

Happiness: a beginner's guide

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Received: 9/02/2023; **Revised:** 15/2/2023; **Accepted:** 20/2/23

Key words: Happiness; Depression; Mental health; Social medicine.

[citation: Pridmore, Saxby; Naguy, Ahmed (2023). DHH, 10(1):https://journalofhealth.co.nz/?page_id=2887].

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest: The authors have no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgement: We are greatly indebted to David Clarke PhD, theologian, philosopher and historian, for his energy, knowledge, generosity, and support.

Introduction

We are interested in (predominantly western) ideas about how to achieve a happy life. We loosely define 'happy' as a spectrum of positive emotional states, extending from contentment to joy. More sophisticated definitions exist – but these differ from each other and only completely satisfy their creators. Our loose definition may be broadly acceptable.

We are not offering 'Positive psychology' (a term coined in 1998) – an emerging scientific approach to understanding human 'flourishing' and 'well-being'. Our aim was to discover any general rules of happiness which could be of interest/value to the general population.

Methodology

We considered the opinions of wise people/authority figures from across the last 4500 years. These opinions were largely taken from collections of quotations. A sample of the books consulted appears at the end of the paper. The internet provided remarkable access to such material – entering names of individuals or topics of interest in a search engine led instantaneously to large quantities of relevant material.

The different orientations of these wise/important people (from religion, philosophy, politics, history) who were/are located at different historical and geographical points inevitably meant some opinions will be contradictory. We have organised material into themes - analogous ideas about the attitudes, behaviours and events which may contribute to happy lives.

Some idiosyncratic views could not be integrated and were excluded – such as the words of the famous psychiatrist Tomas Szasz (1961-2012), "Happiness is an imaginary condition, formerly attributed by the living to the dead, now usually attributed by adults to children, and by children to adults".

In addition to the digital searches, a small proportion of data were extracted from our own personal files (original sources). Nevertheless, we checked the accuracy and the setting of every quote.

Results

We commenced with the view - most people would agree that a happy life is preferable to an emotionally neutral or unhappy life – thus, a happy life would be chosen/sought after.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) taught, “There is within every soul (the immaterial part of the human) a thirst for happiness and meaning.” Interestingly, Thomas Jefferson preserved in the Declaration of Independence (1776) his view that all people have the right (not to happiness but) to the pursuit of happiness.

The results support the view that happiness is multidimensional, subjective and individual-specific experience/behaviour which can be organized thematically, as follows.

CLEAR THINKING

Shakespeare (1564-1616) wrote, “nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so”, indicating the way we think influences the way we feel about things. The early Greek and Roman stoic philosophers were among the first to encourage clear thinking as a means of avoiding unnecessary distress. This became a central tenet of cognitive behaviour therapy.

Logical thinking is helpful in many aspects of our lives – including the pursuit of happiness. Support for this notion arrives from varied sources.

1.

“If you correct your mind the rest of your life will fall into place.”

Lao Tzu (born 571 BCE)

2.

“There is only one way to happiness and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond the power of your will.”

Epictetus (50-135)

3.

“Our life is what our thoughts make it.”

Marcus Aurelius (121-180)

4.

“A person will be just about as happy as they make up their minds to be.”

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)

5.

Happiness doesn't depend on any external conditions, it is governed by our mental attitude

Dale Carnegie (1888-1955)

6.

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)

7,

"Happiness is a state of mind. It's just according to the way you look at things."

Walt Disney (1901-1966)

SATISFIED WITH A LITTLE

We are inclined to think the more valuable possessions we have, the happier we will be. While new possessions elevate our mood temporarily, we soon start hankering for yet more – unless we are alert to this danger and practice self-discipline, life becomes an endless cycle of disappointment. Thus, for more than transient happiness we need to avoid this common trap.

The following listed authorities advise that adjusting our thinking and being satisfied with modest possessions, is a necessary step in the quest for sustained happiness.

1.

“The secret of happiness is not found in seeking more, but in developing the capacity to enjoy less.”

Socrates (470-399 BCE)

2.

“Nothing satisfies the man who is not satisfied with a little.”

Epicurus (341-270 BCE)

3.

"The essence of philosophy is that a man should so live that his happiness shall depend as little as possible on external things."

Epictetus (50-135)

4.

“It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, that is poor.”

Seneca (4 BCE-65)

5.

"I have learned to seek my happiness by limiting my desires, rather than in attempting to satisfy them."

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

6.

“We are happy in proportion to the things we can do without.”

Henry David Thoreau 1817-1862

7.

“To be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness.”

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

THE IMPORTANCE OF HAPPINESS

We present opinions that happiness is of preeminent importance in human life.

