



# STANFORD

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## GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

CASE: M-330  
DATE: 08/11/10

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HAPPINESS

*If only we'd stop trying to be happy we could have a pretty good time.*  
—Edith Wharton

*We tend to forget that happiness doesn't come as a result of getting something we don't have, but rather of recognizing and appreciating what we do have.*  
—Frederick Keonig

*Remembered happiness is different from experienced happiness.*  
—Daniel Kahneman

### INTRODUCTION: THE BASICS OF HAPPINESS

The science of happiness has received considerable amount of attention in the last decade. The findings have attracted enormous attention because, of course, almost everyone would like to be happier. From this research, we have begun to understand the following:

- Happiness can be measured objectively and over time.
- There is a strong correlation between happiness and the experience of meaning.
- We have many misconceptions about what makes us happy.
- There are things we can do—voluntary and intentional activities—to increase our levels of happiness and meaning.

### WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

From Ancient Greeks and Buddhists to modern philosophers and politicians, thinkers have queried the meaning of happiness.<sup>1</sup> Over the last 15 years, psychologists have importantly contributed to this discussion by empirically investigating measures, behavioral correlates, and determinants of happiness. However, there are as many definitions of happiness as the number

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Sara Gaviser Leslie and Professors Jennifer Aaker and Carole Robin prepared this note as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. This note draws significantly from “A Framework for Thinking About Happiness and Meaning” by Professor Carole Robin, Lisa Schwallie and Ricki Frankel.

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of people studying happiness. Webster's simply defines it as "a: state of well-being characterized by emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy; b: a pleasurable or satisfying experience."

### WHAT DETERMINES AN INDIVIDUAL'S HAPPINESS LEVEL?

Research studies show that our enduring level of happiness (H) is determined by our happiness set point (S), life circumstances (C) (influenced by aspects of temperament and character such as depression and sleep quality) and intentional or voluntary activities (V). Martin Seligman proposed an equation for happiness:  $H = S + C + V$ .<sup>ii</sup> Further, Sonja Lyubomirsky, a prominent researcher in the field of happiness and author of *The How of Happiness*, attached percentages to these components. She suggested that our "set point," or happiness level determined by birth or genetics, accounts for 50 percent of happiness; circumstances such as marital status, earnings, and looks determine 10 percent; and the remainder of our happiness comes from intentional activities or things we can do to change our happiness level.<sup>iii</sup>

### HOW DOES MONEY AFFECT HAPPINESS?

There is no universal answer: A hedge fund manager and a Tibetan monk provide two very different models of satisfaction. But most experts agree that the correlation is direct—up to a point. Poor people become happier as they escape poverty, studies have shown, but once people are free from deprivation, the tie between money and happiness begins to fray. Wealth in America grew dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century, but surveys found that Americans on average were no happier.<sup>iv</sup> The washing machine, computer, and television offered convenience and entertainment but did not greatly increase Americans' standard of living. Personal well-being rises steeply from dire poverty to income of about \$20,000 annually. From this point, there is a slow trend upwards until about \$50,000 annually. The rise slows significantly from \$50,000 to higher incomes.<sup>v</sup>

In fact, study after study indicates that acquiring wealth does not significantly increase happiness, with some caveats. In general, people who live in countries with high gross national product, per capita, are happier than those living in poorer countries. However, the increase in national wealth has diminishing returns.<sup>vi</sup> Middle-class and affluent people who seek more wealth are often stuck on what psychologists call a "hedonic treadmill"—a perpetual pursuit of material goods, which reduces the available time for personal relationships and yields minimal emotional rewards. While, initially, a person may view regular international travel as a luxury, once acclimated, not only is it viewed as essential, but also the person now strives for first-class or, better yet, a private jet. Once we adapt to new material products, we strive for ever-higher aspirations; the more we get, the more we want.<sup>vii</sup> The kick of owning a big house or a giant flat-screen television tends to be short-lived, as these possessions become the next, unexciting norm.

What about people with gradual accumulation of wealth or people who are born rich? People with above-average income are relatively satisfied with their lives but are only slightly happier than others in moment-to-moment experience. They tend to be tenser than people with lower incomes and do not spend more time in particularly enjoyable activities. Moreover, the effect of income on life satisfaction seems to be transient.

