

The Pursuit of Happiness-Forget About It

Andrew Rader, LAc, MS

"When you realize that there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you." - Tao Te Ching

For the sake of this article, I would like to broadly define the word *happiness*. For some, the word implies something trite. I am using the word here in a very broad way, from a feeling of simple satisfaction to a transformative experience. It is a general state of well being, that can hold experiences of all kinds in a big borderless container of spaciousness. Even if what is arising is unpleasant, painful or disturbing, there can be an experience of this undesirable aspect being a part of a larger whole, thus the total experience can be one dominated by curiosity, forgiveness or simply acceptance. Happiness can hold unhappiness.

To paraphrase Rabbi David Cooper, happiness is a verb. It is a moment -to- moment concept of one's experience. First there is the direct, unadulterated experience, then there is the thought or feeling about the experience, which without discernment, is often taken to be the experience. Because it all happens within milliseconds, most of us have been habituated to take our conceptions of our life to *be* our life. So how does one discern direct experience from our conceptions of the experience? As the Buddha said, there are 80,000 paths.

The Search for Happiness is a Trap

Robert Holden, Ph. D. in his book, *Happiness Now*, reminds us that, "over the centuries we've listened to countless stories of the Holy Grail, the Philosopher's Stone, Excalibur, the Golden Fleece, the Ark of the Covenant, secret manuscripts of truth, hidden sacred temples, universal elixirs, soul mates, alchemy and magic, pots of gold at the end of rainbows, yellow brick roads and more." We are searching, yet never finding. We believe that the solution is "out there." Looking for happiness can become the very obstacle to actually experiencing happiness. A teacher of mine, Will Goodey, would talk about the difference between a desperate seeker and a happy achiever. The desperate seeker is not OK until something is gained or attained. This is the "when-then" game. *When* this happens, *then* I will be happy. It is almost always an unconscious state. The happy achiever is one who is already fulfilled and whole, who is able to incorporate a desire for something within a state of joy and completeness. An example of this might be the Dalai Lama, who, I believe, is right now complete and whole, yet he may also desire and work towards Tibetan autonomy. His sense of who he is not dependent on whether or not this goal is attained. This does not imply that he doesn't care about it, rather it is an example of a deep understanding and awareness of the way it is.

Holden, a British psychologist, created the Happiness Project out of a diversion from his initial training in psychology. He realized that traditional training was based on disorders and illness. There was no study of how the human being could thrive or be well. During a session with folks in a stress relief group, he suddenly got the idea to have people discuss what went well the past week, essentially share some appreciations. Normally people would share their problems. The effect was enormously powerful. Later he helped design an 8-week course that would enable people to transform their thinking toward happiness in such a way that it became permanent. In 1996, a BBC

documentary followed three people through this course and afterwards for six months. In addition, independent scientists and psychologists, including Richard Davidson, from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, monitored the three subjects. He monitored their brain function and concluded that, "this happiness training not only changes the way you feel; it actually changes the way your brain functions."

Holden's work is part of a movement in Positive Psychology. In the fall of 2009, the First World Congress on positive psychology convened. Psychologist Martin Seligman is generally thought to be the originator although humanistic psychologists, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Erich Fromm preceded him. In fact it was in 1954 that Maslow in his book *Motivation and Personality*, used the term, "positive psychology" for the first time. Although humanistic psychology, with its emphasis on human potential, has been around since the 1950s there is still an overwhelming emphasis in the medical world on disorder, dysfunction and disease.

There is a great yearning for more, hence the growth of the human potential movement, self-help industry, and the spiritual and religious renewal movements. People naturally seek out light and love. A statement from the International Positive Psychological Association (IPPA) states: " Since its inception in 1998, the field of positive psychology has seen an investment of tens of millions of dollars in research, the founding of several scientific journals, and the development of masters and Ph.D. programs in leading universities."