1.

“Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.”

Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

2.

“Oh Happiness! our being’s end and aim!”

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

3.

“The purpose of life is to be happy.”

Lhamo Thondup, 14th Dalai Lama (born 1935)

4.

“The most important thing is to enjoy your life – to be happy – it’s all that matters.”

Audrey Hepburn (1929-1993)

THE INDIRECT APPROACH

Thus, happiness is a desired state, but should it be our primary focus - the focus all our thinking and behaviour?

Perhaps counterintuitively, many with great experience and wisdom advise the best strategy to achieve happiness is to use an indirect approach.

1.

“Happiness is the absence of striving for happiness.”

Chuang Tzu (369-286 BCE)

2.

“Happiness is where we find it, but very rarely where we seek it.”

Jean Petit-Senn (1792-1870)

3.

“Happiness in this world, when it comes, comes incidentally. Make it the object of pursuit, and it leads us on a wild-goose chase, and is never attained.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

4.

“Follow some other object, and very possibly we may find that we have caught happiness without dreaming of it.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

5.

“Ask yourself if you are happy and you cease to be so.”

John Stuart Mill 1806-1873

6.

"Happiness is like a butterfly; the more you chase it, the more it will elude you, but if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder."

[Henry David Thoreau \(1817-1862\)](#)

7.

“When a small child...I thought that success spelled happiness. I was wrong. Happiness is like a butterfly which appears and delights us for one brief moment, but soon flits away.”

Anna Pavlova (1881-1931)

8.

“Happiness is not a goal; it is a by-product.”

Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962)

9.

“Happiness is like coke – something you get as a by-product in the process of making something else.”

[Aldous Huxley \(1894-1964\)](#)

10.

“Men can only be happy when they do not assume that the object of life is happiness.”

George Orwell (1903-1950)

HAPPINESS VIA BEING LOVED AND LOVING

Consistent with the view that happiness can be achieved by pursuing other ends, people in loving relationships often report happiness. This is not surprising as loving relationships provide the opportunity to value and be valued by another human – both being fundamentally pleasant circumstances.

Two views have been expressed, one is that the important element is being loved by another person; the second view considers that the important element is loving another person.

The importance of being loved by another:

1.

“The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves, or rather, loved in spite of ourselves.”

Victor Hugo (1802-1885)

2.

“If the chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved, as I believe it does, these sudden changes of fortune seldom contribute much to happiness.”

Adam Smith (1723-1790)

3.

“The supreme happiness of life consists in the conviction that one is loved.”

Victor Hugo (1802-1885)

The importance of loving another:

4.

“Whatever we do or suffer for a friend is pleasant, because love is the principal cause of pleasure.”

St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

5.

“Happiness comes more from loving than being loved.”

J E Buckrose (1868-1931)

6.

“The happiness you feel is in direct proportion to the love you give.”

Oprah Winfrey (born 1954)

VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

Virtue (high moral values – doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong) was promoted as a quality of importance on the path to happiness by the early Greek philosophers. The connection between virtue and happiness has been echoed over millennia.

We know the laws and mores of our domicile and most of us act accordingly. Thus, virtuous behavior is a matter of choice. While not a certain path to happiness, virtue is a possible mechanism within our control.

Love is considered a type of virtue in Christian, Baha’i, Sikh and other faiths. We listed love above, as a path to happiness – we discussed it separately as love can be viewed as a distinct quality, independent of faith, philosophy and other virtues.

The following support virtue as a path to happiness:

1.

“That virtue alone was sufficient of herself for happiness.” (stoicism)
Diogenes (404-323 BCE)

2.

“It is the active exercise of our faculties in conformity with virtue that causes happiness, and the opposite activities its opposite.”
Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

3.

“The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts: therefore, guard accordingly, and take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reasonable nature.”
Marcus Aurelius (120-180)

4.

“Happiness is secured through virtue; it is a good attained by man's own will.”
[Thomas Aquinas](#) (1225-1274)

5.

“He who is good is happy.”
William Habington (1605-1654)

6.

“Degrees of happiness vary according to the degrees of virtue, and consequently, that life which is most virtuous is most happy”.
John Norris (1657-1711)

7.

“Be in general virtuous, and you will be happy.”
Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)

8.

“Life is the reward of virtue. And happiness is the goal and reward of life.”
Ayn Rand (1905-1982)

VIRTUE BY ANOTHER NAME

Many opinions do not use the term ‘virtue’ but state equivalent moral/supportive behaviour (charity, courage, justice, humanity, temperance) similarly lead to happiness (Dahlsgaard et al, 2005). A common statement is that giving others happiness is a reliable means of securing happiness for ourselves.

