

The Science of Happiness

Scientists never could explain this feeling. Now, for the first time, researchers unveil how you can be happier.

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The Pursuit of Happiness

Researchers unveil the mechanisms of pleasure and happiness. How can these new findings improve your life?

It's like a carrot hanging from a stick right there in front of you. The pursuit of happiness is the force that drives each of us onwards. In this way, we go about building our lives.

Happiness is a trick. A trick of nature conceived over millions of years with one specific aim: to deceive you. Here is the rationale: when we do something that increases our chances of procreation or survival, we feel good... so good that this feeling makes us eager to repeat the experience time and time again. This never-ending pursuit of things that make us happy, in the end, increases our chances of transmitting our genes. "The laws governing happiness were designed not for our psychological well-being but for our genes' long-term survival prospects" says writer and psychologist Robert Wright, in an article published in Time Magazine.

The pursuit of happiness is the fuel that makes the world go round – this pursuit makes us study, work, have faith, build houses, accomplish things, save money, make friends, fight, get married, get divorced, have kids and protect them. The idea of happiness convinces us that each of these achievements is the most important thing in the world and gives us strength to fight for all this. At each victory, a new need arises. Happiness is a carrot hanging from a stick tied to our body. Occasionally, with a huge effort, we manage to bite a little piece of the carrot, but it keeps on hanging mouth-wateringly in front of us, pushing us ahead. Happiness is a trick.

It so happens that we have been taking this trick too seriously. We are living in a time in which happiness is an obligation – unhappy people are unwanted, seen as losers, as a failure. The disease of the day is depression. "Depression in the ailment of a society that decided to be happy, at any price", says the French writer Pascal Bruckner, author of *L'Euphorie Perpétuelle*. Many of us are trying too hard to show our happiness to others – and suffering on the inside because of this. Happiness is becoming a burden: a terrible source of anxiety.

This subject has always been considered unimportant by scientists. However, over the last decade, a growing number of researchers, many influenced by the ideas of philosophers and religious icons, have been putting a lot of work into deciphering the secrets of happiness. The idea is to finally unmask this trick of nature, to understand what makes us more or less happy as well as the best way to deal with the anxiety caused by this never-ending chase. In the following pages we shall see what has already been found.

Three paths

One of the reasons why happiness is so hard to achieve is that often we don't even know what we are talking about (see some attempts to define it in the box in page 52). Hence the importance of the research performed by American psychologist Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania. Seligman concluded that

happiness is, in fact, the sum of three different components: pleasure, engagement and meaning.

Pleasure: You know exactly what this one is. We are talking about that feeling that takes over our bodies when we dance while listening to good music, hear a funny story, talk to a friend, have sex or eat chocolate. An easy way to identify if someone is enjoying a pleasant moment is to look for a smile or bright eyes. Engagement, however, is how deeply one is involved with their own life. An engaged person is someone who is absorbed by their activities, who plays an active role in their own life. Finally, meaning is the feeling that our life is part of a bigger picture.

By dividing happiness into three parts, it becomes easier to define our goals. "Pursuit of happiness" is a very vague aim, and such an undefined objective makes it difficult for us even to figure out where to start. Yet the task becomes much easier if one is aware that it is enough to put these three things together – pleasure, engagement and meaning, so happiness comes with the package, as a free gift. Seligman believes that one of the greatest mistakes of contemporary western societies is concentrating the pursuit of happiness on only one of the three pillars, forgetting the other two. Oftentimes, when we do that, we choose precisely the weakest of all three: pleasure. "Engagement and meaning are much more important" he said in an interview with Time Magazine. So, how can we achieve them? (Take a look at some practical tips on how to be happier, in the box to the right).

Let's start with engagement. Some people are capable of engaging to everything: they dive, head first, into romances, dedicate themselves to their jobs, all the time. This is rare and it is not always a beneficial attitude (especially because extremely engaged people tend to neglect other aspects of life, especially pleasure). Nobody needs to go this far, but the effort of paying attention to the world and taking part in life is really worthwhile.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a researcher at the University of Chicago, United States, studies a brain state that he calls "the flow". This happens when engagement in an activity is so intense that it brings that pleasant feeling of being so absorbed in what you're doing that you forget the world and lose track of time. In other words, it is a state of almost complete happiness. This phenomenon occurs with monks when they meditate, but also in much more trivial situations, like playing an instrument, riding a bike or even fixing a shelf at home. Richard Davidson, of the University of Wisconsin, is another American researcher who observed in the lab that people in the "flow" activated a brain area called the left prefrontal lobe, which can have many effects in the organism, including a better functioning of the immunological system. During a nine-year study in the Netherlands, people who experimented constant moments of flow had a 50% lower risk of death as they reacted better to diseases.

