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The Only Constant is Change  
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## Happiness

Happiness is everyone's goal. It is attained by some and not by others. But what is it? There are many theories on the subject, ranging from complimentary to downright contradictory. Some say happiness is some combination of elements like love, compassion, wisdom, and nonattachment (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998; Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002). Aristotle said happiness was "an activity of the soul that expresses virtue" (Senior, 2006). Others, such as Utilitarianism and Hedonism, define happiness in terms of quantities of pleasure and pain (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002). Tension-reduction theories identify happiness as an end goal. Subjective well-being recognizes that our own perceptions have great influence on our happiness, and that happiness has multiple components (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002). The main components of happiness are life satisfaction, pleasant affect, and unpleasant affect (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002).

In his goal to increase happiness, Seligman (2002) ponders "how to go from plus two to plus seven [...], not just how to go from minus five to minus three and feel a little less miserable day by day." He places great importance on the value of our own contributions to our happiness, but also includes genetic dispositions and external circumstances as influential. Similarly, His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1998) offers the Buddhist perspective that we are in control of our suffering, and therefore, our happiness. The Dalai Lama sees suffering as impeding happiness, which is achieved internally. A loose Buddhist definition of happiness is the absence of suffering. This must be understood within a Buddhist context, though, both for accuracy and to avoid conflict with scientific research. Studies show that the number of happy experiences we have, and, indeed, our overall life satisfaction, is only mildly related to the number of unhappy

moments in our lives (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002). Happiness is difficult to define, but certain aspects, such as strengths and emotions, can be measured (Seligman, 2002). In attempts to measure happiness, many researchers have subjects complete self reports, which may be reflective on one's life or a simple report of current mood. In this way, happiness may come to be the average of many moods across time (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002).

These examples are certainly not a comprehensive overview of all the thoughts on happiness that exist, but they are more than enough to see why happiness, to many, seems anywhere from confusing to impossible to attain. How can we achieve something we can't even define?

A global definition may not be possible; indeed, there are many cultural variations in what causes happiness. Even within cultures there is much variation on what makes people happy; our beliefs and values have great influence on the matter (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). Even without having a clear definition, though, people generally have an idea of how happy they are. Maybe happiness is like being in love; there are chemicals we can measure, but when it comes down to it, you just know if it's there. The assumption that we can report on our own happiness has been crucial to happiness research. Questionnaires, surveys, in-the-moment reporting, and many other techniques are used to find out who is happy and who is not (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002).

Assuming the findings of these tests to be accurate, there have been many discoveries regarding correlates to happiness. Correlates may or may not be causally related, but whether they cause happiness, are caused by happiness, or share a cause with happiness, they appear together. Some of the most consistent correlation findings include intimacy (Myers, 1993; Myers, 2004; Seligman, 2002), contribution to a community or a sense of something larger than

the self, positive personality traits, especially optimism (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Myers, 1993; Myers, 2004; Seligman, 2002), marriage, positive affect (mood) (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Myers, 2004; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006), having a good social network, religiosity/spirituality, and experience of flow (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Myers, 1993; Myers, 2004; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). “Flow” was coined by Csikszentmihalyi and is essentially a state of “losing oneself” through engagement in enjoyable but challenging activities. In addition to optimism, extraversion seems to be among the most important positive personality traits (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Myers, 1993). Positive affect, or positive mood, does not need to be present all the time in order for a person to be happy, but generally the more often a person feels happy on a momentary basis, the happier that person is with his or her life overall (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002).

That overall happiness with life, or life satisfaction, is a major measure of happiness. There are numerous scales by which to measure life satisfaction, the standard being *The Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002). There are others which measure overall feelings of happiness, momentary happiness, and experience of positive and negative affect (Seligman, 2002). Life satisfaction appears to increase slightly with age (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). This runs contrary to former beliefs – a 1967 review by Warner Wilson declared that the young were happier than the elderly. The same review also placed importance on income, marital status, health, level of education, and religiosity. We have seen that marital status and religiosity are, in fact, correlated to happiness, but the others are not (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002). While the data Wilson used has since been refuted, it is interesting that the young people in the studies he used are now 35 years older, and make up an older generation in today’s studies.