## Then Why Pursue Wealth?

Although the answer is not clear, some speculate that part of the puzzle is explained by a desire to have a “positional” advantage over a rival, whether that be a brother-in-law, the loudmouth who lives across the street, or some imaginary “other.” Surveys have shown that most people would be happy making less money, but on one condition: that everyone else made even less. In fact, most people prefer that scenario overall income rises but their own income rises more than the general population’s. Remember when you got the raise you were asking for? You were ecstatic until you found out that all your colleagues also got raises (and perplexed, sometimes annoyed, when you learned their raises were higher). In other words, it’s not how much we have that counts. It’s how much we have compared to how much the Joneses have. This could explain why people in more egalitarian societies generally report higher levels of satisfaction with their lives. Scandinavian countries with large social safety nets consistently score highest on the happiness scale.

We fall prey to the false premise that material goods will bring happiness or even “blonds have more fun” when, in reality, resources like money, physical attractiveness, and material possessions do not correlate strongly with happiness. In contrast, specific character traits such as self-confidence and energy correlate more with happiness.<sup>viii</sup> Happiness is about both wanting what you have and having what you want.<sup>ix</sup>

## ARE THERE PRE-REQUISITES FOR HAPPINESS?

### Expectations and Existing Beyond Survival Mode

We cannot be happy when we are only able to focus on survival. Consider the rice farmer in rural China—she worries about having food for her children and shoes for their feet but spends little time asking herself, “How am I doing? Do I feel fulfilled in my life?” (As Maslow explained, people must fill their physiological and security needs, for safety, sustenance and warmth, before they can take care of their social and esteem needs.<sup>x</sup>) As the rice farmer experiences even modest economic gains, such as a small pay increase, her quality of life gets a high return in terms of caloric intake, clothing, shelter, medical care, and, ultimately, life expectancy.

We must be able to meet our bio-psychological needs in order to be happy: “The better these needs are gratified the better we feel and the more satisfied we are with life. People cannot be happy in chronic hunger, danger and isolation: not even if they have never known better and if their neighbors are worse off.”<sup>xi</sup> Once a society reaches a certain threshold of development, however, further economic growth brings only minimal gains in both life expectancy and in subjective well-being. After attaining a level of development where people can focus on more than survival, the non-economic aspects of life become increasingly important influences on how long, and how well, people live. This societal-level shift is linked with individual-level value changes, or a transition from giving top priority to economic and physical security to self-expression values that emphasize participation, freedom of expression, and quality of life.<sup>xii</sup>

Accordingly, once this shift is made from economic growth to subjective well-being, a rational strategy would be to place increasing emphasis on quality of life concerns such as adequate

leisure time, comfortable living spaces, and fulfilling jobs, rather than to continue the inflexible pursuit of economic growth as if it were a good in itself. In other words, making more money will do little to move the needle of a person's subjective well-being. Of course, humans are very often irrational and, once exposed to bigger houses, more fashionable clothes, and delicacies, they seek these things out repeatedly.<sup>xiii</sup>

## **Have Free Choice, Acknowledge It, But Don't Be Paralyzed By It**

### ***The Joy of Choosing***

Many people believe that we need free choice in order to be happy. However, research on choice has actually turned up some interesting and contradictory data. Some studies have shown that economic development, democratization, and rising social tolerance have increased the extent to which people perceive that they have free choice. This, in turn, has led to higher levels of happiness around the world.<sup>xiv</sup>

People who believe that personal choices, rather than fate, control their future, often have a greater appreciation of freedom of choice than those who credit destiny as determining outcomes. (The people who don't depend on fate are thought of as having an internal locus of control, while those favoring luck and fate are said to have an external locus of control.) Think of the novelist selling her first book. She could send the manuscript off and hope for the best or enlist every useful contact and friend of a friend in making sure the manuscript is given a fair read.

Further, there is a saying, "pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional". While the difference between these two might not be intuitively obvious, a Buddhist-like interpretation of this is that pain is just pain while suffering is the *relationship* one has with the pain—asking "why me?", holding on to it, or moving past it. We make our own good luck. While freedom of choice cannot be used as a proxy for happiness, it does predict life satisfaction better than many other factors including health, employment, and religion both across countries and within countries.

