

Happiness is the prototype of the positive emotions. As many a thinker since Aristotle has said, everything we do is ultimately aimed at experiencing happiness. We don't really want wealth, or health, or fame as such—we want these things

because we hope that they will make us happy. But happiness we seek not because it will get us something else, but for its own sake. If happiness is really the bottom line of life, what do we know about it?

Until mid-century, psychologists were reluctant to study happiness because the reigning behaviorist paradigm in the social sciences held that subjective emotions were too flimsy to be proper subjects of scientific research. But as the "dust-bowl empiricism" in academia has cleared in the last few decades so that the importance of subjective experiences could again be recognized, the study of happiness has been pursued with renewed vigor.

What has been learned is both familiar and surprising. It is surprising, for instance, that despite problems and tragedies, all over the world people tend to describe themselves as much more happy than unhappy. In America, typically one-third of respondents from representative samples say that they are "very happy," and only one in ten that they are "not too happy." The majority rate themselves above the halfway mark, as "pretty happy." Similar results are reported from dozens of other countries. How can this be, when thinkers through the ages, reflecting on how short and painful life can be, have always told us that the world is a vale of tears, and we were not made to be happy? Perhaps the reason for the discrepancy is that prophets and philosophers tend to be perfectionists, and the imperfections of life offend them. Whereas the rest of humankind is glad to be alive, imperfections and all.

Of course there is a more pessimistic explanation, namely, that when people say they are pretty happy they are deceiving either the researcher who is taking the poll, or more likely, they are whistling in the dark. After all, Karl Marx has accustomed us to think that a factory worker can feel he is perfectly happy, but this subjective happiness is a self-deception that means nothing because objectively the worker is alienated by the system that exploits his labor. Jean-Paul

Sartre has told us that most people live with "false consciousness," pretending even to themselves that they are living in the best of all possible worlds. More recently Michel Foucault and the postmodernists have made it clear that what people tell us does not reflect real events, but only a style of narrative, a way of talking that refers only to itself. While these critiques of self-perception illuminate important issues that have to be recognized, they also suffer from the intellectual arrogance of scholars who believe their interpretations of reality should take precedence over the direct experience of the multitude. The profound doubts of Marx, Sartre, and Foucault notwithstanding, I still think that when a person says he is "pretty happy," one has no right to ignore his statement, or interpret it to mean the opposite.

Another set of familiar yet surprising findings has to do with the relationship between material well-being and happiness. As one would expect, people who live in nations that are materially better off and politically more stable rate themselves happier (e.g., the Swiss and Norwegians say they are happier than Greeks and Portuguese)—but not always (e.g., the poorer Irish claim to be happier than the wealthier Japanese). But within the same society there is only a very weak relationship between finances and satisfaction with life; billionaires in America are only infinitesimally happier than those with average incomes. And while personal income in the U.S. more than doubled between 1960 and the 1990s in constant dollars, the proportion of people saying they are very happy remained a steady 30 percent. One conclusion that the findings seem to justify is that beyond the threshold of poverty, additional resources do not appreciably improve the chances of being happy.

A number of personal qualities are related to how happy people describe themselves to be. For instance, a healthy extrovert with strong self-esteem, a stable marriage, and religious faith will be much more likely to say he is happy than a chronically ill, introverted, and divorced atheist with low

