

The Quest for Happiness

Handout 2

According to David Myers, a happiness researcher, money does not buy happiness. Rich people are no more happy than people with average incomes. In addition, older people are neither less nor more happy than young people. And men have no advantage over women. So who is happy?

Only about 10 to 15 percent of Americans identify themselves as truly happy. Certain personality traits, such as extroversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness, are related to happiness. However, in the right situation, anyone can be happy.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has observed that people are most satisfied with life when their work and leisure life provide them opportunity to use their skills. Somewhere between the anxiety of being overwhelmed and the apathy of being bored is the ideal mix called “flow.” Happy people have more flow. They are appropriately challenged in ways that allow them to personally contribute.

Individuals who are happy are also supported by close relationships with family members, friends and fellow employees. Such relationships help fulfill our need to belong to something bigger than ourselves.

Finally, happy people are more likely to be involved in a faith community. A Gallup survey found people who responded with the highest scores on spiritual commitment were twice as likely to declare they were very happy. Other research has suggested those with deep religious faith are less vulnerable to depression and more resilient during times of crisis. Meyers notes that religion is usually practiced communally, involving “the fellowship of kindred spirits” and “the bearing of one another’s burdens.”

So, if happiness is your goal, forget the lottery tickets. Instead, take a friend to lunch. Help a fellow worker. Set your sights on a challenge and enjoy the experience. Look to your network of friends and family. Use your skills to make a difference at home and at work. To strengthen your personal happiness and add to the joyfulness of your family experience, try some of the following:

1. **Work on something challenging.** Hard work can be fulfilling when we can see and believe in the purpose of the task. What challenging task can you take on?
2. **Do something for others.** Service helps to connect us with others. It shows we care for others and helps them care for us. Service builds relationships. How can you help a coworker or serve a child?



3. **Smile often.** It has been said that if you smile, the world smiles with you. Enthusiasm is contagious to children and adults. Having a cheerful disposition can dramatically influence how people interact with us. When we are happy, we draw people to us and develop a greater support system. Even a brief exchange of smiles connects us momentarily to others. So make a point to smile. Remember that, “enthusiasm is caught not taught.”
4. **Join a group.** Participating in a club, a church group or community group can create many opportunities. It can broaden your network of relationships, provide opportunities for service and provide a meaningful cause or purpose to which you can contribute your skills. Of course, your work group can also lend valuable support. Would you benefit from joining a group or increasing your participation in a group to which you already belong?
5. **Give someone a break.** Recognize that sometimes things won't be done to your pleasing. You may be cut off by an unthinking driver. Or someone may have forgotten your special day. Provide helpful feedback if needed, but don't be disagreeable. Don't harbor ill feelings. Don't process it over and over again. Forgive, forget and move on.
6. **Try to keep things in perspective.** Life's little nuisances are minor when compared to the big stuff. So give yourself or someone else a break. Keep things in perspective and count your blessings.
7. **Take care of yourself.** Optimizing your mental health requires that you also take care of yourself physically. Eating right, getting enough sleep and exercising regularly can reduce stress and help you enjoy life more fully.

Smile: A Point of Physiology

A point of physiology
Most recently I heard.
Had I not researched myself
I'd thought it most absurd.
From the corner of each person's mouth,
And down into their heart,
There runs two little threads of string
That tug each person's heart.
So when things are looking bad,
And your spirit's at a low,
Smile and give those strings a tug,
And feel your spirit grow.
Build those smiley muscles.
Tug often at those threads.
Cause if you wait too long,
Your heart will weigh as lead.
I know it sounds a little strange,
But I tell you that it's true.
There's power in a smile,
So smile when you are blue.

- S. Dennis

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