People who feel they have freedom of choice tend to be happier than those who do not. In other words, "it is not sufficient to have more choice, we need to feel in control of these choices to be happier."<sup>xv</sup> The Declaration of Independence spells out unalienable rights as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It's no wonder that these rights are grouped together; the belief that one has free choice and control over one's life is closely linked with happiness.<sup>xvi</sup>

### ***The Burden of Choice***

Choice can have a negative component as well. When people have the opportunity to make a choice, they have a goal of either satisfying their needs or "satisficing" or maximizing every possible angle to find the best possible choice. Satisfying needs can be difficult but maximizing in every decision can be paralyzing. When a person is faced with many options and must make a choice, that decision can be enslaving because the likeliness that they we make a suboptimal choice rises.<sup>xvii</sup>

Think about the process of buying a house—when you have ten houses to choose from, it is a lot harder to make a decision than when you are deciding between two properties. You never feel like you know as much as you want to about each house. When we are overwhelmed by choice,

it can be difficult to gain enough information about an option, standards for each option increase, and any unacceptable result is their fault feels like our fault.<sup>xviii</sup> Although maximizers may achieve better objective outcomes, i.e., find the house with the most features at the lowest price, they often still wonder about their decisions or feel exhaustion from the search. As the researchers explain, “From breakfast cereals to automobiles to colleges to careers, it makes sense for people to expect more when the options are more plentiful than when they are scarce.”<sup>xix</sup> Choice can be both frightening and freeing. Erich Fromm, in his seminal work, *Escape from Freedom*, describes the dual aspects of freedom: we can have both “freedom from” restrictions and “freedom to” what we want to do. When people experience freedom from restrictions placed on them by other people or institutions, they do not always experience enjoyment. Instead, they are often left with feelings of emptiness and anxiety. Convicted criminals who are released from jail but end up committing a subsequent crime in order to return to jail are a perfect example of this phenomenon. When we have unfamiliar freedom, we often crave someone to lead us or so as not to have to make decisions on our own. However, if we can become more spontaneous and independent in our thinking, we have a better chance to use our freedom for positive outcomes, such as happiness.<sup>xx</sup>

Studies of purchasing behavior further the idea that choice can actually be counterproductive. In a jam purchasing study run in the 1980s at gourmet supermarket, customers were allowed to sample as many jams as they wanted from either six or 24 flavors of gourmet jam. While 30 percent of the people who sampled jam from the smaller batch eventually purchased jam, only 3 percent of the customers who sampled from the larger group bought jam. Thus, having many choices can lead to an inability to decide. To manage our choices and embrace choice, we must understand when we are making choices and the power of those choices. While the desire for choice is innate, the exercise of choice and doing that well is a skill. When we harness choice to give meaning to the things we do every day rather than something debilitating, we can learn to make better choices that will enable us “to go from who we are today to who we want to be tomorrow.”<sup>xxi</sup>

### ***Cultural Nuances Related to Choice***

Another interesting facet of choice is that the importance of choice is not universal. University-educated Westerners have been the subjects of almost all the research on the top of freedom and choice but among non-Western cultures and working-class Westerners, choice is understood differently. Western, middle-class ideals of independence and autonomy are grounded on the idea that we raise children to grow up and make their own choices. Among middle-class North Americans, choice increases motivation, happiness, and longevity and is thought of as “the gold standard for well-being for individuals or for societies.” This is not true around the world—East Asians, when making choices, have a tendency to strive towards group values, harmony, and following a trend.

Choice has different meanings and consequences for people, depending on their resources to choose. When people prize choices and purposefully created a world that offers them the opportunity to choose, this can power the idea that people are both responsible for their circumstances and lessens the sense of connection with or empathy for people who do not have as many opportunities to make choices. This calls into question the idea that “choice, freedom, autonomy, well-being are not inevitably linked.” Choice can enable us to live the lives we desire but, when we have too much of it, it can both send us into decision paralysis and leave us

unconnected to others whose relationships with us happen to be tantamount to personal happiness.<sup>xxii</sup>

### SO, IS HAPPINESS IN OUR CONTROL?

Not entirely. The word “happiness” shares an etymological root with “happenstance” (and “haphazard”), suggesting that fate determines our lot in life. Recent research suggests that genes dictate perhaps half of an individual’s capacity for happiness, so biological factors beyond our control play a big role. Brain images reveal, for instance, that people with higher levels of activity in their left prefrontal cortex tend to be happier. In one study, brain images even enabled researchers to predict which babies were more likely to cry when their mothers left the room, based on the levels of prefrontal activity in the babies’ brains.