And how do we attain this flow? Csikszentmihalyi believes that the secret is to go for activities in which you can use all your talent. This activity must be challenging: not so easy that you get bored, nor too difficult, which would be frustrating. Going for activities like this is rewarding and brings high levels of happiness. Of course, not everyone is lucky enough to find challenges like this in their jobs. In this case, a hobby can help in this search for engagement and for moments of flow – it can be either a manual or intellectual activity, or even a sport.

Finally, the third pillar of happiness is meaning. The traditional way to find this is through religion. For thousands of years, mankind has found solace in the belief that each one of us is part of something bigger. Research has proven that religious people consider themselves, on average, happier than non religious individuals – they also suffer less from depression and anxiety, and are less likely to commit

suicide. The belief that God is watching us, in the words of the psychologist and scholar of religion Michael McCullough, of the University of Miami, is like “the equivalent, on a huge scale, of thinking ‘If I can’t pay my rent at the end of the month, my dad will help’”. In other words, it is a comfort, a guarantee that, in the end, injustice will be corrected and our efforts recognised.

Picture caption:

Relationships make us happy. Sometimes, a deep love or a true friendship gives us a sample of the taste of the carrot. But don't delude yourself: it won't last forever!

Figure:

Recipe for Happiness

These methods for attaining greater happiness were laboratory tested and have proven infallible.

Pleasure

- *Allow yourself some sensory pleasure from time to time. It's not about strong emotions. Most of life's pleasures are quite simple: talking with a friend, admiring a beautiful landscape, eating something delicious.*
- *Take “mental pictures” of the pleasant moments in your life – pay attention to details, colours, aromas. When you face a difficult period, try to remember all these things.*
- *Have a companion. Almost everybody feels happier when they are with other people. Of course it doesn't mean avoiding solitude at all costs, but it's really important to have friends.*

Engagement

- *Dedicate yourself to everything you do, at work or elsewhere. Remember: the difference between an annoying job and a rewarding one can be your attitude towards it. If you get more involved, it can become more fun.*
- *Find a challenging activity, a difficult one, and struggle to improve at it, day by day. Yoga, model aeroplanes, computer games, swimming, playing the flute, mountain biking, vegetarian cooking, playing the drums: there are options for all personality types.*
- *Work out. The practice of sports on a regular basis increases one's zest for life in general and keeps us more tuned into the world and our own body. Some researchers suggest that laughing is a very good exercise.*

Meaning

- *Research shows that writing down, in a diary, the things for which you are grateful guarantees an increase in happiness levels that lasts for six weeks. So, from time to time, remember to be thankful for everything you have.*
- *Practice altruistic or kind acts. Collaborate with a humanitarian institution, teach something you know (it doesn't matter if you are teaching how to write or how to play the guitar), go out of your way to help somebody.*
- *If there's anyone that was important to you, even if in the distant past, make them aware of it, preferably in a face to face conversation. Scientists say that paying this “gratitude visit” can be worth a month of happiness.*

Yet religion is not the only way to bring meaning to your life. An efficient trick to heighten one's level of happiness is to do something good for others – visit an orphanage, help a child to do their homework, buy someone a useful gift. This is not just psychobabble. Seligman has measured, in his laboratory, the effects of altruism and concluded that just one selfless action can effectively increase one's

happiness levels for up to two months. Five good deeds a week significantly enhanced the subjects' *joie de vivre* – and when all five were performed on the same day, the benefit was even greater. You can also achieve meaning by constructing something that will outlive you. The classic example is raising children. Another tip is to believe that your life is important for some great cause: history, science, social justice, democracy, freedom, progress or nature. In other words, it's useful to believe in something, even if it's not God.

In conclusion, there is a rule about which all the specialists agree: having friends (and it doesn't have to be a large group) helps people to be happy. Friends count towards all three criteria: they bring, at the same time, pleasure, engagement and meaning to our lives.

Figure:

The Recipe for Unhappiness

If you really want to be happy, you must convince yourself that none of these are the solutions.

