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How Happiness Works: *A Look Inside Positive Psychology*

Psychology is a social science that seems to constantly find new knowledge with which a people can observe and interpret each other. Dating back to the early 1900s, when Sigmund Freud began studying the unconscious brain, behavioral psychologists also began understanding the cause and effects of depression and other mood disorders through the use of case studies, naturalistic observation, and experiments. And although researchers had found a way to measure the causes of depression, those same researchers thought that measuring the opposite end of the emotional spectrum—happiness—was unjustified and unreasonable. It wasn't until the 1980s that psychologists in the fields of social, cognitive, and behavioral psychology decided to search for the causes of happiness which a person could control. Today, measuring happiness, which has its own field of study: positive psychology is not only possible, but it also provides proof within human race's basic instinctual behaviors that happiness can be worked on and achieved. Since the field has been established researchers have progressed and now found better measurements of how one's happiness level increases, but the same question stands unanswered about positive psychology; the same question of what aspects of life created a happier, increased mood was still left unanswered for me. The question arose personally as I began to realize that I wasn't happy, and in fact I was clinically depressed, with the path my life had taken these last six months. The drive to understand the idea of happiness was for me a journey to explore and

capture what aspects of life needed to be changed in order to see myself become an overall more joyful person. Because of my slightly impulsive temperament as a child, wanting to find a quick fix was right up the alley of normal behaviors, but with some reading I soon learned that depression wasn't curable through impulsive behaviors, nor was it a quick fix. I found myself stuck without answers still. One late night I stumbled upon a documentary titled *Happy*, which explored the mysteries of happiness—how to find it, how to contain it, and how to control it. This film, by Roko Belic, surely didn't cure my depression, but it did influence and construct the beginning of a long investigation that would help me find the answers to my questions regarding happiness. I found early on through *Happy* that the answers lay in the aspects of a person's life that dictate his or her mood. Therefore I began to investigate further how and why finding, capturing, and ultimately maintaining happiness is difficult for both the professionals and individuals in society; and here is what I found.

Happiness has been defined more than once as the moment of self-actualization—"the need to live up to our own fullest and unique potential" (Myers 447), which therefore classifies the act of being happy as a pursuit; even more an exploration. A quote from an anonymous source stated on the documentary *Happy*, "The Constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it" which relates to the principle of self-actualization by classifying happiness not as a singular emotion, but more complexly the search for optimal unique potential. Further research founded by Abraham Maslow in his creation of the hierarchy of needs diagram shows present-day psychologists that a person's most basic needs of hunger, thirst, and shelter act as a major barrier in one's search for happiness while also dissecting the ideas behind money and happiness. Harvard graduate psychologist Daniel Gilbert, who is featured on the documentary *Happy*, explains money's relevance to both the

impoverished and the wealthy. As much as one would expect, money produces a significant effect on the impoverished, who aren't able to satisfy the basic needs of human survival. Without the needs of the first two tiers on Maslow's hierarchy of needs met, an individual can't strive toward the other, higher goals, such as realizing one's own importance in society. Thus if money draws a person from the depths of poverty, it will have an impact on that person's mood. The opposite of such circumstances, the effect money has on a wealthy man's happiness, will not provide as significant of a change, because once again those basic needs are met, and he can strive to attain those higher-tier needs. The media seems to falsely portray that wealthy people are happier because of their wealth and that the joy of marriage doesn't last as long as expected. As for those classified as the top 1% of the American population, who earn larger than 10 million dollars a year, those people only felt partially happier than the people who worked under them (Lyubomirsky 1). Also in a survey conducted in 16 different countries concluded that only 25% of married couples and 21% of singles reported being "very-happy" (Lyubomirsky 1). Other goals that mirrored what Maslow believed were important, known as intrinsic and extrinsic goals, helped explain that intrinsic goals' ideals focused on the main topics suggested in the hierarchy of needs diagram. University of Knox psychology professor Tim Kasser, featured in *Happy*, tells the audience that extrinsic goals prioritize goals to gain money, image, or social status; extrinsic goals are declared by most as bad goals to reach for. Whereas intrinsic goals that focus on personal growth, close relationships, and a desire to help are well known for boosting a person's happiness level. Specifically one's goal for reaching out and helping others generates an exceptional amount of happiness because of the feel-good, do-good phenomenon found on page 520 in David G. Myers textbook *Psychology: The Ninth Edition*. The phenomenon states that

being involved in one's community builds up his or her feelings of compassion and gratitude—both emotions affect happiness in a positive way.