People’s happiness depends on a balance between the duration of happiness (immediate pleasures vs. more durable and lasting happiness) as well as the psychological depth (shallow pleasures vs. deeper more meaningful pleasures).<sup>xxiii</sup> Generally speaking, social scientists frequently create wildly inaccurate forecasts of what really makes people happy because there is an association between happiness and short and shallow rewards as opposed to long-lasting and deeper rewards.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### CAN WE BE HAPPIER?

Within limits, it would seem so. As explained earlier, researchers postulate that each individual has a “set point” for happiness, which is essentially a default position. Deviations from that point tend to be short-lived, with the subject soon reverting to his or her norm, no matter what life-altering change has occurred. Within a year of major life-altering experiences, writes Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Happiness Hypothesis*, “Lottery winners and paraplegics have both, on average, returned most of the way to their baseline levels of happiness.”<sup>xxv</sup> What does this mean for people encountering tough economic times or personal loss? Chances are, experts say, other than those who are truly devastated (e.g., after the death of a child), most people will retain their basic outlook. The happy among us will find cause to stay upbeat. As for the unhappy souls—what’s one more downer?

### COMMON CONFUSIONS, MISUNDERSTANDINGS, AND OBSTACLES TO HAPPINESS

#### We Chase a Moving Target

Happiness has also been found to change over time. Overall, younger people associate happiness with excitement, older people associate happiness with feeling peaceful. This change is driven by increased feelings of connectedness to others and to the present moment as people age:

We start simple (ages 11-14), but soon fill up with angst (ages 15-20) and feelings of confinement (ages 19-22) until we leave those behind to go conquer the world (ages 23-26), before gradually trading ambition for balance (ages 27-30), developing an appreciation for our bodies (ages 31-35) and our children (ages 31-35), and evolving a sense of connectedness (ages 36-40), for which we feel grateful (ages 36-40), then happy (ages 41-49), calm (ages 41-49), and finally blessed (ages 50+).<sup>xxvi</sup>

Happiness has a predictable regularity; it is dynamic over the life course and different meanings are malleable and drive behavior.<sup>xxvii</sup> Not surprisingly, physical health and happiness are strongly related. In one experiment, researchers asked participants age 50 and older to assess their own happiness and health. Some participants rated themselves healthy and happy, while others rated themselves unhealthy and unhappy. While a large percentage of people who considered themselves unhealthy were happy, very few of those who rated themselves as healthy were unhappy.<sup>xxviii</sup>

### **Happiness Varies by Culture**

Individual cultures also diverge in their identification of the meaning of happiness. For instance, American and Taiwanese preschoolers were asked to choose between an “excited” smiley face with a wide-open mouth and a “calm” one with a smaller, single-line grin. European-American kids said the excited smile was happier, while Taiwanese kids chose the calm one. When they read a story about two kids—one splashed in the swimming pool while the other one floated in an inner tube, one rocketed high and fast on the swings while the other swung slowly—most Taiwanese children identified with the “calm” character, while most European-American children chose the “excited” character.<sup>xxix</sup>

When people want to feel good, the feelings they strive for depend on the states that they value, strive for, and want to feel; these are their ideal affects. Individual and cultural differences account for what people choose to do when they feel good or stop feeling bad. Americans have an ideal of enthusiastic, excited and elated feelings while Taiwanese seek situations where they experience calm, relaxed and peaceful states. This may explain why some people are more apt to ride rollercoasters or take stimulants like cocaine while others sunbath, listen to classical music or take narcotics such as heroin. Further, it provides a reason why, when describing their ideal vacations, European American college students described holidays that would enable them to “explore and do exciting things” while Hong Kong Chinese preferred going to places where they could “totally relax”. These cultural ideals about ideal states actually drive behavior more strongly than attitudes about certain activities.<sup>xxx</sup>