1.

“Happiest are the people who give most happiness to others.”
Denis Diderot (1713-1784)

2.

“Moral philosophy is not properly the doctrine of how we are to *make* ourselves happy but how we are to become *worthy* of happiness.”

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

3.

“Who is the happiest of men? He who
Values the merits of others,
And in their pleasure takes joy, even
As though t’were his own.”
Goethe (1749-1832)

4.

“The way to be happy is to make others so.”
Robert G Ingersoll (1833-1899)

5.

“There is no happiness in having or in getting, but only in giving.”
Henry Drummond (1851-1897)

6.

“Those who bring sunshine into the lives of others, cannot keep it from themselves.”
J M Barrie (1860-1937)

7.

“We are never really happy until we try to brighten the lives of others.”
Hellen Keller 1880-1968

8.

“Since you get more joy out of giving joy to others, you should put a good deal of thought
into the happiness that you are able to give.”
Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962)

9.

“Happiness is a by-product of an effort to make someone else happy.”
Gretta Brooker Palmer (1904-1953)

10.

“We learn the inner secret of happiness when we learn to direct our inner drives, our interest
and our attention to something besides ourselves.”
Ethel Percy Andrus (1884-1967)

11.

“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice
compassion.”
Lhamo Thondup 14th Dalai Lama (born 1935)

12.

“If you want happiness, provide it to others.”
Frank Tyger 1929-2011

A ROLE FOR WORK/ACTIVITY

Another view is that work/activity is necessary for, or at least contributes to, happiness. This is consistent with the “protestant work ethic” (sustained, focused and regular) which was popular in some Western regions during the 19th and 20th centuries – and other places and periods.

Hard work requires exertion, which may not be attractive to the individual - application to the task may call for the virtue of self-discipline.

1.

“Choose a job you love, and you’ll never have to work a day in your life.”

Confucius (551-479 BCE)

2

“Happiness is activity.”

Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

3.

“Employment is nature’s physician, and is essential to human happiness.”

Galen (130-201)

4.

“All happiness depends on courage and hard work.”

Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850)

5.

“To fill the hour – that is happiness.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

6.

“Happiness is the real sense of fulfillment that comes from hard work.”

Joseph Barbara (1905-1959)

A ROLE OR PURPOSE (OTHER THAN HELPING OTHERS)

There is support for the notion that pursuing a purpose can lead to happiness. We have placed under separate headings, the pursuance of the happiness of others (a laudable purpose which is presented separately), and gainful employment.

1.

“All we need to be happy is something to be enthusiastic about.”

Charles Kingsley (1819-1875)

2.

“The secret of happiness is having something meaningful to do, seeking purpose.”

John Burroughs (1837-1921)

3.

“Give a man health and a course to steer, and he’ll never stop to trouble about whether he’s happy or not.”

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

4.

“If you want to live a happy life, tie it to a goal, not people or things.”

Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

5.

“Happiness is gained through fidelity to a worthy purpose.”

Helen Keller (1880-1968)

6.

“The highest happiness – The sense of competence.”

John Buchan (1875-1940)

7.

“The human spirit needs to accomplish, to achieve, to triumph, to be happy.”

Ben Stein

(1944 -)

DIVERSE VIEWS

Naturally, some individuals advanced uncommon views. for example:

1.

“Happy the man who has been able to learn the causes of things.”

Virgil (70-19 BCE)

2.

“You traverse the world in search of happiness, which is within the reach of every man. A contented mind confers it on all.”

Horace (65-8 BCE)

3.

“The summit of happiness is reached when a person is ready to be what he is.”

Desiderius (720-786)

4.

“The happiness or unhappiness of men depends no less upon their dispositions than their fortunes.”

Francois de La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680)

5.

“The utmost we can hope for in this world is contentment; if we aim at anything higher we shall meet with nothing but grief and disappointment.”

Joseph Addison (1672-1719)

6.

“Happiness grows at our own firesides, and is not to be picked in a stranger’s garden.”

Douglas William Jerrold (1803-1857)

7.

“Unquestionably, it is possible to do without happiness: it is done involuntarily by nineteenth-twentieths of mankind.”

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

8.

“We are never happy: we can only remember that we were so once.”

Alexander Smith (1829-1867)

9.

“Happiness? A good cigar, a good meal, and a good woman – or a bad woman; it depends on how much happiness you can handle.”

George Burns (1896-1990)

10.

“The greatest happiness you can have is knowing that you do not necessarily require happiness.”

