

Happiness – What is it ? / How do we get it?

According to an ancient Greek philosopher, there are three main ingredients to happiness. They are:

- Financial stability
- Friends
- Time to ponder on life

A recent UK survey produced a list of ingredients for happiness:

- Passion
- Challenge
- Faith
- Journey

According to Steven Pinker (from “How the Mind works”), to be happy, we should be:

- healthy
- well-fed
- comfortable
- safe
- prosperous
- knowledgeable
- respected
- non-celibate
- loved

Other ideas for happiness include:

- Good health
- Job satisfaction
- A good marriage/partnership
- Interesting leisure activities
- A nice house & car
- Regular holidays (or time away from work)
- A supportive family
- Altruism
- Security
- Love
- Purpose
- Humour
- Optimism
- Sense of choice

Other ideas/philosophies include:

- Overcoming problems successfully
- Positive emotions and positive activities
- Satisfaction with life

The pursuit of happiness could be measured by “what can be attained through reasonable effort in the current environment”.

People are happy when “they feel better off than their neighbours” and unhappy when “they feel worse off”. For example, you open your paycheck and see that you have a 5% raise. You are happy. You then discover that your co-workers have a 10% raise. You are unhappy.

According to Steven Pinker, “happiness is not something that you experience, it's something that you remember”.

The baseline that many people adapt to is “satisfaction”. If you are satisfied with your life, you are generally happy.

Many surveys have shown that it is not those with money, privilege, health or good looks who are happy, but those who have spouses, friends, religion, and challenging, meaningful work.

It has been noted by some philosophers that “the direct pursuit of happiness is a recipe for unhappiness”.

A comprehensive analysis of what makes us happy was written by Yuval Noah Harari in his book “Sapiens” (page 242, “Counting Happiness”). See Appendix 1.

Unhappiness

If you are unhappy as:

a child
an adolescent
an employee
a wife/husband
a citizen of a city
a citizen of a country

then you blame:

your parents
your parents, your teachers or your friends
your boss or your colleagues
your partner
your mayor
your president/government

Appendix 1. “Counting Happiness” by Yuval Noah Harari

So far we have discussed happiness as if it were largely a product of material factors, such as health, diet and wealth. If people are richer and healthier, then they must also be happier. But is that really so obvious? Philosophers, priests and poets have brooded over the nature of happiness for millennia, and many have concluded that social, ethical and spiritual factors have as great an impact on our happiness as material conditions. Perhaps people in modern affluent societies suffer greatly from alienation and meaninglessness despite their prosperity. And perhaps our less well-to-do ancestors found much contentment in community, religion and a bond with nature.

In recent decades, psychologists and biologists have taken up the challenge of studying scientifically what really makes people happy. Is it money, family, genetics or perhaps virtue? The first step is to define what is to be measured. The generally accepted definition of happiness is ‘subjective well-being’. Happiness, according to this view, is something I feel inside myself, a sense of either immediate pleasure or long-term contentment with the way my life is going. If it’s something felt inside, how can it be measured from outside? Presumably, we can do so by asking people to tell us how they feel. So psychologists or biologists who want to assess how happy people feel give them questionnaires to fill out and tally the results.

A typical subjective well-being questionnaire asks interviewees to grade on a scale of zero to ten their agreement with statements such as ‘I feel pleased with the way I am’, ‘I feel that life is very rewarding’, ‘I am optimistic about the future’ and ‘Life is good’. The researcher then adds up all the answers and calculates the interviewee’s general level of subjective well-being.

Such questionnaires are used in order to correlate happiness with various objective factors. One study might compare a thousand people who earn \$100,000 a year with a thousand people who earn \$50,000. If the study discovers that the first group has an average subjective well-being level of 8.7, while the latter has an average of only 7.3, the researcher may reasonably conclude that there is a positive correlation between wealth and subjective well-being. To put it in simple English, money brings happiness. The same method can be used to examine whether people living in democracies are happier than people living in dictatorships, and whether married people are happier than singles, divorcees or widowers.