Along with what turned out to be incorrect correlates in Wilson's review, other items have been found, some surprisingly, to not be correlated with happiness. Among these are intelligence, gender (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006), race, climate (Seligman, 2002), and parenthood (Senior, 2006). Gender, while not correlated to overall happiness, is strongly correlated to the experience of strong emotions, with women feeling more intense positives and negatives (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). This experience of more pleasant and unpleasant affect together means that the two are not simply opposites of each other, although they can counteract each other (Seligman, 2002). The experiences of positive and negative emotions appear to have different scales, which means we cannot increase happiness just by decreasing unpleasant experiences (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002).

Health is interesting as a non-correlate to happiness because there are two types of health: objective and subjective. What studies have shown is that subjective health – how healthy one perceives oneself to be – matters, but objective health has little bearing on happiness (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998; Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002), unless the objective health includes severe problems, in which case it may negatively effect happiness (Seligman, 2002).

Income and wealth also have some variance in their influence on happiness. Generally, we can say that wealth does not increase happiness, at least not by a significant amount; however, this must be qualified. If one's basic needs are met, wealth does not have much influence on happiness levels. If, however, one is living in poverty and does not have basic needs met, then increasing wealth can have a significant affect on happiness (Cutler and H.H. Dalai Lama, 1998; Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Myers, 1993; Myers, 2004; Seligman, 2002;

Senior, 2006). Social perceptions of wealth also affect how much influence wealth, or lack thereof, has on happiness (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). Because of these and other factors, national happiness levels are somewhat, but not extremely, correlated to national buying power. Generally, people in richer nations are happier, but this could be because they tend to experience more democracy, liberty, and health (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002). Within rich nations (gross national product over \$8,000 per person), increasing wealth has very little impact on overall happiness (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002).

Interestingly, people in the happiest nations are also the most suicidal (Senior, 2006). This certainly supports the notion that extreme wealth does not create happiness. Senior (2006) discusses the negative correlation between the number of choices we have and our ability to make a choice, or our satisfaction with our choice, and the probability of this being a cause of New Yorkers' relatively low levels of happiness. People who try to find the best option are called "maximizers", and they are less happy than "satisficers", who "are willing to make do." A culture of choice breeds maximizers, so we may actually be ruining our own happiness with affluence.

The existence of choice and affluence seems to lead to materialism and what is known as the hedonic treadmill. If fulfillment of our desires made us happy, we would be able to increase our happiness by buying more – money could buy happiness. Almost anyone will tell you "Money can't buy happiness," but it does not appear that most people, at least in the United States, live according to that belief. If money can't buy happiness, why do we spend so much trying? The reason money can't buy happiness is that our desires cannot be fulfilled. Greed cannot be satisfied (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998). Scientifically speaking, this is the

hedonic treadmill. Our desires (hedonism is the attempt to maximize pleasure) continue, just like the track on a treadmill. As they continue, they build on each other. We adapt to higher standards of living, and then want to increase them again because the new levels are no longer exciting. We take things for granted and desire the next upgrade. No amount of wealth or material goods will satisfy this type of desire (Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). Eventually we reach a limit of how much we can obtain, at which we point become frustrated and discouraged (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998).

Constant upward comparison feeds this cycle. Our comparisons of ourselves to others hold great influence over our happiness. Senior (2006) points out that while absolute wealth does not matter much, comparative wealth does. If we compare ourselves to those with more, we wonder why we don't have that much. Upward comparisons bring about jealousy and desire. On the other hand, if we perform downward comparisons, we will feel happier and more satisfied with our lives as they are (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998). There are many obstacles to happiness, and the cycle of greed is a major one.