Numerous sources point to close relationships as the biggest benefactor toward a happy life, simply because being able to confide in a close friend or family member can help a person through a tough situation—everyone can relate to that. I found myself better capable of understanding this idea as I read through Shakespeare's famous *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet* the main character Hamlet is given the opportunity to confide his personal pangs with childhood friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern starting on lines 267 of act two, but instead Hamlet decides to make a mockery of his two friends as they interrogated and questioned him, much like how a session with a psychologist would play out. As the reader continues on though, he or she learns that Hamlet's depression isn't ever cured and he eventually dies in England. Myer's book advises that friends should act on kindness in the way they would expect it in return, and that trust created can produce happier emotions, thus a happier person. Victor Frankenstein, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, also suffers with depression for various reasons, but mostly due to his lack of close companions during his stay in Ingolstadt. Much of Victor's misery shifts quickly back onto himself after his inglorious creation runs off into the night, leaving him alone once more unable to fulfill his need to belong and feel love. Relationships have been found to play a major role in happiness, and more specifically psychologists and other professionals take into account not how many friends a person has, but how frequently a person and his colleagues cooperate with each other (Science of Happiness: 7 Habits of Happy People). Because the research relating to close relationships and positive psychology have only been recently learned, a person searching for help with his or her happiness, much like myself, may not find multiple contrasting sources, therefore the unity of materials in each individual source presents the validity of this

idea. Surprisingly though, a documentary filmed by the PBS Network, titled *This Emotional Life*, identified other unfound research related to close relationships. I learned that beyond the trust and compassion strengthened through close relationships, one can always teach his friend the ability to give and receive love, how to understand each other's boundaries, when to listen and when to give advice, as well as celebrating good times and good memories, the realization of self-worth, a sense of safety among each other, and a friend can provide a melting pot of ideas for both a person and a person's friends to produce questions, which influences us to learn and grow. The theme with relationships, much as I expected, ultimately ties back into Maslow's hierarchy of needs, specifically in his third tier which is the need to belong and feel loved.

At the top of Maslow's pyramid, sitting three tiers above the need to belong and be loved, sits the need for self-transcendence, which is defined through the spiritual or otherwise religious aspects of a person's life. Regardless of one's preferred deity or other beliefs, incorporating a spiritual aspect allows people to find "a sense of purpose and hope" (Myers 525). "The proof is in itself as those who report being involved in some faith have shown above-average happiness levels and the ability to cope with stressors better" (Myers 525). Our familiar character Victor relies on the spirituality of nature in *Frankenstein* as he explains the deep serenity of the summit of Montanvert in chapter ten. Victor exclaims, "These sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation...although they did not remove my grief, they subdued and tranquillised it" (Shelley 66). Much like Victor expressed, not all people can feel instantly gratified and content when working through ideas of spirituality, but the moral that follows this specific idea is merely to apply them to your life where it's appropriate, and not to expect instant happiness by pursuing only this one aspect of happiness. My uncle, John Spencer, who is a doctoral professor at the University of Iowa, stated in an interview, via E-mail, that in general the