- Money

It certainly brings happiness: but only until your basic needs are fulfilled. Thereafter, more money doesn't alter the level of satisfaction. An exaggerated focus on material things will make your life devoid of meaning.

- Marriage

Conditioning happiness to factors over which you have no control is definitely a bad idea. Besides, a marriage has nothing to do with a perennial state of happiness. There are highs and lows, as with everything else in life.

- Future

"I'll be happy when I finish paying for my apartment". It's important to have goals, but believing that happiness is in the future just postpones its realization. Not to mention that, after paying the mortgage, it's quite probable that you'll come up with a new goal, even more difficult to achieve.

- New Car

Our consumerist culture and ubiquitous advertising create new needs all the time. Maybe the old car still works fine, but you convince yourself that you can't live without the larger model, released this month.

- Beauty

This is another case of unrealistic expectations. Firstly, it's impossible to have a perfect body and face. Secondly, because none of this would guarantee that you live happily ever after. Ask the top model Gisele Bündchen if she doesn't have moments of suffering.

- Status

Prioritising status symbols indicates that you're more concerned with other people than with yourself. A penthouse apartment facing the beach is good because of the wonderful view. Not because it will make your friends envy you to death.

Unhappiness is necessary

Ok, we already have the recipe for happiness. All we have to do now is bring together pleasure, engagement and meaning, and our life will be complete forever, isn't that right? Oh, if only it was that simple. Happiness, as poets and party-poopers never cease to repeat, is brief. Thank goodness! By definition, happiness is a condition in which we don't want to change a thing. In other words, if we spent

too much time feeling like this, our lives would become stuck. The pursuit of happiness is what drives us – if we could grab the carrot, we would stop running and the whole game would lose its appeal. So, a little anxiety and a bit of dissatisfaction are perfectly healthy.

“Happiness is designed to evaporate”, wrote Robert Wright. According to him, evolution is the reason this statement is true: “if the joy that comes after sex never ended, then animals would copulate once in their lifetime”. There lies one of the greatest problems nowadays. There are a lot of people thinking that we can live an entire existence of ‘highs’, with no ‘lows’, with no sorrow or suffering. Some of these people are willing to achieve this with absolutely no effort, just relying on antidepressants.

It may sound like a scientist’s diatribe, but some religious leaders, especially Buddhists, have been bearing similar tidings for a long time. One of their basic precepts is that “life is suffering”. What a downer, right? Maybe, but understanding that suffering is inevitable can help bring happiness and surely decreases anxiety. The Dalai Lama’s advice is that, when things are looking bad, instead of surrendering to unhappiness or merely trying to minimize the symptoms, you should take a deep breath and try to figure out the reason for what’s happening.

According to His Holiness, the most of our pain is created by ourselves, by our lack of ability to cope with sadness and by the feeling that we are obliged to be eternally happy. By facing the pain face to face and identifying its real causes, you will be taking a giant leap towards self-knowledge, which will allow you to understand what your real objectives in life are, what your values are. Using Seligman’s terminology, this self knowledge will clarify what kind of activity brings you pleasure, engagement and meaning. That is, these bad moments bring the conditions you need in order to pursue your own realization – individual, personal and non-transferable.

Picture caption:

More and more, westerners base their lives on the accumulation of material goods. Beware: it can make the stick bearing the carrot longer and longer.

Each to his own

This is the nub of the question. There’s no formula for happiness that can work for everyone – and that’s exactly where the self-help books usually fail. Everyone is different, and reacts to life in a different way. That was the conclusion of the study performed in 1996 by researcher David Lykken of the University of Minnesota. He compared data concerning 4000 pairs of identical twins and noticed that, in most cases, when one of them tended to see life in an optimistic way, the other had the same approach to life – and when one was pessimistic, the other was too. This is no big surprise. Any parent knows that some kids are born with a predisposition to smile, while others are simply much more difficult to please.

In recent years, considerable evidence has appeared, showing that we tend to maintain a constant “level of happiness” throughout our lives – and not even big events seem capable of abruptly altering this level. One example comes from research conducted by psychologist Richard Lucas of the University of Michigan. Lucas spent 15 years interviewing married and single people in Germany and asking them to rate, on a scale of 0 to 10, their level of happiness. Single people achieved an average of 7.28. When they got married, this number increased significantly, reaching around 8.5. However, two years later, their average was exactly 7.28 again. This suggests that, in the long run, marriage doesn’t seem to change – for better or worse – one’s level of happiness.