This provides a grounding for historians, who can examine wealth, political freedom and divorce rates in the past. If people are happier in democracies and married people are happier than divorcees, a historian has a basis for arguing that the democratisation process of the last few decades contributed to the happiness of humankind, whereas the growing rates of divorce indicate an opposite trend. This way of thinking is not flawless, but before pointing out some of the holes, it is worth considering the findings.

One interesting conclusion is that money does indeed bring happiness. But only up to a point, and beyond that point it has little significance. For people stuck at the bottom of the economic ladder, more money means greater happiness. If you are an American single mother earning \$12,000 a year cleaning houses and you suddenly win \$500,000 on the lottery, you will probably experience a significant and long-term surge in your subjective well-being. You’ll be able to feed and clothe your children without sinking further into debt. However, if you’re a top executive earning \$250,000 a year and you win \$1 million on the lottery, or your company board suddenly decides to double your salary, your surge is likely to last only a few weeks. According to the empirical findings, it’s almost certainly not going to make a big difference to the way you feel over the long run. You’ll buy a snazzier car, move into a palatial home, get used to drinking Chateau Pétrus instead of California Cabernet, but it’ll soon all seem routine and unexceptional.

Another interesting finding is that illness decreases happiness in the short term, but is a source of long-term distress only if a person's condition is constantly deteriorating or if the disease involves ongoing and debilitating pain. People who are diagnosed with chronic illness such as diabetes are usually depressed for a while, but if the illness does not get worse they adjust to their new condition and rate their happiness as highly as healthy people do. Imagine that Lucy and Luke are middle-class twins, who agree to take part in a subjective well-being study. On the way back from the psychology laboratory, Lucy's car is hit by a bus, leaving her with a number of broken bones and a permanently lame leg. Just as the rescue crew is cutting her out of the wreckage, the phone rings and Luke shouts that he has won the lottery's \$10 million jackpot. Two years later she'll be limping and he'll be a lot richer, but when the psychologist comes around for a follow-up study, they are both likely to give the same answers they did on the morning of that fateful day.

Family and community seem to have more impact on our happiness than money and health. People with strong families who live in tight-knit and supportive communities are significantly happier than people whose families are dysfunctional and who have never found (or never sought) a community to be part of. Marriage is particularly important. Repeated studies have found that there is a very close correlation between good marriages and high subjective well-being, and between bad marriages and misery. This holds true irrespective of economic or even physical conditions. An impecunious invalid surrounded by a loving spouse, a devoted family and a warm community may well feel better than an alienated billionaire, provided that the invalid's poverty is not too severe and that his illness is not degenerative or painful.

This raises the possibility that the immense improvement in material conditions over the last two centuries was offset by the collapse of the family and the community. If so, the average person might well be no happier today than in 1800. Even the freedom we value so highly may be working against us. We can choose our spouses, friends and neighbours, but they can choose to leave us. With the individual wielding unprecedented power to decide her own path in life, we find it ever harder to make commitments. We thus live in an increasingly lonely world of unravelling communities and families.

But the most important finding of all is that happiness does not really depend on objective conditions of either wealth, health or even community. Rather, it depends on the correlation between objective conditions and subjective expectations. If you want a bullock-cart and get a bullock-cart, you are content. If you want a brand-new Ferrari and get only a second-hand Fiat you feel deprived. This is why winning the lottery has, over time, the same impact on people's happiness as a debilitating car accident. When things improve, expectations balloon, and consequently even dramatic improvements in objective conditions can leave us dissatisfied. When things deteriorate, expectations shrink, and consequently even a severe illness might leave you pretty much as happy as you were before. You might say that we didn't need a bunch of psychologists and their questionnaires to discover this. Prophets, poets and philosophers realised thousands of years ago that being satisfied with what you already have is far more important than getting more of what you want. Still, it's nice when modern research – bolstered by lots of numbers and charts – reaches the same conclusions the ancients did.