How then, with the hedonic treadmill in place, can we be happy? By not stepping onto the treadmill. The Dalai Lama (1998) explains, "The true antidote of desire is contentment." If we are content with what we have, obtaining more loses its appeal. The accumulation of wealth loses its influence on happiness. This is where the Buddhist definition of happiness comes in. Happiness in this context is the absence of suffering. To Western ears, this may sound hedonistic, but is actually extremely different. In Buddhism, suffering is the experience of unsatisfactoriness. This may be physical, like illness, or mental or emotional, such as sadness. The causes of suffering, or unsatisfactoriness, are internal. According to Buddhism, we can control our perceptions and interpretations of the world. It is by controlling things like desire,

anger, and attachment (called delusions) that we eradicate suffering. We cannot always control our external circumstances, but if we can develop an internal calm we can remain content regardless of those circumstances (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998).

What other, maybe simpler, ways are there of improving happiness? Using the happiness correlates can help. Although causality cannot be inferred into every correlational study, some things have been shown to increase levels of happiness or well-being. Sometimes we can trick ourselves into thinking we are happy. By acting more positive, it is possible to trigger actual positive emotions. Getting enough sleep and exercising also help a great deal (Myers, 1993). Engaging in activities that produce flow increases happiness, as does building a social network (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Myers, 1993; Myers, 2004, Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). Keeping a gratitude journal or reflecting on positives each day works (Myers, 1993; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). Practicing a religion or being spiritual may help (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Myers, 1993; Myers, 2004; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006), but this may not be useful if the practice is not genuine. The possible reasons for religion's benefits are wide-ranging, and include the community, hope, and life meaning derived from religion (Myers, 1993; Myers, 2004; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). Seligman (2002) also points out that most religious teachings proscribe many behaviors that detract from happiness.

Another big way to improve happiness is to contribute to something larger than the self. Outward focus is not only increased by feeling good, but also causes good feelings (Myers, 1993; Seligman, 2002). Seligman (2002) offers these mood improvements caused by altruism as examples of "gratifications." Gratifications use personal strengths to overcome challenges. Gratification "consists in total engagement and in the loss of self-consciousness. Time stops." Gratification is related to what Seligman calls "authentic" good feelings, which arise "from the

exercise of strengths and virtues,” as opposed to engagement in simply pleasurable activities (“shortcuts” like television, chocolate, and drugs).

Seligman (2002) and other Positive Psychology researchers picked out 24 strengths and six core virtues that are valued across cultures. Seligman claims that we all have “signature strengths,” which are the areas we are strongest in. Happiness comes not from the correction of weaknesses, but from the building of our strengths. This idea serves as a basis for Seligman’s theory of happiness. Seligman divides positive lifestyles into three levels: the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life. The pleasant life is fairly hedonistic. It is obtained by doing things that produce momentary satisfaction. The good life is a step up from pleasant. The good life makes use of personal strengths to increase gratification and authentic happiness in our lives. The meaningful life, then, is another step up. The meaningful life serves the well-being of many people. Often, meaning is derived from religion. For others (including Seligman), clear meaning is not as easily obtained, but serving others still increases the well-being of all involved.

An important distinction to make here is the difference between momentary happiness and enduring happiness. The pleasant life is focused mainly on momentary happiness, although a person trying to live the pleasant life may believe that momentary pleasures will bring about lasting happiness. Enduring happiness, though, means that a person’s overview of life is improved, not just during an activity, but long after.

Does that mean momentary happiness has no relationship with enduring happiness? Yes and no. Momentary happiness is correlated with enduring happiness (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002), but that does not mean you can improve your overall happiness by filling your life with momentary pleasures. The correlation has a “third variable” explanation. People with strong positive personality traits are more likely to feel good in the moment and about their

lives overall (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002). Optimists, for example, view their problems as more manageable than do pessimists, so their moods are not brought down by difficulties as much (Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). Optimists, then, are more likely to feel momentary happiness, and they are also more likely to have high life satisfaction. Because of this, momentary happiness can be used to predict life satisfaction (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002).

One famous study on optimism also correlated optimism and longevity. The study looked at momentary emotions of young nuns. The ones who expressed optimism in a single journal entry were very likely to live longer than non-optimistic nuns in the same study (Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). A longitudinal study of Mayo Clinic patients had very similar findings, and a study of over 2,000 Mexican-Americans found positive emotion to be a strong predictor of health and longevity. Happiness may not only be a correlate but a cause of good health; happy people have been found to seek out health information and make healthier decisions than less happy people (Seligman, 2002).