The same is true for other radically life-changing events – for better or for worse. A 1978 study with lottery winners showed that these lucky individuals have peaks of happiness right after winning the prize yet they tend to go back to previous levels some months afterwards. Something similar seems to happen to people who are paralysed after an accident. They go through a period of unhappiness but after two months they recover happiness levels almost as high as before the accident.

These data lead some specialists to affirm that happiness is something immutable. Eight years ago, the researcher Lykken caused a controversy when he publicly declared that “apparently, efforts to become happier are as useless as trying to grow taller”. Today he admits that this declaration was, to say the least, exaggerated. Apparently, a better analogy to explain happiness is to compare it with weight. Each one of us has a specific biotype – a tendency to be more or less fat. But of course our habits and the way we behave have a big influence on what shows on the scales. The same thing happens with happiness: we naturally tend towards a specific level, yet dieting really works.

Figure:

Gross National Happiness

The Netherlands are the happiest country in the world. But Brazil is looking good too.

“A country’s ‘Gross National Happiness’ is more important than its ‘Gross National Product’”. This sentence was uttered in the seventies by Jigme Singye Wangchuck king of Bhutan, a small Buddhist country squeezed between China and India. Following Wangchuck’s ideas, maybe the most important indicator of all is that measured by the research led by the American expert Ed Diener. People from several corners of the world were asked to rate their own happiness.

The results were quite fascinating. At first: it was clear that rich countries have high levels of happiness. All nations with per capita income higher than US\$ 20,000 had scores higher than 8. All who scored more than 9 were rich. Yet rich people were not the only ones smiling. Our Latin America also obtained good scores, despite its poverty. Most notable was Colombia – precisely the country most beset by drug trafficking and civil war. Brazil appeared less happy than Argentina and Uruguay, a surprising result for those who believe in the stereotype portrayed by carnival.

But our results weren’t bad at all.

A matter of desire

An example of how much we can alter our genetic predisposition to happiness is the way we deal with our desires. There are two ways to achieve happiness: having more or wanting less. If happiness is the carrot, the stick from which it dangles is what we call desire. Lately, we’ve been growing longer and longer sticks.

Look at the case of rich countries. “In the United States and Europe, there’s a general feeling of disappointment, because people are becoming aware that the satisfaction brought by society and material goods is limited” says the economist and philosopher Eduardo Giannetti, author of the book *“Felicidade”*. In the United States, since the end of World War II, all economic indicators have been steadily improving. Per capita income has tripled, the size of houses has doubled, and access to material goods has grown so much that today garages have more cars than the country has people. Nevertheless, the national index of happiness hasn’t grown one iota. The USA National Opinion Research Center has periodically interviewed Americans since the fifties – and the results have been exactly the same for all these years (a third consider themselves “very happy”).

There's a reason for that: Americans want more and more. Their desires never cease to grow. In other words, the carrot is becoming tastier and tastier, but also more and more distant. Growing demands are an essential condition to keep the economy running. The capitalist rationale is to create needs and then satisfy those needs – it's not a coincidence that this land of malcontents is the richest country in the world. We need things as soon as they become available and this is true for products as well as ideas. When we take a look at magazine covers and we see beautiful people, with make up and streamlined bodies, or when we see unbelievably modern sound systems on TV, it becomes really hard to remain satisfied with our average appearance and with our old but trusty walkman. It so happens that happiness is not linked to material things. Ed Diener of the University of Illinois, who has been investigating this subject for 25 years, has assessed the happiness levels of the 400 richest people in the world, according to Forbes Magazine, and came to the conclusion that they are strictly on a par with the Massai shepherds in Africa.

Picture caption:

The professional side occupies a considerable portion of our lives. Of course it's important to have a life outside the workplace, but happy people tend to be those who find pleasure, engagement and meaning in their jobs.

Just to further complicate things, we have more and more options as each day goes by. There was a time when we had three kinds of shampoo on the supermarket shelf: for normal, dry or oily hair. It was easy to pick up one and go home certain of having made the right choice. But when you stand before a myriad of brands and prices of shampoo, each specially developed for split ends, curly, thin, dark, coloured, bleached or damaged hair, then you cannot be so sure that you're buying the right product. The same thing happens when it's time to buy a car, toothpaste or frozen food, not to mention when you must choose a boyfriend or a career. "Many people just get paralysed in the face of so many options" says the American psychologist Barry Schwartz in his book "The Paradox of Choice". This generates a considerable cause of frustration and anxiety.