### **We Don’t Remember Happiness Accurately**

There are numerous studies which demonstrate that people’s recollections of how they felt in the moment are often not accurate; how people remember being affected by events is different than how people actually felt at the time. Specifically, individuals tend to over-recall the tail end of an event and under-recall other temporal stages of an event. Over time their brains tend to “fill in” areas that they don’t actually remember and these “filled” events become so mingled with the memories that it’s impossible for the individual to distinguish between the two. Retroactively people tend to “remember” feeling more as they think they ought to have felt and less of the emotions they actually experienced.

Such is the case with a trip to Disneyland—people often remember Disneyland as one of their happiest memories. But online experience ratings cast doubt on our memories; parking is difficult, the lines are long, the tickets expensive, the food unappetizing (and overpriced). How is it that you go home, wake up, and can’t wait to return to Disneyland? Perhaps, at least in part,

this is because of the photos taken of you grinning ear to ear after exiting the ride.<sup>xxxii</sup> Indeed, we tend to underestimate the intensity of our mixed emotions—an effect which appears to increase over time.

Interestingly, this decline in memory does not occur to the same degree when we experience feelings in only one direction (i.e., sad or happy). This may have to do with the complexity of mixed emotions in contrast to the comparative ease of remembering purely positive or negative emotions.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Mixed emotions create discomfort, particularly for North Americans or younger individuals (interestingly, mixed emotions don't create that state of discomfort for individuals with East Asian cultural background or who are older).<sup>xxxiiii</sup>

What we recall from the past and what we project for the future depends on our current status. Unlike the past or future, the present is salient and available.<sup>xxxv</sup> Interestingly, when we think about the future, we rarely consider failure but focus mainly on things like meeting desirable goals (e.g. graduation, gainful employment, marriage, children, and exotic travel).<sup>xxxvi</sup> Considering how much trouble we have remembering how we felt in the past or how we want to feel in the future, it's no wonder that the pursuit of happiness can be so elusive.

Because of our general inability to recall our emotional state accurately, we are often poor at predicting our emotional state in future circumstances. What people believe will make them happy and what will actually make them happy tend to be two different things.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Thus, despite the adage of money not buying happiness, when rating the importance of various life elements to overall happiness (in order from most important to least important), respondents in one study most often chose the following: job prospects, academic performance, financial situation, personal safety, social life, outdoor activities, natural beauty, cultural opportunity, overall climate, summer weather, winter weather.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

## CAN WE REDUCE UNHAPPINESS?

### Neuro-Linguistic Programming

Less attention has been focused on decreasing unhappiness, as opposed to increasing happiness. However, some researchers have begun to tackle this area. One branch of research known as neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is concerned with the processes by which we create an internal picture of the external world through language and our neurology. NLP has been used in various techniques such as curing phobias and reframing.<sup>xxxix</sup> NLP research has uncovered that we cannot imagine the absence of something—and in conjuring it up, we actually make it bigger, even though we are trying to make the image of it go away. For example, the golfer who tells him/herself “don't hit the sand trap” is much more likely to hit the sand trap than the one who focuses on hitting the green.

### Disengaging and Changing Behaviors

Other research claims that the best way to reduce unhappiness is to evaluate our feelings and try to understand what is making us unhappy. Overthinking, however, can actually worsen sadness and make it harder to escape unhappiness. In fact, “the combination of rumination and negative mood is toxic.” In ruminating, we just become stuck with our feelings. Recalling bad



experiences can actually harm our concentration and performance, especially when we are doing mentally demanding everyday activities like reading and writing. As Lyubomirsky explains, “Becoming happier means learning how to disengage from overthinking about both major and minor [negative] experiences, learning to stop searching for all the leaks and cracks—at least for a time—and not let[ting] them affect how you feel about yourself and your life as a whole.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