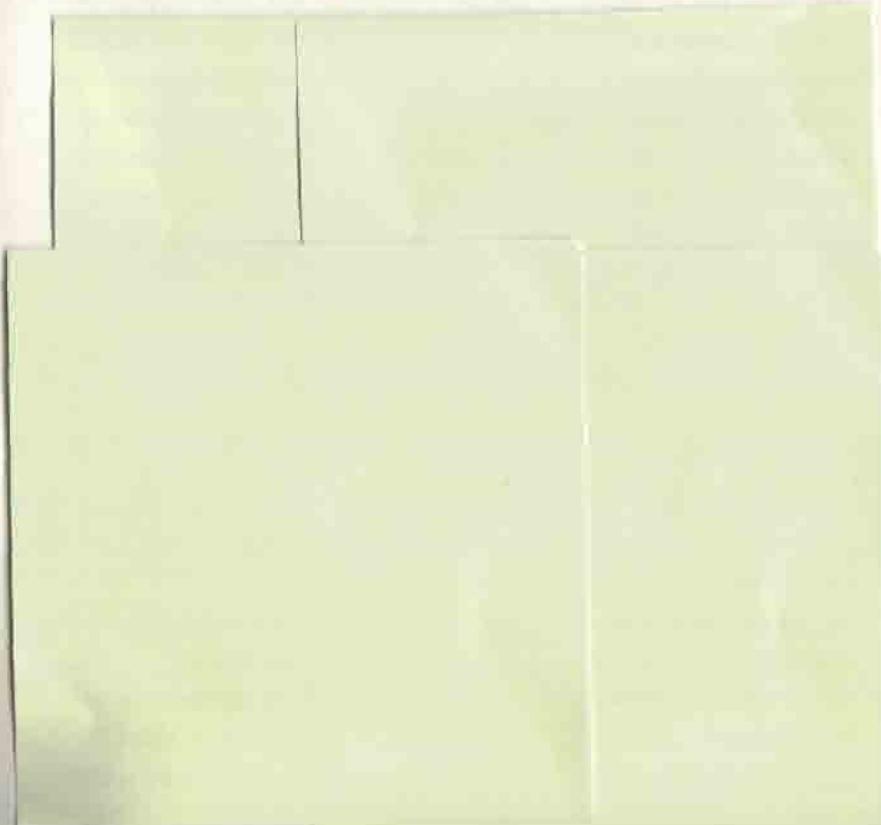
self-esteem. It is in looking at these clusters of relationships that the skepticism of the postmodernist critique might make sense. It is likely, for instance, that a healthy, religious person will construct a "happier" narrative about his or her life than one who is not, regardless of the actual quality of experience. But since we always encounter the "raw" data of experience through interpretive filters, the stories we tell about how we feel are an essential part of our emotions. A woman who says she is happy to work two jobs to keep a roof over her children's head is probably in fact happier than a woman who doesn't see why she should have to bother with even a single job.

But happiness is certainly not the only emotion worth considering. In fact, if one wants to improve the quality of everyday life, happiness may be the wrong place to start. In the first place, self-reports of happiness do not vary from person to person as much as other feelings do; no matter how empty a life otherwise might be, most persons will be reluctant to admit being unhappy. Furthermore, this emotion is more a personal characteristic than a situational one. In other words, over time some people come to think of themselves as happy regardless of external conditions, while others will become used to feeling relatively less happy no matter what happens to them. Other feelings are much more influenced by what one does, who one is with, or the place one happens to be. These moods are more amenable to direct change, and because they are also connected to how happy we feel, in the long run they might lift our average level of happiness.

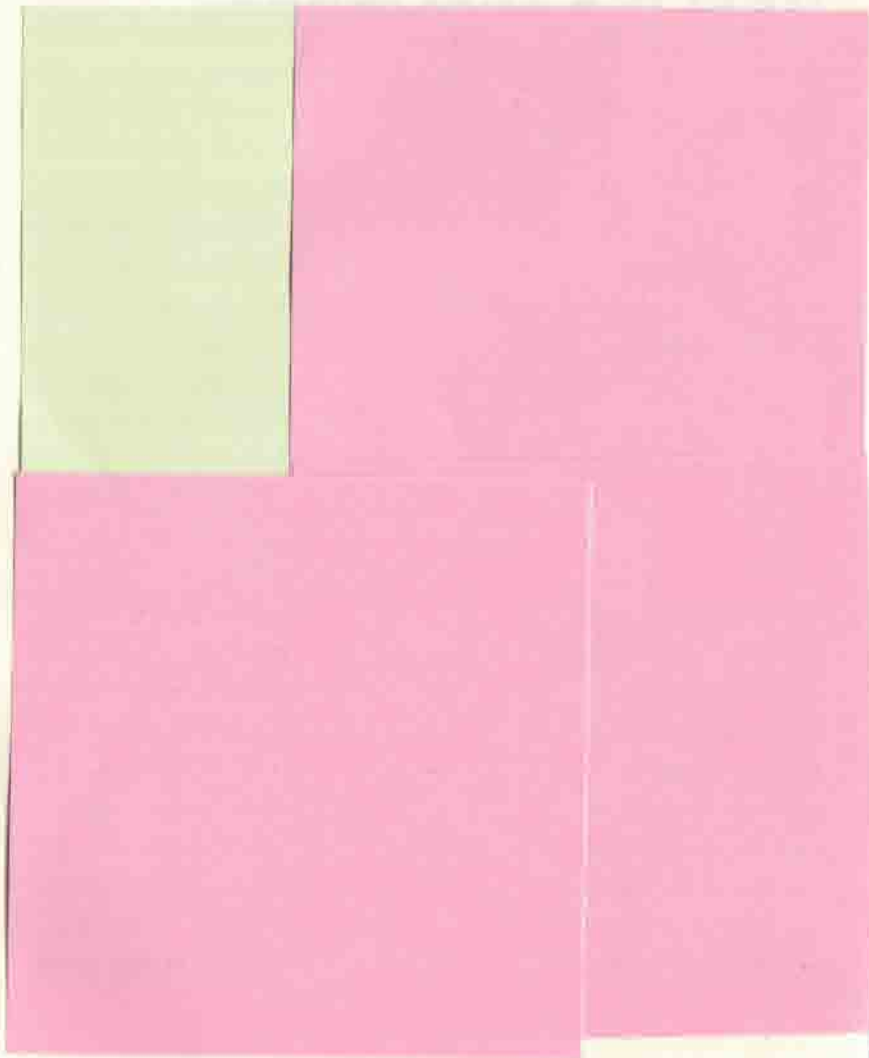
For instance, how active, strong, and alert we feel depends a lot on what we do—these feelings become more intense when we are involved with a difficult task, and they get more attenuated when we fail at what we try to do, or when we don't try to do anything. So these feelings can be directly affected by what we choose to do. When we feel active and strong we are also more likely to feel happy, so that in time

