Why You Shouldn't Want to Always Be Happy

By: Frank T. McAndrew, Posted on: August 18, 2016

In life, happiness can seem fleeting and elusive, something just out of reach. Steve Corey/flickr, CC BY-ND

In the 1990s, a psychologist named Martin Seligman led the positive psychology movement, which placed the study of human happiness squarely at the center of psychology research and theory. It continued a trend that began in the 1960s with humanistic and existential psychology, which emphasized the importance of reaching one's innate potential and creating meaning in one's life, respectively.

Since then, thousands of studies and hundreds of books have been published with the goal of increasing well-being and helping people lead more satisfying lives.

So why aren't we happier? Why have self-reported measures of happiness stayed stagnant for over 40 years?

Perversely, such efforts to improve happiness could be a futile attempt to swim against the tide, as we may actually be programmed to be dissatisfied most of the time.

Chapter Download: "Is It Possible to Become a Permanently Happier Person?"

You can't have it all

Part of the problem is that happiness isn't just one thing.

Jennifer Hecht is a philosopher who studies the history of happiness. In her book "The Happiness Myth," Hecht proposes that we all experience different types of happiness, but these aren't necessarily complementary. Some types of happiness may even conflict with one another. In other words, having too much of one type of happiness may undermine our ability to have enough of the others – so it's impossible for us to simultaneously have all types of happiness in great quantities.

For example, a satisfying life built on a successful career and a good marriage is something that unfolds over a long period of time. It takes a lot of work, and it often requires avoiding hedonistic pleasures like partying or going on spur-of-the-moment trips. It also means you can't while away too much of your time spending one pleasant lazy day after another in the company of good friends.

On the other hand, keeping your nose to the grindstone demands that you cut back on many of life's pleasures. Relaxing days and friendships may fall by the wayside.

As happiness in one area of life increases, it'll often decline in another.

A rosy past, a future brimming with potential

This dilemma is further confounded by the way our brains process the experience of happiness.

By way of illustration, consider the following examples.

We've all started a sentence with the phrase "Won't it be great when…" (I go to college, fall in love, have kids, etc.). Similarly, we often hear older people start sentences with this phrase "Wasn't it great when…"

Think about how seldom you hear anyone say, "Isn't this great, right now?"

Surely, our past and future aren't always better than the present. Yet we continue to think that this is the case.

These are the bricks that wall off harsh reality from the part of our mind that thinks about past and future happiness. Entire religions have been constructed from them. Whether we're talking about our ancestral Garden of Eden (when things were great!) or the promise of unfathomable future happiness in Heaven, Valhalla, Jannah or Vaikuntha, eternal happiness is always the carrot dangling from the end of the divine stick.

There's evidence for why our brains operate this way; most of us possess something called the optimistic bias, which is the tendency to think that our future will be better than our present.

To demonstrate this phenomenon to my classes, at the beginning of a new term I'll tell my students the average grade received by all students in my class over the past three years. I then ask them to anonymously report the grade that they expect to receive. The demonstration works like a charm: Without fail, the expected grades are far higher than one would reasonably expect, given the evidence at hand.

And yet, we believe.

Cognitive psychologists have also identified something called the Pollyanna Principle. It means that we process, rehearse and remember pleasant information from the past more than unpleasant information. (An exception to this occurs in depressed individuals who often fixate on past failures and disappointments.)

For most of us, however, 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.

Our memories of the past are often distorted, viewed through rose-colored glasses. U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973. Chromogenic color print. © Stephen Shore.

Self-delusion as an evolutionary advantage?

These delusions about the past and the future could be an adaptive part of the human psyche, with innocent self-deceptions actually enabling us to keep striving. If our past is great and our future can be even better, then we can work our way out of the unpleasant – or at least, mundane – present.

All of this tells us something about the fleeting nature of happiness. Emotion researchers have long known about something called the hedonic treadmill. We work very hard to reach a goal, anticipating the happiness it will bring. Unfortunately, after a brief fix we quickly slide back to our baseline, ordinary way-of-being and start chasing the next thing we believe will almost certainly – and finally – make us happy.

My students absolutely hate hearing about this; they get bummed out when I imply that however happy they are right now – it's probably about how happy they will be 20 years from now. (Next time, perhaps I will reassure them that in the future they'll remember being very happy in college!)

Nevertheless, studies of lottery winners and other individuals at the top of their game – those who seem to have it all – regularly throw cold water on the dream that getting what we really want will change our lives and make us happier. These studies found that positive events like winning a million bucks and unfortunate events such as being paralyzed in an accident do not significantly affect an individual's long-term level of happiness.

Assistant professors who dream of attaining tenure and lawyers who dream of making partner often 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 attitude went from "I'm a guy who wrote a book!" to "I'm a guy who's only written one book."

But this is how it should be, at least from an evolutionary perspective. Dissatisfaction with the present and dreams of the future are what keep us motivated, while warm fuzzy memories of the past reassure us that the feelings we seek can be had. In fact, perpetual bliss would completely undermine our will to accomplish anything at all; among our earliest ancestors, those who were perfectly content may have been left in the dust.

This shouldn't be depressing; quite the contrary. Recognizing that happiness exists – and that it's a delightful visitor that never overstays its welcome – may help us appreciate it more when it arrives.