Tal Ben Shahar, Ph.D., is another proponent of Positive Psychology. He was a depressed computer-engineering undergrad at Harvard, decided to change majors to psychology and philosophy, and became decidedly happier. He later was given a chance to teach psychology at Harvard. His first class, basically Happiness 101, had eight students, two of which dropped. The following year, word had spread, and he had over 300 students. It soon became the most popular class at Harvard with over 500 students. The media became interested in how this particular class beat out Intro to Economics for top spot in size. Dr. Ben Shahar's take on Positive Psychology is that it is taking the rigor of science and applying it to be best of the self-help movement. He presents a concise methodology based on studies that will greatly increase one's happiness and their health. It goes as follows:

1. Allow yourself and others to be human. Specifically, accept and welcome all states of consciousness. By blocking the negative emotions, we also cut ourselves off from the positive emotions. Suppressed emotion will intensify while acceptance allows it to move. Unconditional acceptance, or forgiveness is the message here. Sound familiar?
2. Stress is not the problem. Not enough recovery time is the problem. When we have too much to do, it leads to feelings of overwhelm, which if it persists leads to depression. A national survey of college students revealed that 85% felt overwhelmed and 45% felt depressed to the point of it affecting how they function. Simplify - do less. Value down time. Micro down time- take a minute or two multiple times a day to just do nothing but breathe. Mezzo down time - get a good night's sleep and honor the Sabbath by taking at least one day off each week. Macro down time- real vacation time, two weeks or more each year.
3. Exercise. A study at Duke divided 156 clinically depressed people into three groups: One group was prescribed only exercise for four months. Another received antidepressants only. The third group did exercise and received antidepressants. After four months there was no significant difference between the groups. The treatments ended and they looked at relapse rates after 10 months. The medication group had a 38% relapse rate, the combined group had 31% and the exercise group relapsed at 9%! Dr. Ben Shahar felt that this signified that lack of exercise acts like a depressant drug. Exercise alone out performed medication. For a much more detailed look into the power of exercise read *SPARK* by John Ratey, MD.

Ben Shahar feels exercise is the unsung hero of psychology.

4. Meditation. All types of meditation work to improve our well being. There are three components that seem to be a part of all meditation that have value: one-pointedness, natural and relaxed breathing and a frame of mind that realizes there is no bad meditation, acceptance, or forgiveness of what arises. Multiple studies have documented real changes in the brain. Please see: www.acupuncturetoday.com/mpacms/at/article.php?id=32480
5. Breathing. Practice relaxed breathing. The more relaxed one is, the deeper the breath becomes, and the more stressed one is, the more shallow it becomes. By simply allowing the breath to be the focus and taking the time for three deep breaths, we change our brain and body chemistry. Try it.
6. Appreciations. Before bed and just upon waking. Note five things that we appreciate. Do this consistently and the effects are profound.

In the field of Chinese medicine, we have the cultivation of *Shen*. We have the understanding of all holistic traditions that one's sense of self, one's confidence and understanding of one's place in the world, between Heaven and Earth, is inextricably tied to both mental and physical health.

Western thinkers began to promote happiness in the 17th century. In 1672, the philosopher/cleric Richard Cumberland wrote that promoting the well being of others was critical to the "pursuit of our own happiness." A few years later John Locke wrote that, "The highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness."

And in 1776 Thomas Jefferson and friends wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

Resources:

See previous articles:

- www.acupuncturetoday.com/mpacms/at/article.php?id=32480
- www.acupuncturetoday.com/mpacms/at/article.php?id=32337
- Embracing Your Inner Critic, Hal and Sidra Stone
- Happiness Now! Robert Holden
- Soul without Shame-A Guide to Liberating Yourself From the Judge Within, Byron Brown
- God Is A Verb, Rabbi David Cooper
- Undefended Love, Jett Psaris and Marlena Lyons
- A Thousand Names for Joy, Byron Katie
- Spark, John Ratey, MD

JULY 2012