The crucial importance of human expectations has far-reaching implications for understanding the history of happiness. If happiness depended only on objective conditions such as wealth, health and social relations, it would have been relatively easy to investigate its history. The finding that it depends on subjective expectations makes the task of historians far harder. We moderns have an arsenal of tranquillisers and painkillers at our disposal, but our expectations of ease and pleasure, and our intolerance of inconvenience and discomfort, have increased to such an extent that we may well suffer from pain more than our ancestors ever did.

It's hard to accept this line of thinking. The problem is a fallacy of reasoning embedded deep in our psyches. When we try to guess or imagine how happy other people are now, or how people in the past were, we inevitably imagine ourselves in their shoes. But that won't work because it pastes our expectations on to the material conditions of others. In modern affluent societies it is customary to take a shower and change your clothes every day. Medieval peasants went without washing for months on end, and hardly ever changed their clothes. The very thought of living like that, filthy and reeking to the bone, is abhorrent to us. Yet medieval peasants seem not to have minded. They were used to the feel and smell of a long-unlaundered shirt. It's not that they wanted a change of clothes but couldn't get it – they had what they wanted. So, at least as far as clothing goes, they were content.

That's not so surprising, when you think of it. After all, our chimpanzee cousins seldom wash and never change their clothes. Nor are we disgusted by the fact that our pet dogs and cats don't shower or change their coats daily. We pat, hug and kiss them all the same. Small children in affluent societies often dislike showering, and it takes them years of education and parental discipline to adopt this supposedly attractive custom. It is all a matter of expectations.

If happiness is determined by expectations, then two pillars of our society – mass media and the advertising industry – may unwittingly be depleting the globe's reservoirs of contentment. If you were an eighteen-year-old youth in a small village 5,000 years ago you'd probably think you were good-looking because there were only fifty other men in your village and most of them were either old, scarred and wrinkled, or still little kids. But if you are a teenager today you are a lot more likely to feel inadequate. Even if the other guys at school are an ugly lot, you don't measure yourself against them but against the movie stars, athletes and supermodels you see all day on television, Facebook and giant billboards.

So maybe Third World discontent is fomented not merely by poverty, disease, corruption and political oppression but also by mere exposure to the First World standards. The average Egyptian was far less likely to die from starvation, plague or violence under Hosni Mubarak than under Ramses II or Cleopatra. Never had the material condition of most Egyptians been so good. You'd think they would have been dancing in the streets in 2011, thanking Allah for their good fortune. Instead they rose up furiously to overthrow Mubarak. They weren't comparing themselves to their ancestors under the pharaohs, but rather to their contemporaries in Obama's America. If that's the case, even immortality might lead to discontent. Suppose science comes up with cures for all diseases, effective anti-ageing therapies and regenerative treatments that keep people indefinitely young. In all likelihood, the immediate result will be an unprecedented epidemic of anger and anxiety.

Those unable to afford the new miracle treatments – the vast majority of people – will be beside themselves with rage. Throughout history, the poor and oppressed comforted themselves with the thought that at least death is even-handed – that the rich and powerful will also die. The poor will not be comfortable with the thought that they have to die, while the rich will remain young and beautiful for ever. The Egyptian people revolted against the Mubarak regime even though it provided them with safer and longer lives than any previous regime in the history of the Nile Valley. But the tiny minority able to afford the new treatments will not be euphoric either. They will have much to be anxious about. Although the new therapies could extend life and youth, they cannot revive corpses. How dreadful to think that I and my loved ones can live for ever, but only if we don't get hit by a truck or blown to smithereens by a terrorist! Potentially a-mortal people are likely to grow averse to taking even the slightest risk, and the agony of losing a spouse, child or close friend will be unbearable.