William Saroyan (1908-1981)

THE COMPREHENSIVE VIEW

Above, we have listed opinions which promote a single element approach/path to happiness. To those with scientific training, the single element approach is more comfortable. However, real life is complicated, and therefore, multi-dimensional views of happiness may be more credible.

The following opinions involve more than one element.

1.

“Not the owner of many possessions will you be right to call happy: he more rightly deserves the name of happy who knows how to use the god’s gifts wisely and to put up with rough poverty, and who fears dishonour more than death.”

Horace (65-8 BCE)

2.

“True happiness is a retired nature, and an enemy of pomp and noise. It arises in the first place, from the enjoyment of oneself, and, in the next, from the friendship and conversation of a few select friends.”

Joseph Addison 1672-1719

3.

“Happiness – a good bank account, a good cook, and a good digestion.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1878)

4.

“The secret of happiness is this: let your interests be as wide as possible, and let your reactions to things and persons that interest you be as far as possible friendly rather than hostile.”

Bertrand Russel 1872-1970

Discussion and Conclusions

We rejected a large quantity of material. For example, the English literary genius Samuel Johnson (1799-1784) wrote, “There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn.” We presumed this to be an attempt at wit and not an attempt to argue that alcohol use is a reliable source of happiness. He also wrote, “I shall long to see the miseries of the world, since the sight of them is necessary to happiness.” While this notion may have a quasi-sensible basis, it appears to be little more than an attempt to be entertainingly outrageous.

The quantity of happiness experienced by any individual is related to personality/disposition (Bentall, 1992), which is in turn shaped by genetic endowment and past and recent life experiences. However, individuals have the ability to influence their psychological lives by employing disciplined thinking and arranging events such that the chance of particular outcomes is increased. This paper provides information which may allow the individual to increase their quota of happiness.

We commenced with the arguments that clear thinking and satisfaction with modest possessions is a good basis for a happy life. We were able to demonstrate strong support for the view that happiness is a desired state, but that it may be more surely achieved by focusing on other topics - with happiness arriving as a by-product. We dealt with love separately from the other virtues and learned that loving others and being loved by others are both described as a source of happiness. Virtue (in various forms) was recommended in the quest. There was strong support for caring for others as a route to happiness.

There is support for work/activity and a sense of purpose potentially contributing to happiness. Application to a task (work) is possible for those able to make decisions and able to sustain their decisions. A sense of purpose depends in large part on personality/disposition and exposure to opportunities and challenges. A sense of purpose and enthusiasm may be related and are connected with happiness in the words of renowned children’s author Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), “All we need to be happy is something to be enthusiastic about.”

We encountered some less common views, such as Virgil (70-19 BCE), “Happy the man who has been able to learn the causes of things.” Less common views are likely held by those with distinct personality/disposition and distinct circumstances. While of interest, these views are less likely to be broadly applicable in the quest for happiness.

Happiness is a highly desired state. Here we report the views of a host of clever and experienced people stationed at different points across time, indicating that happiness is a likely spin-off of a virtuous, working life. Virtue is defined differently by different authorities, it is generally agreed to include loving and being loved by others, a degree of self-sacrifice for the good of others and “doing the right thing”.

It can be argued there are many forms of happiness based on an individuals' lived experiences, e.g., material happiness, (such as financial happiness, work for a purpose happiness, love happiness), and immaterial happiness (such as spiritual happiness), and both (such as good deed happiness, being loved happiness, i.e. the consequences of the physical act of doing someone good or being loved).

Do (or should) opinions of “clever” or “wise” people matter, especially when the opinions they offer are very different? Individuals are more likely to identify with stated opinions if they have experienced similar life events. It is plausible that a struggling individual who lacks resources may equate accumulation of resources to happiness regardless of the statement that accumulation of resources does not lead to happiness (see SATISFIED WITH A LITTLE).

The above material indicates happiness is a multi-dimension, multi-level phenomenon. It is probable our concepts of happiness change over time, and become more individual-based according to our lived experiences.

Most of the listed quotes support the presence of self-esteem and confidence, and immaterialism, that is, in order to achieve happiness, we need the courage to be good, do good, love and be loved, pursue a purpose and so on.

Some individual identify with the idea that the purpose of life is to be happy (see THE IMPORTANCE OF HAPPINESS SECTION), while others may agree with having a purpose in order to be happy (see A ROLE OR PURPOSE SECTION).

An interesting investigation would be to address the question; how many elements/dimensions of happiness must be satisfied to achieve sustained happiness? Based on the above analysis, clearly health and wealth alone are not sufficient to sustain happiness.

There is a range of views regarding the acquisition of happiness. We hope a collaboration of international experts (philosophers, theologians, and citizens) will take this enquiry further.

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