

The pursuit of happiness has been a question mankind has been striving to answer since the beginning of existence. With the emergence of relative economic prosperity, technological advancements, and access to robust scientific research, most would have guessed that we have figured out the question and that humans should be thriving at unprecedented rates.

Unfortunately, that is not the case in the United States. According to the 2024 World Happiness Report, an annual survey measuring the global happiness of different countries across various factors and analyzing trends in happiness, the younger generation is experiencing plummeting happiness levels compared to the older, happier generations. This trend is the complete opposite of what is seen in other countries, despite the U.S. being one of the richest countries in the world.

This decrease in happiness is a multifaceted issue that can be attributed to a variety of factors, coinciding with the rise of social media, skyrocketing loneliness, and increasing mental health issues.

Aristotle believed that humans desire happiness for its own sake because it is the ultimate goal of living. Perhaps it's not that the newer generation has stopped seeking happiness, especially with all the resources available to seemingly provide it, but maybe we are looking at the issue incorrectly.

Many think of the term "happiness" as synonymous with a single component of well-being, namely hedonic well-being. Therefore, when you ask someone to define happiness, they usually don't think of civic engagement, finding meaning, or enduring hardships as examples; rather, they focus on maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Although there are large correlations between different factors of well-being, such as happiness and meaningfulness,

there are also profound differences between them. Focusing solely on living a pleasurable life can be problematic.

One obstacle that prevents people from achieving true well-being when they overemphasize seeking pleasure is the adaptation level theory, similar to the hedonic treadmill. This theory posits that the current level of stimulation is determined by comparison to a baseline, which is frequently adjusted by historical experiences and events. For example, winning the lottery is a highly pleasurable experience that is impactful and distinctive, but the rapid increase in happiness can shift your adaptation level so that ordinary experiences that were previously pleasurable, such as going for a walk, are no longer as enjoyable. Furthermore, habituation will eventually set in, causing the initial thrill of winning the lottery to wear off.

Conversely, the adaptation level theory does not only work negatively to prevent us from perceiving pleasure at constantly high levels continuously but also helps us endure hardships. Research showed that experiencing a modest amount of adversity throughout one's life reduces symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Seery et al. 2010). Furthermore, not only does experiencing hardships increase resilience, but it also increases an individual's ability to savor positive experiences later. Stress and adversity are viewed negatively by some in society due to the increased negative emotions and decreased savoring in the present. Still, research showed that a moderate amount of adversity in life could build enduring psychological resources to face hardships and appreciate positive experiences in the long run (Croft et al., 2014).

In a time of age when people are confused and usually have a false perception of what is going to bring happiness in life, my intervention will surround the topics of resilience and self-regulation/grit.

First, it is important to note that the intervention I will be recommending will strive towards long-term individual well-being, which can be further narrowed down into many subsections, rather than short-term pleasure. This distinction is important because the pursuit of happiness is in itself a problematic statement and a naive goal to strive towards. Robust research has shown that being in a constant state of negative emotion is problematic and that the ability to experience and savor positive emotions is conducive to well-being. However, what is perhaps counterintuitive is that valuing happiness to an extreme degree has negative consequences. These consequences include a decrease in long-term well-being, short-term positive emotions, and increases in negative emotions (Zerwas & Ford, 2021).

In the short term, experiments have shown that individuals who value happiness on a larger scale experience lower levels of positive emotion after watching a positive film and higher levels of loneliness after watching an intimate film (Mauss et al., 2011). Furthermore, researchers found that individuals valuing happiness are at high risk for mental health issues such as depression and demonstrate low levels of mental well-being and life satisfaction that extend over time (Ford et al., 2014). This pattern was especially strong for individuals experiencing low levels of stress in their lives, which some would guess is one of the most important indicators of long-term well-being.

These results are highly counterintuitive given that previous research surrounding effective strategies for goal attainment highly favors mental contrasting and implementation intentions after setting a goal. Mental contrasting encourages individuals to reflect on the discrepancy between the present reality and the desired future after fulfilling a goal.

Implementation intentions encourage individuals to plan out their actions toward the goal in

advance. However, when it comes to pursuing happiness, the problem occurs within these processes.

In the initial part of goal setting, most people have unreachable expectations for the level and frequency of happiness that one can achieve. Studies show that individuals with the highest expectations and plans for New Year's Eve celebrations were less happy than individuals with lower or no expectations (Schooler et al., 2003). Individuals who set goals to be happy all the time, even in situations that are not conducive, also reported lower well-being (Tamir & Ford, 2012).

