

Happiness: A Reflection of an Inner State of Balance

Lori A. Futterman RN, Ph.D.
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“Positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life most worth living. The topics of concern to this new field of investigation range from the biochemical bases of joy to the well-being of nations” (World Book of Happiness, p.16). Dr. Martin Seligman became the renowned scholar on optimism and its relation to mental health. He launched the movement of positive psychology in 1998. The focus of this form of psychotherapy is on the individual’s strengths, virtues and the true sources of authentic happiness (The Science of Happiness: Psychology explores humans at their best, Harvard Magazine Jan-Feb 2007 p. 1-10).

An important question that emerged from positive psychology has been: What constitutes happiness? When we look at the research, we find that happiness is defined as contentment, a sense of internal peace within oneself and the world around them. Contentment and happiness reflect an inner balance between the psyche and soma.

A Swedish study (World Book of Happiness, p. 55) reveals four factors that have a major impact on the level of happiness. These factors, in order of priority are: relationships, health, leisure and standards of living. The common theme that emerges among researchers is that happiness is determined by satisfactory interpersonal relationships; in particular, the closeness of relationships has a profound positive influence. A study done in Finland (World Book of Happiness, p. 54) of over 20,000 individuals, aged 18-64, concluded that people who are emotionally and physically healthy are happier even above financial and vocational status (Swedish study, p. 55). Many national studies suggest that the level of income is very important for happiness. This is true when people are living in poverty but the effect drops when people are financially comfortable or wealthy (p. 28).

Dr. Doh C. Shin, in his research on the quality of life, suggests that there are three components of positive life experiences (World Book of Happiness, p. 122-124). The first is enjoyment which is defined as possessing certain things that give one pleasure; the second is contentedness which is defined as the ability to attain equilibrium between one’s needs and satisfaction and the third is achievement which is defined as the ability to fulfill one’s capacities. You might reflect during your day and ask yourself three questions:

- Am I enjoying what I am involved in?
- Am I feeling content at this time?
- Am I fulfilling my potential?

These questions may motivate you to redefine your current situation and even encourage you to create new avenues and directions within your life.

Dr. Sonja Lyubormirsky’s research (World Book of Happiness, p. 64-65) explores the influence of genetics on one’s level of happiness. Her work suggests that with fraternal and identical twins each person is born with a “happiness set point” which defines 50% of our capacity and is defined as the baseline or potential for happiness. This sets the degree to which he or she

is bound to return, even after setbacks or triumphs. However, our genes do not necessarily determine, only influence, one's level of happiness. All living beings have the potential for a balanced inner state. Perhaps one way of viewing the possibility of attaining a calm mind set is that we can stretch beyond our conditioned way of "typically" or habitually operating. In this way, it is quite possible to change our physiological wiring. Lyubormirsky conducted the first controlled experimental intervention to show that happiness can increase and sustain above one's set point. In other words, one can change with effort and motivation and enhance their level of happiness. Her research demonstrates that 40% is within our power to change and the other 10% is attributed to life's circumstances (p. 64).

Another key aspect of our happiness is our desire to give to others. Generosity and the creation of a compassionate caring attitude for others can yield the result of attaining internal contentment. This notion is motivating and encourages us to set an intention towards this outcome. Though this concept is not unique, it is something very tangible that we can integrate into our daily lives. "The good life follows in the wake of loving relationships with friends, neighbors, colleagues, family members and spouses" (p. 19).

Richard Layard addresses the development of happiness within society in his book *Happiness: Lessons from a new Science* (Penguin Press 2006). He states that happiness is a product of the outer conditions that one resides in as well as from within and reminds us that the key is compassion for oneself and the world around us.

Layard suggests that:

- Countries need to monitor the development of happiness as closely as they monitor the development of income.
- Societies need to redefine their attitude on many standard issues such as taxes, work-life balance, performance-related pay and its negative effect on the family unit and communities in general.
- Make it a priority to help the poor within the country and affluent countries to help third world countries.
- Devote time to working with the problems of mental illness, "...the greatest source of misery in the west and the fortunate should ensure a better deal for those who suffer."
- Introduce more flexible work hours for family life and parental responsibilities.
- Within the educational system and curriculum create discussions on the meaning of life and encourage the development of a philosophical ideology. This may entail an approach to their educational goals which include giving to the society as a whole.

Your level of happiness can be determined by your choices and actions. Some actions that you can take to enhance your state of happiness and inner contentment are:

- Focus on the positive aspects of your life. Happiness is a reflection of an inner state of mind.

- Observe the tendencies toward a negative track of feelings, thoughts or actions and re-frame or redirect your attention.
- Involve yourself in the practice of meditation or relaxation of the mind to facilitate this calm inner perspective.
- Another good daily practice is to develop mental control by watching the mind as it slips into a habitual pattern of negativity and redirect your attention to a positive mental state.
- Close relationships are a number one source of happiness. Support that social interactive part of yourself by engaging in things that you are passionate about.
- Engage in enjoyable activities with others with a mind that is focused on enjoying the present situation and being as compassionate as you can be. This may lead to a pleasurable experience.
- Involve yourself in determining your current aspirations, goals and interests.
- What provides meaning in your life? Engaging in things that give you purpose tends to enhance your energy and refreshes your outlook. Focusing on the present moment can provide fuel for the future.
- Honor the body's need for physical activity which directly enhances mood, thinking and an overall sense of well-being. Find an exercise that you totally enjoy being involved in.
- Seek outside guidance and consider psychotherapy if you find that you are not living up to your full potential.

Lori A. Futterman RN, Ph.D.
591 Camino de la Reina, Ste. 705
San Diego CA 92108
drlorifutterman.com
Laf1@cox.net
619-297-3311 (voice)
619-293-3322 (fax)