm, feeling, it's an actual innate need. And it seems to me that this innate knowledge and need for connection at the neurological level may be a cause of why we sometimes seek it in the wrong ways through addiction, self-medication, over-eating or under-eating, chasing love, almost as if any connection, no matter how tenuous or

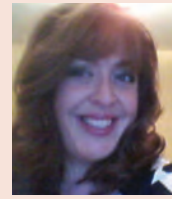
unhealthy, is better than none.

At this third level of happiness, it's about really exploring who our authentic

self is, accepting that we are vulnerable at times and feeling worthy of love and belonging because of who we are rather than in spite of who we are. It's about accepting our 'gifts of imperfection' (Browne, 2012). It's about building more resilience into our lives, reaching out to others and developing a spirituality that feeds a sense of hope. It's about cultivating a life that is hopeful and that allows us to truly experience. It's about learning how to play and to practise gratitude daily. And finally it's about using the talents and gifts we have to build meaningful work into our lives and to share our gifts with others.

In Conclusion

I have found through putting the above into practice that happiness and positive emotions have a real value in my life, in my therapy rooms, in my relationships and in my work. I have found that they have enhanced my resilience when I have encountered very difficult personal times recently. From my personal experiences I agree with the research that happiness and wellbeing builds better health and allows us to be creative and open to others. In our current economic and social climate I am convinced they are essential in how we are to face and come through the challenges in front of us and to thrive. 



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