

Synthesized Happiness: It's the Real Thing

Andrew Rader, LAc, MS

"The basic thing is that everyone wants happiness, no one wants suffering. And happiness mainly comes from our own attitude, rather than from external factors. If your own mental attitude is correct, even if you remain in a hostile atmosphere, you feel happy."- Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama.

In 1973, Dr. Grossarth Meticek surveyed thousands of people in Heidelberg, Germany regarding their attitudes about life. The average age of the participants was 58. Twenty-one years later, he compared the attitude scores with health outcomes. Those with the 300 most positive attitudes were 30 times more likely to be alive and well than the 200 with the lowest scores. In another use of the data, he took 1,200 participants with the most negative outlooks, divided them into two groups of 600. One group got lessons on how to improve their attitudes for one year, while the other group received no instruction or sham instruction. Thirteen years later the group that got the real instruction had 409/600 alive, while only 97/600 were alive for the group that did not get trained on how to cheer up. These are significant results indicating that attitude affects lifespan.

A recent study done by Sheldon Cohen at Carnegie Mellon University found that happy people are less likely to catch a cold or flu, and if they do, their symptoms are less severe.

Karina Davidson at Columbia University Medical Center did a study using 10 years of data on 1,739 individuals from a 1995 Nova Scotia health survey. Those with the most positive attitudes, using a five-point scale had the lowest risk for heart disease. Each point represented a 22 percent reduction in risk.

An Australian study that was published in the American Journal of Health Promotion looked at 9,981 individuals over a three-year period. The participants answered two simple questions, "during the past four weeks have you been a happy person?" and "all things considered, are you satisfied with your life?" Those that reported the most positive outlooks again had significantly better health outcomes as gauged by a survey only three years later.

A study that has been following a community of nuns for decades, in the United States, found that those who had optimistic journal entries as young women tended to have better health in their later years compared to the other nuns with less positive outlooks on life.

On a more mechanistic model, professors Sandra Sephton and Suzanne Segerstrom from the University of Kentucky did a study of 124 first-year law students. They surveyed these law students for their level of optimism regarding their futures in law school. Over the course of the year their cell-mediated immunity (CMI) was measured with a skin test at five different times. The CMI correlated directly with levels of optimism. Interestingly, negative emotions did not alter the CMI, suggesting that simply being stress-free was not good enough to move the CMI - you had to actively engage positive emotions to have an immune response.

Positive Psychology

It is heartening to see that attention is being given to a powerful concept that has been a foundation piece of indigenous medicine forever; that what and how we think and feel matters. It matters not only to our subjective experience, which is no small thing; it also happens to matter regarding quantifiable, objective outcomes in the outer world of substance and matter.

I can continue to cite studies, but you get the point. In fact, most of the readers of this article know this intuitively and yet it is nice to see it substantiated and acknowledged with interest and funding from the western scientific community. The last decade or so, the burgeoning field of positive psychology has begun to get some traction. Positive psychology is an old idea with a makeover. Positive psychology is based upon the idea of studying what is optimal with human consciousness and learning from that, rather than focusing on the disorders. Again, this is not a new idea, but one that has been institutionally neglected in many areas of western medicine. There seems to be exciting new initiatives in this arena popping up in our elite institutions.

The Dalai Lama has given his blessing, along with \$150,000, towards the new Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford. The center has initiated studies involving meditation practitioners. Some are brain-imaging studies that have demonstrated activity in an area of the brain known as the nucleus accumbens when these practitioners think compassionate or altruistic thoughts. Other studies look at individuals' response to the suffering of others, which can lead to a desire to take action, indicated by activity in the pre-frontal cortex where motor activity is activated. This type of research is exciting in that it will validate and elucidate the power of positive thinking, which has sometimes been given a bad rap.

There is much misunderstanding regarding the "power of positive thinking." Some, would rightly argue that it can give people who have difficult situations, whether it is health related or not, the idea that their situation was due to their "negative thinking" and all they have to do is change; implying that they were responsible for their situation and also responsible for improving it. Understanding this misunderstanding is crucial in order for the value of "power of the mind" to be fully accepted and to move forward.

Creating A Reality

Yes, we are capable of changing how we think, and how we respond to circumstances that we experience. Yes, how we respond matters. No, we are not bad or wrong if bad things happen to us. Yes, we cannot control what happens to us, only to how we respond to what happens to us, and often very poorly at that. So, we can remove that load of guilt or shame because it serves no useful purpose. What I believe the power of positive thinking is about is that in any given moment we create our reality, we manufacture how we feel.

To support this concept, consider this question posed by Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert: Which would you rather have happen to you, win the lottery or become paraplegic? Dumb question. Interestingly, when lottery winners and paraplegics were asked to fill out a survey regarding their happiness levels, one year after becoming lottery winners or paraplegics, the degree of happiness was the same for both groups!

In Gilbert's words, we synthesize our happiness. We think that outer circumstances matter regarding our happiness, or do they? Gilbert talks about "impact bias," which is the phenomenon where we seem to give much more significance, or imagine, that bad events are much worse than they really are. They tend to have less impact and less intensity than we would think at the time of the event.

Gilbert gives these us these examples: Moreese Bickham, who was exonerated after spending 37

years in a Louisiana State Penitentiary for a crime he did not commit said, "I don't have one minute's regret. It was a glorious experience." He synthesized his happiness. Pete Best, the original drummer for the Beatles who was dropped for Ringo just before the band became famous, and is still a drummer said, "I am happier than I would have been with the Beatles." You might think that these people are deluding themselves or are in some kind of denial, meaning synthetic happiness is not as good as real happiness. In other words, how could getting what we want be the same as not getting what we want in terms of making us happy? Gilbert designed a neat study.

People were given the opportunity to rank in order of what they liked best to least after viewing five different Monet prints. They were then told that they could take home their third or fourth choice because it just so happened that those prints were available. People usually chose the third because they liked it slightly better than the fourth. Then, sometime later, it could be weeks or days, they were asked to rank the five prints again. People would then put #3 in the 2 position and #4 in the 5 position - synthesized happiness. They like the one they chose better now that they owned it. He then repeated this experiment with patients who had anterograde amnesia, a severe condition of no short-term memory. They can remember their childhood but not if they met you 30 minutes ago.

These people ranked their prints, were told they could have #3 or #4, they chose #3, then 30 minutes later were introduced to the same task, not remembering that they had just done it 30 minutes earlier, and not remembering that they "owned" number 3. They then ranked the prints just the way normal memory people did, they put #3 into the #2 slot and #4 into the #5 slot! They synthesized their happiness with the print they owned without knowing they owned it.

The Joy of Being Stuck

Another phenomenon Gilbert tested was the idea that we are happier when given power to choose rather than a situation of being stuck with something. Students were given the opportunity of choosing one of two desired photographs they created and losing the other, however one group was given the opportunity to change their choice within five days if they so desired, the other group was permanently stuck with their first choice. It turns out that the group that had no opportunity to switch ended up liking their choice much more than the group that had the option to switch. In other words, "the unanticipated joy of being stuck."

Next experiment: a group of students were told they could take a photography course where they could take home one print at the end. They could choose between two courses, one where they had to make a decision and there would be no going back after that or they could choose then have a five-day period to change their minds. 66 percent of the students chose the course that would give them five days to make up their mind. Two thirds chose the outcome that would bring them the least amount of satisfaction with their choice!

Oscar Wilde famously once said, "There are two tragedies in life, getting what you want and not getting what you want." Now we know that if you don't get what you want, it isn't such a tragedy and soon you'll be happy about it.

JANUARY 2011