Furthermore, understanding that it's impossible to have happiness in all aspects of life can help you enjoy the happiness that has touched you.

Recognizing that no one "has it all" can cut down on the one thing psychologists know impedes happiness: envy.

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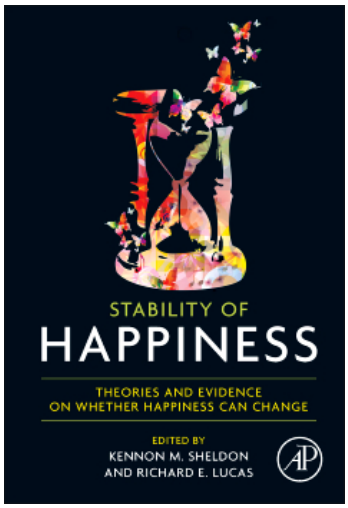

In a new book called *Stability of Happiness: Theories and Evidence on Whether Happiness Can Change*, the authors look at the longevity and stability of human happiness: what influences our happiness and whether those influences affect happiness long term or are short lived.

We are pleased to offer you a complementary look at a chapter from the book called "Is It Possible to Become a Permanently Happier Person?" below:

Chapter 1

Is It Possible to Become a Permanently Happier Person?

An Overview of the Issues and the Book

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Subjective well-being—a construct that is known more colloquially as "happiness"—is a characteristic that reflects a person's subjective evaluation of his or her life as a whole. Although the construct is based on a person's own perspective, it is thought to reflect something about the actual conditions of people's lives. These conditions include both external conditions such as income and social relationships, as well as internal conditions such as goals, outlook on life, and other psychological resources. Moreover, people who evaluate their lives negatively would likely be motivated to improve the conditions of their lives, and those who evaluate their lives positively would be motivated to maintain or further improve these conditions. Thus, happiness and related constructs are thought to signal how well a person's life is going, which should mean that as a person's life improves, so should the happiness that that person reports.

Over the years, however, at least some researchers became quite skeptical about the possibility for change in happiness. Initial reviews of the literature suggested that few external, objectively measured life circumstances were strongly related to subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Wilson, 1967). In addition, some highly cited studies suggested that even individuals who had experienced extremely strong positive and negative life events (such as winning the lottery or becoming disabled) barely differed in their self-reported happiness (e.g., Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; but see Lucas, 2007, for a reinterpretation of this finding). This evidence, when considered in the context of increasing numbers of studies showing strong heritability for reports of happiness and relatively high stability over time, led some to suggest that change was not possible

Stability of Happiness.

(e.g., Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996; see also Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006, for a review).

If these perspectives are true, then they present major problems for the field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive human states, traits, and other characteristics, and positive psychology is premised on the notion that these desirable qualities can all be improved through the application of scientific research (at the population level) and personal effort (at the individual level). Since the very beginning of positive psychology, happiness has been one of the most important topics of study—in part because happiness is so important to most people (hence the thousands of happiness books marketed to laypeople), and in part because the right to "pursue happiness" is a right guaranteed to all U.S. citizens (and citizens of Western democracies more generally). If it turns out that greater happiness cannot be successfully pursued, then it calls into question whether higher levels of other positive personality characteristics (i.e., virtues, strengths, capabilities) are also

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What if happiness works as an indicator (that we are on the right track) and is not at all a goal? https://nicichiarasa.wordpr...

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It's a shame that such a thing like happiness is subject of the theory. In that book they operated with distinguish terminology in order to define the nature of human being, which depends on the unconscious brainwork. It's more determined by our primitive desires in reflection of our present views for being successful.

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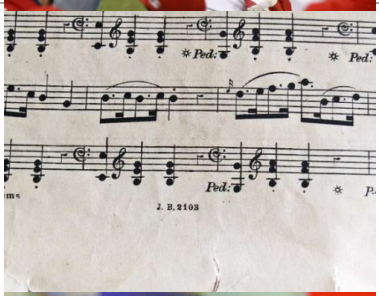

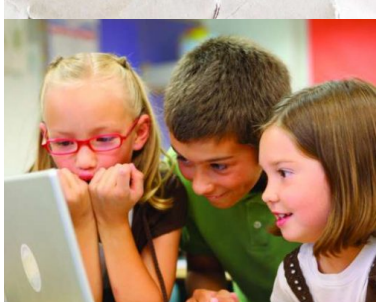

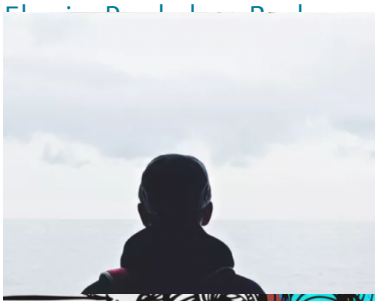

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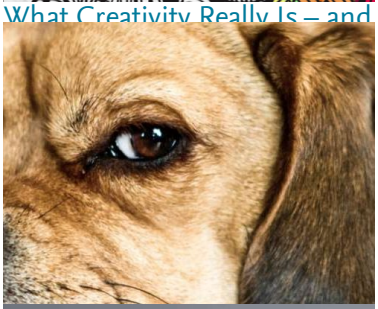

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