

## Week 7 – The Science of Happiness

This week we will delve into the science of happiness. Most of us desire to be happy, but we often pursue ways of being happy that are ineffective.

What is Happiness?

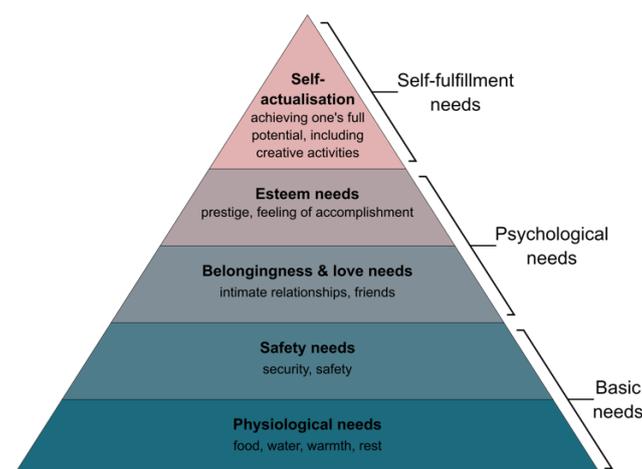
Happiness – a subjective feeling of well-being.

- a feeling ('affective') component - the experience of relatively frequent positive and relatively infrequent negative emotions
- a thinking ('cognitive') component - relatively high life satisfaction or a positive overall evaluation of one's life

Three general types of theories of happiness<sup>1</sup>:

1. Need and goal theories – pursuing and achieving appropriate goals will make you happy. Humans have essential needs to be happy e.g. human beings have basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000)
2. Genetic and personality disposition theories – your basic wiring determines your level of happiness possible, or how you might achieve happiness.
3. Process and activity theories – what is our potential to improve happiness by doing specific activities e.g. meditation and exercise are proven to improve happiness, as are activities such as performing acts of kindness, practicing gratitude and optimism.

Most academic research is on the first two of these areas, but the third is now becoming a greater focus of research. Many of us are familiar with Maslow's theory of happiness, which proposed a hierarchy of needs. In this theory, Maslow states we need to address lower orders of need before we can address higher needs.



<sup>1</sup> Nelson, S. K., Kurtz, J., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2015). What psychological science knows about achieving happiness. *Health, happiness, and well-being: Better living through psychological science*, 250-271.

At a population level, it's hard to argue that this theory has merit. It is very difficult to imagine ourselves thinking about achieving our potential when we don't have food, shelter or psychological or physical safety. There are some outliers however that the theory does not account for:

- Bhutan is a poor country which has high levels of happiness. In fact they have pioneered the measurement of happiness (Gross National Happiness) much like we measure our economy. There are four pillars of GNH:
  - sustainable and equitable socio-economic development;
  - environmental conservation;
  - preservation and promotion of culture; and
  - good governance.
- A survey of young people around the world found that young people in developing countries are twice as likely to feel happy as young people in developed countries. India was the most happy and Japan was the least (MTV, 2008).

Of course there is strong evidence to support Maslow's theories, with countries with advanced economies with strong social welfare systems (the Nordic countries, New Zealand and Australia) doing best in international rankings.

### **So what makes us happy?**

Well it's not money or property, beyond a basic level of comfort. There is something called 'Hedonic Adaptation'. Put simply the more we have, the more we want and the less subjectively happy we become.

Also there is little evidence that simply wanting or asking for happiness is effective. The world does not respond to such requests. Rather we need to reverse this - changing how we engage with the world leads to happiness, not the other way around.

But as we have discussed in previous weeks, to change our behaviour, we first need to change our thoughts!

Certainly having a sense of autonomy (of being 'in control' of our lives), competence ('I can cope with my situation') and Relatedness ('I care for others, and others care for me. I have a good circle of friends and I'm not lonely') are really important for happiness.

