

The What and How of Happiness

A variety of biological, psychological, religious, and philosophical approaches have striven to define happiness and identify its sources.

Philosophers and religious thinkers often define happiness in terms of living a good life, or flourishing, rather than simply as an emotion. Happiness in this sense was used to translate the Greek word 'Eudaimonia'. But while most people would agree that a life of happiness or flourishing is desirable, the really difficult question is to specify just what sort of activities enable one to live well.

One important move in Greek philosophy to answer the question of how to achieve happiness is to bring in another important concept in ancient philosophy, 'arete' (virtue). The philosopher Aristotle, for example, wrote that the good or happy life is one of "virtuous activity in accordance with reason". However, it is important to bear in mind that the sense of 'virtue' operative in ancient ethics is not exclusively moral and includes more than states such as wisdom, courage and compassion. The sense of virtue which 'arete' connotes would include saying something like "speed is a virtue in a horse", or "height is a virtue in a basketball player". The alternative translation 'excellence' might be helpful in conveying this general meaning of the term to a modern audience. It is also interesting to note that for Aristotle, 'eudaimonia' actually requires activity, or action, so that it is not sufficient for a person to possess an ability or disposition that he or she does not use.

Another Greek philosopher, Epicurus, explained happiness in a different way. Epicurus' ethical theory is hedonistic. Hedonism is the view that pleasure is the only intrinsic good and that pain is the only intrinsic bad. He understands happiness as a more or less continuous experience of pleasure and the freedom from pain and distress. However, it is important to understand that Epicurus does not advocate the pursuit of any and every pleasure. Rather, he recommends a policy whereby pleasures are maximised "in the long run". Specifically, Epicurus claims that some pleasures are not worth having because they lead to greater pains, and some pains are worthwhile when they lead to greater pleasures. The best strategy for attaining a maximal amount of pleasure overall is not to seek instant gratification but to work out a sensible long term policy.

More recently, writers and thinkers have continued to discuss the pursuit of happiness and the good life. In the 1930s Abraham Maslow, an American professor of psychology, created a visual aid to explain his own theory on the subject. The idea, which he called the 'hierarchy of needs', is a pyramid depicting the levels of human needs, starting from the basic need for food and shelter. When a human being ascends the steps of the pyramid, he reaches self-actualisation.

Since the 1960s, research has produced many different views on causes of happiness, and on factors that correlate with happiness. Sonja Lyubomirsky concludes in her book 'The How of Happiness' that 50 percent of a given human's happiness level is genetically determined (based on twin studies), 10 percent is affected by life circumstances and situation, and a remaining 40 percent of happiness is subject to self-control. Leda Cosmides and John Tooby say that happiness comes from "encountering unexpected positive events", while according to Mark Leary, as reported in a November 1995 issue of Psychology Today, "we are happiest when basking in the acceptance and praise of others".

Richard Davidson's 2012 bestseller 'The Emotional Life of Your Brain' argues that positive emotion and happiness benefit your long-term health. A study conducted in 2005 by Andrew Steptow and Michael Marmot found that happiness is clearly related to biological markers that play an important role in health. Steptow and Marmot collected health and well-being data from 116 men and 100 women. Interestingly, the participants who rated themselves the least happy had cortisol (a hormone related to stress) levels that were 48% higher than those who rated themselves as the most happy.

In spite of this finding and the plethora of research into every conceivable aspect of happiness, it seems that we are no closer than the ancient Greeks were to achieving it at a societal level. In fact, levels of stress and mental illness seem to suggest the opposite. Perhaps instead of studying the minutiae of happiness, we should simply follow Aristotle's advice and strive to 'do and live well'.

Questions 1 to 6

Match each of the following statements with the name of a writer or philosopher from the box below. Write the correct letter, A to E, for each statement.

NB. You may use any letter more than once.

1. Genes play a considerable role in each person's level of happiness.
2. The pursuit of happiness requires taking a long-term view of what is good for us.
3. Being unhappy can affect a chemical in the human body.
4. We are happy when other people say nice things about us.
5. Happiness cannot be achieved without action.
6. Negative experiences are sometimes valuable because they lead to future happiness.

- A) Aristotle
 - B) Epicurus
 - C) Sonja Lyubomirsky
 - D) Mark Leary
 - E) Andrew Steptow and Michael Marmot

Correct answers:

1. C
2. B
3. E
4. D
5. A
6. B

For more matching practice, click on the links below.

[Academic reading, matching](#)

[General reading, matching](#)

Note:

I recommend that you try both of the exercises above. The techniques are the same for both the academic and general tests.