

A LINE ON LIFE

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The Pursuit of Happiness *

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In the *Declaration of Independence*, Thomas Jefferson wrote that everyone should have the basic rights of "*life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*." Can we define happiness? What qualities of life make a person happy?

In 1979, Jonathan Freedman asked a large sample of people for their definitions of happiness. About half saw happiness in terms of fun, excitement and good times. To them, happiness was a life full of **pleasurable activities**. The other half saw happiness in terms of contentment, satisfaction and freedom from worries. For them, happiness was essentially "*peace of mind*." However, the difference between the two views seems to be only one of emphasis. Almost everyone recognizes both good times and peace of mind as central to happiness.

In addition, happiness is seen as a relatively **enduring** state of mind – one that lasts months or years. This is in contrast to momentary feelings, such as the "*happiness*" that we feel when our team wins a game or the "*unhappiness*" when our supper is burned. However, these transitory states are related to more enduring states of happiness. In a 1969 study, people were asked about the number of good and bad feelings they had in recent weeks. The extent that good feelings outnumbered bad feelings was related to these people's overall ratings of happiness. In other words, a few setbacks will not make you miserable, as long as there are enough good moments to compensate for them.

In 1978, the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research conducted a survey on the emotions experienced in the last few weeks and overall feelings of happiness. In this survey, 30% rated themselves as "*very happy*" 55% as "*pretty happy*." Only 10% said they were "*not too happy*."

In contrast to what some may expect, few objective characteristics seem to be related to happiness. Younger people – in the so-called "*prime of life*" – were not generally happier than elderly people. On average, there was also no difference between those who live in rural or city areas.

In contrast, **social relationships** seemed very important. On average, married people were happier than those who were single, divorced or widowed. Even among single people, those with close friendships are happier than those without them. Regardless of the situation, this important component of happiness essentially involves **caring about others and feeling cared about in return**.

Even more important in the social relationships are **people's feelings about themselves**. Those who say they are satisfied with themselves and feel in control of their lives are

happier than those who take less pride in their abilities and who believe they are at the mercy of external forces.

In another 1979 study, Paul Costa and Robert McCrae found that some men's personality traits related to their feeling positive about their situation. Those high in "*extraversion*" – being sociable, active and involved in life – reported more *positive* feelings. At the other end, those high on "*neuroticism*" – being anxious, impulsive and hostile – reported a high number of *negative* feelings. Even more interesting, the researchers found that these personality traits predicted the men's ratings of their happiness *ten years later!*

Some people think they would be much happier, if they had some extreme good fortune – like winning a million dollars in a lottery. However, this does not seem to be the case. In a 1978 study, Philip Brinkman interviewed (1) a group of people who had recently won a state lottery and (2) a comparable control group who had not experienced the thrill of suddenly coming into a lot of money. Subjects were asked how happy they were now, six months earlier and how happy they expected to be in another six months. They were also asked to rate their pleasure in routine experiences – having breakfast, talking with a friend, getting a compliment or reading a magazine.

Lottery winners were not significantly different from the control group in their past, present and expected levels of happiness. On the other hand, lottery winners took less pleasure in the everyday, worldly pleasures of life. After a major positive change in their lives, the simpler pleasures took on less meaning to them.

If we have extremely high expectations, we are unlikely to be happy.

Expectations seem to be very important in our perception of happiness. The Institute of Social Research study seemed to support this view. One of the happiest groups of people were those who had little education – thus leading to low expectations about their earnings – who had managed to earn a great deal. Those with similar income but with more education were somewhat less happy, perhaps because they expected their income all along. In comparing their current life to their past life, those with less education are happy to be where they are. If we are to gain the greatest pleasure from good fortune, it seems to be helpful to remember our humbler beginnings.

Goals are necessary to lead zest to life, but unrealistic expectations will almost certainly lead to frustration and unhappiness. Rather than focusing on things you can never have, you will tend to be happier to focus on all you have in life – whether it is money, possessions, friends, family, knowledge, various skills, a good reputation, your health or even a beautiful sunset. Your success in your pursuit of happiness depends on what you choose as your measure of happiness.

* Adapted from Zick Rubin and Elton McNeil's *Psychology: Being Human*, Harper and Row, 1987, pages 306-309.