environment strongly dictates our actions and motivators for the day. He also provided me with information that a majority of society feels at its happiest in the presence of the sun. Both Victor Frankenstein and my uncle John helped me understand another core aspect to a happier life, but knowing how complex psychology can get at times made me rationalize that there had to be more information relating to increasing a person's happiness out in the psychology world. Myers and other well known psychologists theorized that attaining happiness wasn't limited primarily limited to one's mentality toward life, and furthermore that physical acts, such as aerobic exercise to be exact, can boost a person's dopamine levels—the level of a chemical which directly influences a person's happiness—and relieve unneeded stress. Although the idea is easier said than done for most Americans, facts have proven that making routine time for exercise can reduce depression and lower anxiety levels. As an all-season runner and someone who suffers from depression I can testify to the validity of this knowledge that I found. Further evidence from “the Cochrane Review has produced a landmark analysis...the major conclusions was that exercise had a ‘large clinical impact’” (Science of Happiness: 7 Habits of Happy People). Research also provided a thesis that stated aerobic exercise isn't the only physical act that will increase a person's happiness. Sonja Lyubomirsky's article *Discovering Happiness; The How of Happiness* talked about how hugs can boost a person's happiness as well. Lyubomirsky writes about an experiment, in her article, that included Penn State students who were told to give at least five hugs out daily to anyone for four weeks in a row. The students who participated and logged in a journal their activity, as well as the conclusion to the experiment became much happier over that period of time, whereas the students who only completed the minimum reading showed no change in any of their happiness. And if hugs don't work to increase a person's happiness level, than the possibility of simply smiling may be offered as an alternative.

Many people in society may sometimes wonder whether this next influential and transformative idea actually helps turn that frown upside down. In a article written by David Straker titled *Act Happy*, he writes about improving one's happiness through quick, easy steps; steps that require minimal physical effort, along with optimal mental capacity. Straker declares that body posture can play a major role in increasing happiness, so long as it's done right. One must feel relaxed while sitting, allowing his or her body to move freely and happily, with noticeable positive thoughts sparking from him or herself. Also, the article *Act Happy* introduces the idea that using happier vocabulary and having a positive, lifted sounding tone will raise a person's level of happiness. Natural kindness, in which a person give the same decency and compassion as they expect to receive from his or her neighbor will also ensure a brighter mood for both because of the ability to spend leisure time together. If all this information seems hard to fully believe, try smiling for fifteen to thirty seconds—research from the article *Act Happy* has proven it to be effective. Proof this hypothesis is effective can be found when talking about the battle a person's brain goes through routinely, between our morals and our recent actions, that is only resolved through changing one's thought of either aspect of morals and actions. By smiling, people eliminate all other options to adapt besides smiling, therefore the mind's is told to become a happier person (Straker). As a disclaimer the article does state that the above procedures aren't guaranteed likely to produce an euphoric state, but repetition of these actions will show an increased level of happiness. The above research is based on an idea known as The Facial Feedback Hypothesis which claims by forcing oneself to smile it can lead to happier feelings. One might not have guessed that handing out hugs could produce much of the same affects as well.

Thus far research has been able to show how finding, understanding, and capturing happiness is possible, but the question of how to maintain that happiness once it's achieved remains unanswered. Sonja Lyubomirsky's article *Discovering Happiness; The How of Happiness* states that naturally a person's goal to reach his or her peak level of happiness ends at age sixty-five. Naturally as one ages, his or her vital organs begin to shut down, so the research would make sense that the brain, which is considered one of most vital organs in a human's body, also begins to lose full functioning. Because dopamine remains one main chemical receptor of few in the brain to generate happiness, the loss of those receptors due to aging can lead to a decrease in a person's mood. So how does one avoid the decrease in mood in effects from aging and natural decay? Latter research has shown that reminiscing on past positive events will cause an increase in morale in the elders, as well as its ability to slow down the process of those depleting dopamine receptors (Lyubomirsky 1). Psychologists have studied and found various other ways to maintain one's level of happiness once it is achieved, some of these ways are completely uncontrollable by the person, while others are purely dependant on how the person controls such ways. Temperaments—an infant's emotional excitability—are genetic and therefore out of one's control. Although popular belief shifts a person to think that only naturally eccentric and extroverted people will succeed in fulfilling their happiness, an article written by psychologists Ed Diener, Robert Biswas-Diener, Barbara L. Frederickson, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, titled *Connection & Happiness*, states that both introverted and extroverted people have the same capability of having close connections with friends and family and finding true happiness. The article also states that "Social skills are learned, and they can be learned and improved at any time in our lives" (Diener, Biswas-Diener, Frederickson, Lyubomirsky). Therefore even as a person ages closer to that peak level of happiness, which starts roughly around age sixty-five, he or she