In the year 2000, Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper, psychologists at Columbia and Stanford respectively, set up two tasting booths in a grocery store. In one of them there were 24 types of jam, and in the other, only 6. The number of clients who bought something was ten times greater in the stand with fewer options, even though the other one had attracted 50% more customers. Why did this happen? Schwartz suggests that in cases like this, people intuitively evaluate the "opportunity costs": choosing one of the options implies that you are foregoing all other possibilities. When there are hundreds of possibilities, picking one means "losing" much more. And, in today's world, when everyone has free access to the whole world via the Internet and there are almost no limits to our desires, it seems inevitable that we become anxious – and miserable.

While researching the subject, the psychologists found behaviour patterns that allow us to divide people into two groups: those who are trying to make satisfactory choices, not aiming to reach perfection, and those who cannot rest until they find "the best option of all". People in the second group tend to make better choices, of course. But the ones in the first group are happier with the decisions they made. "One solution could be limiting the number of options, or improving the way we make choices", says Schwartz.

So far, so good. But do we really know how to pick the best options for our lives? According to researchers Daniel Gilbert, Tim Wilson, George Lowenstein and Daniel Kahneman, the answer is "no". Decisions are made based on our predictions of how each option will affect our lives. Nevertheless, according to them, we have huge difficulty in evaluating the capacity of an event to make us happy or unhappy.

We overestimate the intensity and duration of our emotional reactions, whilst at the same time underestimating our ability to adapt even to extreme situations. Remember the case of lottery winners and paralysed victims of accidents, who soon regained their normal level of happiness? Well then, we are able to adapt to almost everything. We lend too much importance to decisions that are not as important as they seem and we forget that a “wrong” choice is not the end of the world. It’s just a matter of establishing limits to our desires. In other words, being happy is a lot simpler than you might imagine.

Simple? So explain it

The main idea is: don’t take things too seriously. “Lightness” is the key word. It doesn’t mean that all of us should paint a smile on our faces and start thinking that everything that happens is wonderful. Lightness means understanding that even the best sensations come to an end, as there is no annoyance that lasts forever. You should not turn yourself into a cheerful fool: sometimes circumstances make us react in a negative way, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

Gianetti calls attention to the difference between “being happy” and “remaining happy”. “There are people who lead a life full of pleasant moments, but who have no direction in life nor higher calling. At the other extreme are those ones who fail to stay happy because they only think about the future and living too cautiously”. Maybe the best path is half way between these two extremes. Reaching this balance is no mean feat and unfortunately there is no magic formula or instruction manual. The key is to pay attention to yourself and change bit by bit. “Mental transformations are not easy and they take time. They demand a constant effort”, advises the Dalai Lama.

Happiness is not an end in itself but rather a consequence of the way you live your life. People who look for complicated recipes and formulae for how to get there end up losing track of the small pleasures and joys. What defines someone’s level of happiness is his or her day-to-day behaviour and the way they react to the most banal situations. In summary, a guaranteed way to become happier is to worry less about being happy.

Figure:

<p>Happiness is... With the exception of “love”, this is the most difficult word to define. Take a look at some attempts</p> <p>...“to live in peace and harmony” Buddhist vision</p> <p>...“the activity of the soul guided by virtue” Aristotle, Greek philosopher (384-322 B.C.)</p> <p>...“good health and a bad memory” Ingrid Bergman, Swedish actress (1915-1982)</p> <p>...“brief. Never call a mortal ‘happy’ until you see how he goes to his grave” Euripedes, Greek playwright (480-406 B.C.)</p> <p>...“a mystery like religion, and should never be rationalized” Gilbert Keith Chesterton, British writer (1874-1936)</p> <p>...“something that we won’t achieve in this world, but only after salvation” Christian vision</p>
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..."an imaginary condition, formerly attributed by the living to the dead, now usually attributed by adults to children and by children to adults"

Thomas Szasz, Hungarian psychiatrist (1920-)

..."not achieved by the conscious pursuit of happiness; it is generally the by-product of other activities"

Aldous Huxley, British writer (1894-1963)

"the way. So, there's no path to happiness"

Mahatma Gandhi, Indian nationalist leader (1869-1948)

Picture caption:

What if you, just for a moment, stop running after happiness? Maybe you bump into it at the very moment you stop looking so hard.