We all come with a certain set of pre-set mental predispositions or traits – introversion/extroversion (my comfort around strangers), neuroticism ('how much we worry about things') – which does define, to some extent, how easily we find happiness in life. There are strong genetic correlations, and conditions such as depression and anxiety make the journey more difficult. There is equally good evidence that these traits can change over a person's life, which leads us to think about how we might move ourselves into a greater state of happiness.

### **Improving our happiness.**

There are a variety of actions we can take to improve happiness. What ones are right for you depends on:

- Motivation and effort – people who invest in actions to be happy experience the most gain.
- Variety – doing a variety of activities appears to be important and more effective than doing only one thing.

- Timing – an example is that a study that compared people who ‘counted their blessings’ once per week were more positive than those who counted them three times per week. It seems it was a more fresh and therefore meaningful activity this way.
- Person-activity Fit – Activities that match a person’s personality, resources, goals, values, and preferences are more beneficial

### Happiness Practices

Physical Health and Exercise – Medical evidence is clear that regular exercise is important for health, as is getting enough sunshine (vitamin D) and regular sleep. Eating well, and avoiding alcohol and drugs are important factors in promoting a positive physical state of being.

Positive behaviours (e.g. social interaction) – avoiding negative relationships and interactions, having enough social interactions, are important in fostering a positive mental attitude.

Meditation – Mindfulness meditation promotes more positive mood states. Regular meditation promotes decreased Amygdala activity, an area of the brain associated with our stress reactions. Mindfulness also increases activity in the pre-frontal cortex, associated with increased concentration and decision making. The interconnectedness between parts of the brain also seem to be enhanced.

Practicing Gratitude – All of us have reasons to feel gratitude. We can think of the people who have helped us, the positive circumstances we find ourselves in. Even if we see life as a struggle, there are many people and aspects of our circumstances for which we should have a sense of gratitude. There are practices such as a gratitude journal that can remind us that we are in many ways blessed.

Practicing Altruism – One of the best ways to improve our happiness is to be altruistic and generous. It is truly better to give than to receive. Deliberate acts of altruism every day will leave to improvements in our happiness levels. These don’t have to be large and they don’t have to be acknowledged by others. It could be as simple as picking up rubbish along the street and disposing of it. It can be smiling to people as you pass them. If we do this consciously and with awareness, with no expectation of reward, it will improve the world, and also improve our life.

Developing Optimism – We have talked in previous weeks about non-attachment and expectations. A related concept is Optimism. If we see the world clearly, we realise that there is tremendous possibility for change. That if we have the right mindset, then we have no reason to be other than optimistic. If we follow a middle way (neither expecting everything to be lovely but also realising that nothing is completely bad), then we can see that we actually have a lot of ‘agency’ about our future. Nothing is so bad, as to be hopeless. When bad things happen, they can still be made into positives. Remember we can’t change the past, so don’t hang onto it. You can’t always have everything, so avoid grasping desire. Do this, and you will find yourself optimistic about your circumstances.

## Exercise

Recall someone who has been of great help to you in your life. Consider how your life is better because of their help. Develop a sense of gratitude for them.

Think about things that you are grateful for. It can be people, places or even just that we live in a country without war. Feel a sense of gratitude that you are in this place, that you know these people.

Think: like I have benefited from these things, so I also want to enable positive experiences for others. Affirm that regardless of your situation, you can choose to be altruistic in your day to day life.

Think of ways that you can be altruistic. Small ways and big ways. What would be the barriers to performing these altruistic acts. Be as authentic as possible. Are there ways you can remove these barriers? If not, think of something that you can do.

Decide what concrete actions you will take in the next 24 hours, and the next 7 days.

Develop a firm resolve to perform the altruistic actions that you have identified. Visualise the positive effect that these altruistic actions can have on the lives of others. Recall how the altruistic acts of others have aided you in your life. Imagine if everyone in the world was to do likewise.

Consider if everyone did the opposite – that they only cared for themselves and lacked gratitude for what they are given. Conclude that showing gratitude and being altruistic is also the most logical way to conduct ourselves.