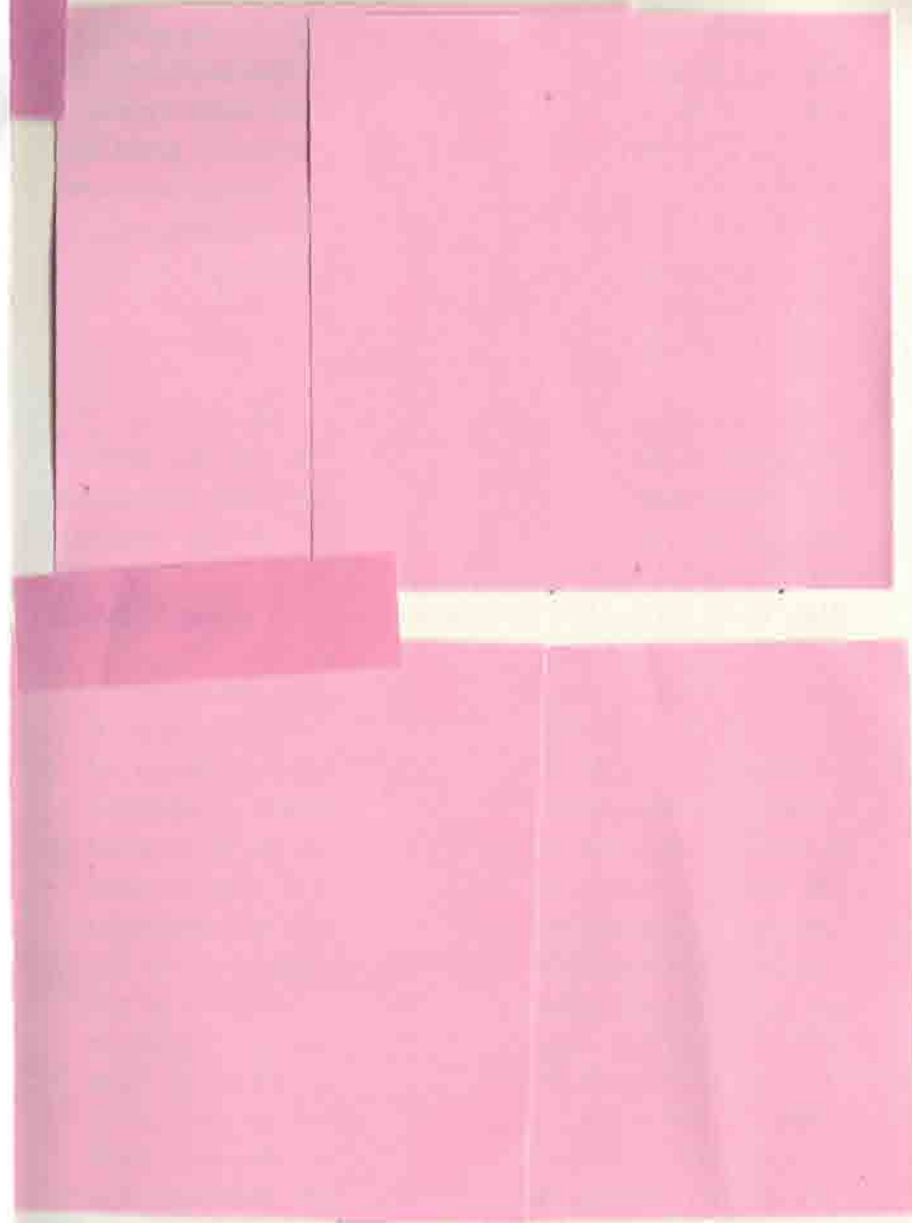
the choice of what we do will also affect our happiness. Similarly most people feel they are more cheerful and sociable when they are with others than when they are alone. Again, cheerfulness and sociability are related to happiness, which probably explains why extroverts on the average tend to be happier than introverts.