This is all wonderful news for happy people, but what about pessimists and depressives? To some degree, it is true that they are just not as well off. Our personality traits are about 50% attributable to genetics, so we are, in fact, born with inclinations toward certain levels of happiness. These predispositions are not completely determinant of our views on life, though (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998; Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). We have the power to change our perceptions, ultimately changing our happiness levels (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998; Seligman, 2002).

Seligman (2002) models happiness with the formula  $H = S + C + V$ , where H stands for happiness (enduring, not momentary), S is our set range for happiness, C is our circumstances,

and V is our voluntary control. The set range is genetically determined and basically unchangeable. As evidence for this set range, Seligman cites studies where lottery winners do not stay happy and paraplegics regain some happiness. Circumstances might be moderately controllable, but generally that is not where the most lasting changes will be made. Our voluntary control is the most significant way we influence our happiness.

Here we find exceptions to the third variable explanation of positive affect's correlation to overall happiness. Numerous experiments have found that mood affects our thought patterns and performance levels (Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). So, putting ourselves in better moods may actually make us lastingly happier, if we can accomplish thought patterns that create nicer outlooks on our circumstances. Senior (2006) recognizes that happy or optimistic thought patterns must be practiced for them to become habits of the mind.

The Dalai Lama (1998) agrees whole-heartedly with the notion that we must practice good thinking. Mind training is a huge component of Buddhism. Training the mind ultimately means freeing it from delusion, but there are small steps by which to attain that goal. Meditation is seen as an essential practice, and there are different meditations one can perform, all in the interest of developing understanding and compassion and ending desire. Meditation without intentional, directed thought, though, would not do much. The Dalai Lama and Cutler (1998) talk about shifting perspective on suffering. Recall that suffering is not just physical pain, but also mental or emotional unrest. Our natural inclination is generally to avoid suffering and to think of it as a negative experience. If we recognize that suffering is largely unavoidable, though, and instead try to change our perspective on it, we may find that we can maintain an inner calm in the face of unpleasant circumstances, and even stop suffering at the hands of circumstance.

How can we change our perspective that drastically? First of all, we can recognize that we are not alone in our suffering, and we have not been singled out to suffer. We can even take suffering to be an opportunity for connection to others. In addition, we can try to view suffering as a learning opportunity. Adversity gives us the opportunity to develop such attributes as patience and tolerance. These cannot be developed without an adverse situation in which to practice. The development of patience and tolerance is very similar to the experience of weight training: a certain amount of resistance is needed in order for growth to occur. If we never faced adversity, our strengths would never grow. Therefore, we should be grateful for such situations (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998).

Seligman (2002) also takes a positive approach to adversity, noting that “hard times are uniquely suited to the display of many strengths.” There are many strengths we do not know we have until they are put to the test. Tough situations give us the opportunity to discover our strengths, which we can then use to build happiness into our lives. Seligman also points out the evolutionary value of negative emotions – they warn us of threat. Without negative emotions we would find ourselves ill-prepared for many situations.

Clearly, the perspective one chooses greatly influences how one feels about a situation. A study involving colonoscopies supports the idea that one’s thoughts about an event affect one’s feelings about that event. In the study, by Daniel Kahneman, nearly 700 patients were randomly assigned to receive either a normal colonoscopy or a prolonged one which ended with a stationary colonoscope. A stationary colonoscope does not cause as much discomfort as a moving one, but is still uncomfortable. The absolute amount of discomfort (as a function of time) was greater in the longer procedure, but the patients who received the longer treatment reported less discomfort than did those for whom the colonoscope was moving the whole time. Their

perspectives were influenced by the final memory of the event, and their feelings changed accordingly (Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006).

Focusing on the positives, consciously or not, definitely creates a more favorable picture in our minds. But some people really are pessimistic and have trouble seeing the positives. Critics of Positive Psychology and other such theories return to that genetic predisposition to suggest that maybe we cannot change our levels of happiness as much as we would like to think. Julie Norem, one such critic, says that without evidence of dispositional optimism being changeable, it does not help much to tell people to be more optimistic. She did an experiment that tested performance levels on anagram puzzles while listening to Mozart and then to a dirge. People identified as pessimists performed better during the dirge, which suggests that a better mood does not always lead to better performance (Senior, 2006), or perhaps that pessimists are in better moods when left to their pessimistic ways; however, many studies counter these findings (Seligman, 2002).