Some of the ways that we can stop ruminating, according to Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, are to break free, move to higher ground and avoid future traps. The easiest way to break free is through distraction—go for a walk, read, call a friend, etc. A different activity can actually lift your mood and make it easier for you to cope in the future. A second strategy is to “stop!”—you can even yell it to yourself—and think about something else. Thirdly, you can compartmentalize your feelings and set them aside for a time in the day when you will do nothing but ruminate. Often, when that time arrives, it will seem unnatural to force yourself to overthink an issue. Alternatively, you can talk about your thoughts with a sympathetic and trusted person who can think objectively. Finally, writing in a journal or even on a scrap of paper can allow you to let go of negative thoughts and get past them.<sup>xl</sup>

We can also learn to change our behavior patterns and use cognitive thinking styles to reduce depression. Studies show that adolescents at risk for depression have learned to change what they say to themselves, understand the distortions in their thoughts, and improve their self-image. Often, shifting thinking, while easier said than done, can help unhappy individuals. Meditation has also helped adolescents struggling with anxiety.<sup>xli</sup>

Finally, some advocate simply changing behavioral habits. Unhappy people choose television more than socializing or reading. They might become happier by socializing more.<sup>xlii</sup> Exercising more and losing weight are additional ways to decrease unhappiness; exercise releases endorphins and these brain chemicals enhance our mood.

## WHAT ABOUT HAPPINESS AS A NATIONAL POLICY

Can we use happiness and positive emotional contagion to drive change or get people to do what we want? Most certainly. While technocrats the world over try to boost their nations’ gross domestic product (GDP), the government of Bhutan is publicly dedicated to increasing GDH—Gross Domestic Happiness. The policy has four pillars: equitable and sustainable economic growth; environmental conservation; cultural preservation; and good government.

But Bhutan is not the only nation focused on happiness as a matter of national policy. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, encouraged by fellow Labor Party member and renowned happiness scholar Richard Layard, has shown interest in using happiness studies to advance “well being” in the U.K. Layard argues for teaching “happiness skills” in school and for curtailing advertising that targets children, in an attempt to stifle envy and greed. The nub of his approach, though, involves an aggressive program of income redistribution—since, he says, “an extra pound or dollar gives more happiness to poor people than to the rich.” Of course that leaves unaddressed the unhappiness caused when taxes are raised to make that possible. Nevertheless, measuring domestic happiness may still make sense. As Robert F. Kennedy said in a speech at the University of Kansas in March, 1968, the nation’s GDP measures everything “except that which makes life worthwhile.”<sup>xliii</sup>

## WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US?

Even within an inconsistent and erratic system of capitalism, psychologists believe that increased happiness is attainable. Distilled to its most basic level, positive psychology encourages people to strive for “mindfulness”—living in the moment, recognizing the beauty of nature, and appreciating the positive aspects of our lives. Research has also shown that happiness is enhanced by optimism; religious faith; acts of generosity and altruism such as community service; and work or hobbies that produce a frequent experience of “flow”—a state of total engagement.

Further, kindness, gratitude and optimism can improve happiness levels but only if they are ongoing activities; people must practice these things consistently in order for them to have an impact.<sup>xliv</sup> As the Dalai Lama explains, “Suffering and pain are understood to be a function of an untamed and undisciplined mind, while happiness and joy are understood to be a function of a tamed and disciplined mind.”<sup>xlv</sup>

## Spend Time Others—Particularly Close Others

Very happy people spend the least time alone and the most time socializing, are more extroverted and are more agreeable than unhappy people. Yet according to one study, “happy” people defined in this way weren’t always happy and never reported being ecstatic. In other words, they maintained higher levels of happiness due to their social relationships. Of course, it remains to be seen if the social relationships lead to happiness or if happiness causes social relationships to form. What is known, however, is that very happy people do have strong social ties and report having close family and friends.<sup>xlvi</sup>

We are motivated by a need to belong and relate to other people; it is essential for well-being.<sup>xlvii</sup> Accordingly, social relatedness can be the tool to get people from sadness to happiness, as Francis Bacon asserted about friendship: “It redoubleth joys and cuts grief in half.” In fact, people who enjoy close relationships cope better with stresses such as bereavement, job loss, illness and even rape.<sup>xlviii</sup> Further, love is frequently mentioned by individuals as the missing element that would bring happiness.<sup>xlix</sup> Satisfying relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners make lives meaningful and, according to many, are necessities for happiness.<sup>1</sup>

