



**Frank T. McAndrew Ph.D.**  
Out of the Ooze

# You Can't Be Happy All of the Time, But Don't Stop Trying

We often forget that happiness is fleeting. That's a good thing.



4.6K

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We've all heard someone start a sentence with, "Won't it be great when . . .?" We probably say this most frequently when we are young: *Won't it be great when I get my driver's license? Won't it be great when I go off to college and get out of my parents' house? Won't it be great when I get out of*

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*college and get a great job? Won't it be great when I fall in love and get married? Won't it be great when I have kids? Won't it be great when my kids are out of diapers?*

Similarly, we often hear (mostly older) people start sentences with, "Wasn't it great when . . . . ? Think about how seldom you have heard anyone say, "Isn't *THIS* great, right now?" Surely, our past and future are not always superior to our present, and yet we persist in thinking that

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this is the case. These hiccups in our thinking are mild delusions that are probably a very adaptive part of the human psyche.

Most of us have an *optimistic bias* about our future. As a classroom demonstration of this, at the beginning of each new term I typically ask students in my class to tell me (anonymously in a survey) what their grade point average (GPA) was last term and then to estimate what it will be the coming term. I then give them accurate information about the average grade received by all students in my class over the past three years and ask them to report the grade that they expect to receive. The demonstration works like a *charm*, every time: Without fail, the predicted GPAs and expected grades are far higher than one would reasonably expect given the evidence at hand.

And yet, we believe.

Cognitive psychologists have identified a phenomenon they refer to as the *Pollyanna Principle*. In a nutshell, it means that we process, rehearse, and remember *pleasant* information from the past more than *unpleasant* information. (An exception to this pattern would be depressed individuals who continually ruminate upon past failures and disappointments.) For most of us, the reason that the good old days seem so good is that we focus on the pleasant stuff and tend to forget the day-to-day unpleasantness.

These innocent forms of *self-deception* enable us to keep striving. If our past was good and our future can be even better, then we can work our way out of the unpleasant, or at least mundane, present. Individuals in our evolutionary past who were not so delusional would have been out-competed by cockeyed *optimists*, big time, and it is these “cockeyed” *genes* that have come down through the ages to us.

All of this tells us something about the *fleeting nature* of happiness. Emotion researchers



The advertisement features two covers of Psychology Today magazine. The top cover shows a baby in a blue shirt and tie with the headline "LIFE LESSONS" and "5 TRUTHS PEOPLE LEARN TOO LATE". The bottom cover shows a woman's face with the headline "CONFESSIONS OF A SOCIOPATH" and "5 WAYS TO BEAT OUT OF A CREATIVE BUT SMALL...". A yellow starburst graphic in the center says "SAVE UP TO 55%". Below the starburst, the text "SUBSCRIBE NOW" is written in large white letters, and a black button with white text says "CLICK HERE".

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have long known about something called the "*hedonic treadmill*." We work very hard to reach a goal, anticipating the happiness it will bring. After a brief fix of "yippee," however, we quickly slide back to our baseline, mundane way-of-being and start chasing the next carrot at the end of the stick. Studies of lottery winners and individuals at the top of their fields who seem to "have it all" regularly throw cold water on our dreams that getting what we really want will change our lives. Assistant professors who dream of attaining tenure and lawyers who dream of becoming a partner, often quickly find themselves wondering why they were in such a hurry. After finally publishing a book, it was depressing for me to realize how quickly my self-concept went from "I am a guy who wrote a book" to "I am a guy who has only written *one* book."

Time to get back in the race.

This is all as it should be, at least from a competition point of view. Dissatisfaction with the present and dreams of the future are what keep us *motivated*, and warm fuzzy memories of the past reassure us that the feelings we seek can be had. Perpetual bliss would completely undermine our will to accomplish anything at all—people who remained happy for too long got left behind. This should not be depressing to us; quite the contrary. Recognizing that happiness exists to keep us moving and that it is a delightful visitor that never overstays its welcome may help us appreciate it more when it arrives.

It may also be useful to remind yourself that there is nothing wrong with you if you think that your present life could be a lot better than it is—after all, that is the human condition.

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