The quality of life does not depend on happiness alone, but also on what one does to be happy. If one fails to develop goals that give meaning to one's existence, if one does not use the mind to its fullest, then good feelings fulfill just a fraction of the potential we possess. A person who achieves contentment by withdrawing from the world to "cultivate his own garden," like Voltaire's *Candide*, cannot be said to lead an excellent life. Without dreams, without risks, only a trivial semblance of living can be achieved.



For instance, even though food is a source of good moods, we cannot achieve happiness by eating around the clock. Meals raise the level of happiness, but only when we spend around 5 percent of our waking time eating; if we spent 100 percent of the day eating, food would quickly cease to be rewarding. The same is true of most of the other good things in life: sex, relaxation, television watching, in small doses, tend to improve the quality of daily life considerably, but the effects are not additive; a point of diminishing returns is quickly reached.





A major feature of daily rhythms is going in and out of solitude. Over and over, our findings suggest that people get depressed when they are alone, and they revive when they re-join the company of others. Alone a person generally reports

low happiness, aversive motivation, low concentration, apathy, and an entire string of other negative states such as passivity, loneliness, detachment, and low self-esteem. Being alone affects most those individuals who have the fewest resources: those who have been unable to get an education, who are poor, single, or divorced. Pathological states are often invisible as long as the person is with others; they take effect mostly when we are alone. The moods that people diagnosed with chronic depression or with eating disorders experience are indistinguishable from those of healthy people—as long as they are in company and doing something that requires concentration. But when they are alone with nothing to do, their minds begin to be occupied by depressing thoughts, and their consciousness becomes entropic. This is also true, to a less pronounced extent, of everyone else.

The reason is that when we have to interact with another person, even a stranger, our attention becomes structured by external demands. The presence of the other imposes goals and provides feedback. Even the simplest interaction—like that of asking another person the correct time—has its own challenges, which we confront with our interpersonal skills. Our tone of voice, a smile, our bearing and demeanor are part of the skills we need in stopping a stranger on the street, and making a good impression. In more intimate encounters, the level of both challenges and skills can grow very high. Thus interactions have many of the characteristics of flow activities, and they certainly require the orderly investment of psychic energy. By contrast, when we are alone with nothing to do there is no reason to concentrate, and what happens then is that the mind begins to unravel, and soon finds something to worry about.

Being with friends provides the most positive experiences. Here people report being happy, alert, sociable, cheerful, motivated. This is especially true of teenagers, but it also holds for retired seniors in their seventies and eighties. The

importance of friendships on well-being is difficult to overestimate. The quality of life improves immensely when there is at least one other person who is willing to listen to our troubles, and to support us emotionally. National surveys find that when someone claims to have five or more friends with whom they can discuss important problems, they are 60 percent more likely to say that they are “very happy.”

Experience while with the family tends to be average, not as good as with friends, not as bad as when alone. But this average is also the result of wide swings; one can get extremely aggravated at home one moment and be thoroughly ecstatic the next. On the job, adults tend to have greater concentration and cognitive involvement, but they are more motivated when at home, and are happier there. The same holds true for children in school compared to home. Family members often experience their interactions differently from each other. For instance, when fathers are with their children, they typically report positive moods. So do their children up to grade 5. Afterwards, children report increasingly negative moods when with their fathers (at least until grade 8, after which there are no data available).

The strong effects of companionship on the quality of experience suggest that investing psychic energy in relationships is a good way to improve life. Even the passive, superficial conversations at a neighborhood bar can stave off depression. But for real growth, it is necessary to find people whose opinions are interesting and whose conversation is stimulating. A more difficult, but in the long run even more useful, skill to acquire is the ability to tolerate solitude, and to even enjoy it.