## The Experience of Flow: The Process of Happiness

One measure of the good life is flow or level of engagement. Flow is the state achieved when fully engaged, immersed and absorbed in an activity.<sup>li</sup> Time often seems to stand still. Flow happens for different people in different ways—including when performing a physical activity (like skiing or dancing), creating something (like cooking or painting), solving a complex problem, or negotiating a business deal. When we are doing things we are good at or enjoy, we experience flow. There is a strong correlation between the experience of flow and enduring levels of happiness.<sup>lii</sup>

While many people rely on exercise or other hobbies to gain flow, it is also possible to experience flow while doing work or even during tasks which are normally considered routine.

We experience flow when there is a good match between our strengths and the task we are engaged upon.<sup>liii</sup>

### **Live Life with a Purpose: Why Does Volunteer Work Feel So Good?**

Working for a larger purpose creates happiness and meaning. This is why volunteer activities, caring for members of your family, supporting a charity, or working to live up to your moral principals all feel so good. Ultimately, we seek a continuing experience. We thrive on feeling that we matter, and that what we do matters.<sup>liv</sup>

We also experience meaning when we have a sense of congruence and coherence between who we are and what we do, when we feel connected to others and/or “special” and when we engage in meaningful activities.<sup>lv</sup> So, if the purpose of your work (or your life) is only to maximize your material wealth, or if your focus is only on your own happiness, you will de facto be limiting your happiness in the long term. To create a meaningful life, it is critical to feel that in some way, something that we are doing is connected to something beyond ourselves. Eudemonia, or true happiness and well-being, is the result of an active life governed by intrinsic meaning, self-sacrifice, and self-improvement.<sup>lvi</sup>

Interestingly, although money does not lead to happiness, giving it away might. In fact, regardless of what they buy, people experience a greater level of happiness when they spend money on others rather than on themselves.<sup>lvii</sup> In a research experiment, people were asked to consider spending time with a nonprofit (vs. not). Later, they asked to donate real money. Those who were first asked to think about spending time with the nonprofit ended up donating twice as much money (vs. the group who of people were not asked to imagine time spent with the nonprofit). Even more interesting, this doubling effect was fueled by the belief that such volunteer work would make them happy.<sup>lviii</sup> These findings suggest that once personal goals are aligned with creating meaning in the world, individuals become much (much) happier.

Acts of kindness need not involve joining the Peace Corps or even spending a day cleaning up the seashore. Rather, little things make a difference. Whether people bought a sandwich for a homeless person or shoveled snow from a neighbor’s driveway, when they performed acts of kindness, individuals experienced higher levels of happiness and felt more fulfilled. Kindness and fulfillment are linked. While random acts of kindness can get routine and boring, deeds that strengthen existing social ties, such as helping to find a job for a friend, will tend to yield more benefits as they help build relationships.<sup>lix</sup>

### **Finding Meaningfulness with Balance**

A holistic view of life is critical to an ongoing level of happiness and meaning. One way to think about life holistically is to think in terms of the overlapping domains:<sup>lx</sup>

- Work/Career/School
- Home/Family
- Community/Society
- Self (Mind/Body/Spirit)

At any given time, these domains are not equal in size and importance in your life. They overlap; changes in one domain may impact the others. For example, when ignoring the Self domain, often Work and Family suffer. Focusing excessively on any one domain, to the exclusion of the other domains, is a suboptimal way to achieve happiness.

Thinking of our lives holistically, as interconnected and overlapping domains, creates the possibility of multiplier effects. For example, the result of finding a way to create a sense of flow and engagement in Work may lead to a sense of happiness and meaning that positively impacts how we feel about and interact with the Home, Community and Self domains.

## CONCLUSION

According to Blaise Pascal, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end.” Not only is our desire for happiness universal, however, but also our inability to find happiness is as well. We need to stop chasing happiness and start seeking brief moments of fun and meaningfulness. Savoring experiences, practicing gratitude, and cultivating mindfulness all help to increase enjoyment and pleasure in what we do and, hence, increase levels of happiness our day-to-day enjoyment of life. When we can do this particularly well, we have the opportunity to influence not only our own well-being but also the well-being of our family, friends and wider community.

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