

The Road to the Good Life

If someone were to ask you, "What would make you feel happier," what would you say? Perhaps you would answer: to have more time to spend with family and friends, more money, better health, or (especially during the long winter months) to move to a warm climate. There is now some research available to indicate if these things really do make people happier.

A field called "Positive Psychology" has developed, pioneered by Dr. Martin Seligman, where researchers have turned their attention to positive emotion, positive traits, and positive institutions. *And the research shows.....*that people who are married and have a rich social life have increased levels of happiness, that money and health have only a small effect on happiness, and that climate has none. Of course, determining causality is another matter: we don't know if marriage and a rich social life causes happiness, if people who are already happy are more likely to get and stay married, or if there is some third variable, like sociability, that causes both more happiness and a greater likelihood of marriage.

Money has a small effect on level of happiness, which may be surprising to some. In the United States, the very poor rank lower in happiness, but once a person is just barely comfortable, more money adds little or no happiness. How you rate the importance of money influences your happiness more than money itself. Materialism seems to be counterproductive: at all levels of real income, people who value money more than other goals are less satisfied with their income and with their lives as a whole.

Objective good health is barely related to happiness. What matters is our subjective perception of how healthy we are. It is a tribute to our ability to adapt to adversity that many people find ways to appraise their health positively even when quite ill. Moderate ill health does not bring unhappiness. A disabling illness that is severe and long lasting results in a decline of happiness and life satisfaction, although not to the extent that most people think.

It's easy to get caught up thinking, "If only I could afford (fill in the blank), I would be so much happier." It's helpful to place money in context, and by all means, take care of your health and enjoy your relationships. At the same time though, it's important to know that the factors mentioned above account for only 10 - 15% of the variance in happiness. Here's the good news: there are a number of **internal** circumstances you can change to increase your level of happiness and fulfillment. **You can move your emotions in a positive direction by changing how you feel about your past, how you think about the future, and how you experience the present.**

Increase Your Level of Happiness in the Present

Whatever it is that gives you pleasure, you can increase the amount of happiness you derive from it by understanding the following concepts: habituation, savoring, and mindfulness. Pleasures have strong sensory and emotional components. Dr. Seligman* characterizes pleasures as high intensity (elation, excitement, hilarity, ecstasy, bliss), moderate intensity (enthusiasm, attraction, fun) and low intensity (comfort, relaxation, amusement). Pleasures are fleeting; once the external stimulus is gone, the positive emotion associated with it fades. Moreover, rapidly repeated indulgence in the same pleasure does not work, because of a process called

habituation or adaptation. Inject into your life as many events that produce pleasure as you can, but let enough time elapse between them so that you truly enjoy them. Spacing, as well as surprise, keeps pleasures from habituating.

Savoring is the awareness of pleasure and of the deliberate conscious attention to the experience of pleasure. After testing thousands of undergraduates at Loyola University, Drs. Fred Bryant and Joseph Veroff detailed 5 techniques that promote the four kinds of savoring: **basking** (receiving praise and congratulations), **thanksgiving** (expressing gratitude for blessings), **marveling** (losing the self in the wonder of the moment) and **luxuriating** (indulging the senses). The 5 techniques are:

- Sharing with others:** the single strongest predictor of level of pleasure—seeking out others to share the experience with and telling others how much you value the moment
- Building Memories:** taking mental photographs or a physical souvenir of the event, and reminisce about it later with others
- Self-congratulation:** taking pride in yourself and telling yourself how impressed others are and remember how long you've waited for this to happen
- Sharpening perceptions:** focusing on certain elements and blocking out others, such as closing your eyes while listening to music
- Absorption:** letting yourself get totally immersed and stop reminding yourself of other things you should be doing, wondering what comes next, or considering the ways in which the event could be improved upon

Have you ever eaten without really tasting, heard without really listening? Unawareness can keep us from being in touch with ourselves, causing us to miss much of what is most beautiful and meaningful in our lives. **Mindfulness** is basically just a particular way of paying attention and being present. It is developed by purposefully attending to things we ordinarily never give a moment's thought to. It makes our experiences more vivid and our lives more real.

Now that we've talked about ways to increase your pleasure in life, we have another question for you: what would happen if life were made up of easy pleasures? What if life never called on strengths, never presented challenges? Does happiness come more readily from having fun, or from kindness? In order to find out, students in Dr. Seligman's Authentic Happiness course at the University of Pennsylvania were assigned the task of engaging in one pleasurable activity and one philanthropic activity. The results: when philanthropic acts were spontaneous and called upon personal strengths, the student's whole day went better. The afterglow of the pleasurable activity (hanging out with friends, watching a movie, eating a hot fudge sundae) paled in comparison.

Gratifications are activities that we like doing and engage us fully, activities in which we become immersed and absorbed. When does time stop for you? When do you find yourself doing exactly what you want to be doing, and never wanting it to end? This state has been identified in extensive research by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as "flow": the state of gratification we enter when we feel completely engaged in what we are doing.

If gratifications are, well, so gratifying...why, then, do people choose pleasure (or displeasure) over gratification? **Faced with the choice between reading a good book and watching a sitcom on TV, we often choose the latter—although**

surveys show again and again that the average mood while watching sitcoms on television is mild depression. In general, Americans are thought to over-rely on shortcuts to happiness, such as television, drugs, shopping, and loveless sex. Yet positive emotion alienated from the exercise of character leads to emptiness and depression. Gratifications produce flow, but require skill and effort; they can be stressful, offering challenges and the possibility of failing. Yet the positive feeling that arises from the exercise of strengths and virtues, rather than from the shortcuts, is authentic, according to Dr. Seligman, and the way to achieve lasting fulfillment.

When thinking about how to be happier, it is important to remember the distinction between pleasure and gratification; otherwise, it is all too easy to rely on shortcuts, to a life of snatching up as many easy pleasures as possible. **In order to find the way to the "good life" it is important to get more gratification in your life.** The highest success in living and the deepest emotional satisfaction comes from building and using your signature strengths. By improving the very best in ourselves, we can improve the world around us and achieve contentment, gratification and meaning.

That sounds all well and good, but you're not sure what is the very best in yourself? Go to the following website: <http://www.viastrengths.org/strengths/> to learn your top 5 strengths, or stop by the Counseling Center during our screening hour to take the Values in Action Strengths Scale. The scale identifies six virtues: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity and love, temperance, and transcendence, and 24 strengths that are associated with each.

*Seligman, M.E. (2002). Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment. New York, NY: Free Press.