In the process of mental contrasting, individuals use emotional regulation strategies to strive towards higher levels of happiness, but research indicates that humans are not very accurate at knowing what strategies are effective. For example, people believe that spending money on themselves will bring more happiness than spending money on others, when in fact the opposite is true (Dunn et al., 2008). Furthermore, individuals tend to simultaneously use regulating strategies that conflict with each other, such as both savoring and dampening strategies, which is rarely successful (Feldman et al., 2008).

Monitoring one's present state of happiness could also be problematic as it could lead to higher feelings of disappointment and a decreased ability to savor and appreciate moments of positive emotion. Research has found that participants who were asked to monitor their happiness while listening to music reported less happiness than those who did not monitor their happiness (Schooler et al., 2003).

In conclusion, this research found that two traits underlying the pursuit of happiness could induce or inhibit happiness. The aspiration to be happy increases an individual's tendency to set more intense and frequent goals for happiness. This process is highly moderated by

someone's ability to implement effective emotional regulation strategies. Recruiting unsuccessful strategies could backfire. Conversely, being concerned about happiness increases the likelihood of an individual being disappointed, and experiencing higher levels of negative emotion even during positive events.

From a neurochemistry standpoint, the neurotransmitter dopamine plays a significant role in controlling our reward and motivation systems. It gives us feelings of pleasure, satisfaction, and motivation. In a period where dopamine is so easily accessible through social media, pornography, processed foods, and recreational drugs, many individuals who abuse these harmful activities have irregular dopamine receptor sensitivities that can lead to low libido, motivation, and depression.

According to a study done by Wise & Robble, habitual reward-seeking, such as unconsciously taking a nicotine hit or even overeating, downregulates dopamine receptors. In fact, long-term desensitization of dopamine receptors will decrease the range of rewarding stimuli that are not stimulated by existing habits. This consequence could lead to long-term health issues, such as addiction not only to drugs but also to reliance on unhealthy habits that will not make individuals happy but rather keep them from being unhappy. Furthermore, the decrease in the range of rewarding stimuli can lead individuals to engage in more risky and unhealthy behaviors to seek the reward, such as gambling addiction or drug overdose (Wise & Robble, 2020).

From the available data, we can see that happiness is fleeting and cannot be a sustainable pursuit that guarantees long-term well-being. The pursuit of pleasure, especially when obtained without effort or worthiness, can inhibit our ability to truly savor and appreciate moments of happiness. Although humans should not be in a constant state of suffering, we need the feeling of

movement forward, which gives us motivation and a sense of accomplishment. This feeling of progress can be broad, and everyone's goals can be different, whether they are physical, emotional, spiritual, or social.

To promote sustainable well-being and reduce the constant pursuit of fleeting pleasure, I propose integrating designated periods of intentional breaks from dopamine-seeking activities. Many individuals may observe that even during routine tasks—such as using the bathroom, showering, brushing teeth, cooking, or eating—they often seek additional stimulation, like scrolling through social media, watching videos, or playing games. It is not uncommon for some to struggle to recall the last time they engaged in such simple activities without the accompaniment of digital distractions.

The continuous pursuit of immediate gratification can lead to an adaptation of baseline happiness levels, making even moments without external stimuli feel dull or unfulfilling. Over time, even with these distractions, individuals may find that their sense of happiness plateaus, as the hedonic treadmill catches up.

To counteract this, individuals are encouraged to implement practices that help resensitize their dopamine receptors and foster long-term satisfaction. This can include:

1. **Mindful Engagement:** Avoid mindless scrolling when bored and instead opt for meaningful activities that contribute to long-term satisfaction, such as organizing or cleaning.
2. **Balanced Consumption:** Limit indulgence in foods that provide short-term pleasure but impact energy and motivation negatively over time. While a sugary treat may offer momentary enjoyment, it can lead to sluggishness and decreased well-being afterward.

3. **Substance Moderation:** Refrain from using recreational substances for brief moments of euphoria, even if culturally accepted. While activities like drinking or recreational drug use may enhance a social experience temporarily, the aftermath often includes reduced motivation and overall well-being.
4. **Savoring Simplicity:** Take time to appreciate small, everyday moments without the distraction of technology. This could mean enjoying a walk outside, focusing on the natural environment, or eating a meal while fully engaging with the flavors rather than pairing it with a digital distraction.

These practices encourage individuals to build resilience, enhance their long-term happiness, and create a more balanced approach to daily living.

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