

The Pursuit of Happiness : A Modern Day Obsession?

Happiness has always been a subject of interest in psychology. However, recently, the issue of happiness has increasingly been placed at the forefront of our minds. With magazines, books and smartphone applications having happiness as their main focus, some argue that we have become obsessed with the concept of happiness. However, this is with good reason. Specifically, some studies have shown that happiness contributes positively to our well-being, as well as our health. Among other benefits, happier people tend to sleep better, have stronger more intimate friendships, and also tend to be in better physical health. This certainly makes the search for happiness alluring. But what actually leads to our happiness? What are the factors and habits that contribute to a fulfilled and satisfactory life? Below you will find three factors or practices that, among many others, are said to lead to greater happiness.

1. Buying Experiences and Being Financially Generous

Does wealth make us happy? When our basic human needs are being met, the simple answer is no. Some studies suggest that people tend to overestimate the impact that wealth would have on happiness. The truth is that the mere possession of money will not contribute to greater happiness, but what we choose to do with it, will. When compared to material purchases, it seems that “experiential purchases” contribute more positively to our general well-being and happiness. For instance, rather than buying a material possession, such as a purse, buying an experience, such as dinner and a movie, is likely to have a greater impact on our level of happiness. Additionally, financial generosity also seems to make us happier. Some studies suggest that spending more of our money on others, leads to greater happiness.

2. Practicing Gratitude

Compensating for the Brain’s “Negativity Bias”

According to Dr. Rick Hanson, author of “Hardwiring Happiness”, the human brain has evolved to constantly scan for, and focus on, threats in our environment. This mechanism was evidently beneficial for our ancestors. As Dr. Hanson puts it, our mind tends to react like velcro for negative experiences and teflon for positive ones. Because our brain tends to naturally fixate on negative experiences, the practice of gratitude, as well as mindfulness of our positive experiences, can lead to greater happiness.

Two Simple Techniques

Keeping a Daily Gratitude Journal. Expressing daily gratitude can be beneficial to our happiness. One easy method is to keep a daily “gratitude journal”, in essence, a journal in which you identify three things for which you are grateful. This is a quick

exercise that I sometimes suggest to clients, as it generates positive emotions, and can help to counteract our brain's inherent negativity bias.

Recounting and Re-experiencing Positive Experiences. Regularly scheduling a bit of time to review and re-experience a positive event can contribute to greater happiness. Aim to choose a positive experience, preferably one that occurred recently, and try to describe it with as many details as possible. Write down everything you remember about this particular experience, describing it through your five senses, in order to remember the feelings and sensations you experienced when this event occurred. Our mind has difficulty differentiating between visualization and reality. Consequently, by re-visiting a positive experience, you will once more benefit from the positivity that was initially related to it.

3. Surrounding Ourselves With Happy People

Some studies have shown that when we surround ourselves with happy people, we increase our potential to become happier in the future. Surrounding ourselves with happy people may give us further insight into their “happiness habits”, as well as their “happy mindsets”. This could encourage us to adopt some of their positive methods, and ultimately contribute to greater happiness.

This is only a brief overview of just three of the many factors and habits that can increase our level of happiness. Exploring and implementing these practices may contribute to greater happiness. However, we should try to avoid happiness from monopolizing our thoughts and efforts. Some argue that the relentless pursuit of happiness may actually hinder our ability to attain actual happiness. Essentially, the pressure to be happy, and to constantly improve upon our current circumstances, can make people less happy. Ironic, is it not? As Viktor Frankl famously stated: “happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue”. We shouldn't wait all week for Friday, all year for summer, and all life for happiness, as happiness has the potential of being found in the present. Rather than obsessively pursuing happiness, we should perhaps aim to appreciate and truly benefit from our present circumstances and experiences, while continuing to make positive “happiness adjustments” in our lives.

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