Senior (2006) cites other critics as well. Barbara Held questions the assumption that happiness in and of itself is a virtuous goal, and wonders how well we can test the effects of virtuous action on well-being. This may, indeed, be difficult to test empirically, but the methods used to study other aspects and causes of happiness could be used to study this as well. Seligman's (2002) theory that altruism increases happiness is based on experience, not just hypotheticals.

Adam Phillips also thinks we may have less control over happiness than Positive Psychology suggests. He emphasizes that it is normal to have negative feelings, but that Positive Psychology portrays them as unnatural, as something to be done away with. Phillips also complains that Positive Psychology ignores the complexities of the human experience. He claims

that “anyone who could maintain a state of happiness, given the state of the world, is living in a delusion” (Senior, 2006).

Phillips may be correct. A famous study tested the realism of optimists and pessimists by asking them to determine how much control they had over a light. Participants had varying amounts of control over when the light turned on and off. The pessimists were much better at estimating their levels of control than optimists were, offering support to the concept of depressive realism (Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). This fits with another correlation to happiness, perceived control or self-efficacy. People who believe they are in control of their lives are generally happier than those who do not believe they can be effective (Myers, 2004; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). If control is only perceived, though, and one does not actually have much capacity to influence a situation, is happiness not based on a deception?

Seligman might respond to this by saying that perceived control may actually lead to objective control. His breakthrough, after all, was in the field of learned helplessness (Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006). Who is to say we cannot also learn self-efficacy? Seligman (2002) talks in his book Authentic Happiness about applying long-held beliefs about negative emotions (i.e. evolutionary value) to positive emotions. Why shouldn't we do the same thing with learned helplessness and apply the theory to the opposite effect?

As for reality, what makes this so important? Reality may very well be harder to define than happiness. Most of us would like to be able to justify good feelings with objective truth, but what if we cannot? Does that make those feelings less valuable? Our perceptions are much more influential to our experiences than any sort of objective reality (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998; Diener, Lucas, and Oishi, 2002; Myers, 1993; Myers, 2004; Seligman, 2002; Senior, 2006), so does it really matter if objective reality exists? And if objective reality does not exist,

what implications are there for happiness? Who gets to decide when a situation warrants happiness and when we should be sad? If we do not have that much control over our lives, what do we have? Happiness is an internally determined state. As the Dalai Lama (1998) teaches, we will never be lastingly happy if our happiness is based on external circumstances.

Still, though, should happiness have some basis in reality, to the extent we can agree on reality? As it turns out, depressive realism may not be as legitimate a theory as the light experiment would make it seem, as numerous studies have failed to replicate those findings (Seligman, 2002). If pessimists are not more realistic than optimists, how do their perceptions differ? Maybe they would provide the same description if asked for an objective view devoid of interpretation, their experiences are still very different. Optimists are still happier.

Recall Phillips' statement that a person with lasting happiness is living in delusion (Senior, 2006). It is interesting that he should use that word, "delusion," because another happiness theory, Buddhism, describes happiness as freedom from delusion (Cutler and HH Dalai Lama, 1998). Phillips is, in a way, suggesting the same thing – delusion is bad. But in Phillips' version, delusion causes happiness, while in Buddhism delusion prevents happiness. This brings up a deeper question about the nature of reality. In both cases, "delusion" means an inaccurate representation of reality. Phillips' reality is negative, though, while the Dalai Lama's reality is positive. Can we really know which is right?

It seems to me that we create our own realities through our thoughts. The only reality I can experience is subjective, but it is my own subjectivity through which I am viewing the world. No one else is any closer to objective truth; everyone views the world through their own colored lenses. While clear and untinted might be preferable, that does not seem to be an option. As long as we have to wear colored glasses, I'll take mine in rose.