can still control and maintain his or her happiness levels by trying to continue to have social relations with others. But although humans are structured to be social creatures, so may still find branching out to others equally terrifying and difficult, so for those certain individuals research has also been provided about the internal ways one can increase his or her mood.

One main internal aspect that helps increase one's mood is actually easier to comprehend and achieve than that of the external goals to satisfy a person's need to feel loved and feel as if they belong. That aspect derives from the idea that when a person associates with positive situations and reciprocates those positive ideas have a better chance of becoming happier (Lyons 1). The article, *Positive Emotional Psychology: Have a 'Daily Diet' of Positive Emotions*, written by Lindsay Lyons which includes the ideas of psychologist Barbara Frederickson talks about how when a person, as stated before, associates with positive situations, his or her vision expands and the visual field of perception opens up wider. This biological cue allows more room for the various positive stimuli to enter into one's perception of life. Lyons writes on behalf of Frederickson that obviously negative emotions and situation will work to decrease one's overall mood, therefore by increasing the amount of positive thoughts a person thinks daily will increase the amount of happiness a person achieves. And also through her research from 2005, Frederickson found a correlation between achieving happiness and living a longer life span; simply put, thinking happily keeps you happily alive for longer. Frederickson mainly stresses the idea of finding a balance between the positive and negative stimuli that affects a person's life—it's how one's life is able to flourish so well. My uncle John restated this idea later in our interview. In the interview I asked my uncle how he believed a person's happiness can affect his or her external aspects of life, in which he replied and agreed that happy thoughts will in effect create a boost in one's mood, but often times overcoming troubling times and being resilient

toward other aversive situations pushes a person into making the most progress toward increasing his or her mood. But again, the point to be stressed is that maintaining happiness in one's life can often times be more challenging than simply finding happiness and how it works, but with the right balance between the intrinsic and extrinsic goals previously stated by Tim Kasser, along with achieving a balance between the seven tiers of Maslow's hierarchy of needs will ensure a noticeable increase in a person's mood and also provide one the definite ability to balance life and happiness on top of that.

Throughout all my research, I've generated a generalized answer to my various question, in which I found and believe that the ultimate overlying reason for people's unhappiness derives from the overlapping aspects that must be balanced with limitations. Most Americans struggle in keeping their internal lives structured and always in check, and unfortunately each time a person slips up in their life, he or she is pushed farther from happiness and more toward depressive symptoms. Research has also taught me to understand that Maslow's hierarchy of needs mirrors the steps a person's, and myself especially, should take to improve his or her mood. Starting with the most basic psychological needs of hunger and thirst and sleep, all the way up to the need for self-transcendence and self-actualization--which is the achieved when a person realizes his or her full potential—work as the building blocks to improving one's personal happiness and self-esteem. Even more specific, the key tiers of Maslow's hierarchy of include having and sustaining close relationships with those whom a person loves, striving to help in one's community and find one's acceptance among his or her peers as well as within themselves, finding tranquility and serenity in the aspects of nature or religion, and overall cognitively thinking more positive thoughts can drastically transform and increase the level of happiness found in a person. More so Shazwellyn commented in an article, *Psychology 101. What Makes People Happy? Is Happiness*

Easy?, that continuous happiness is impossible to achieve, and therefore does not exist due to the various external stimuli that affect us beyond the barriers of our control. Shazwellyn writes that the best end result to finding, capturing, and maintaining happiness results from the ability to set realistic goals and feel satisfied with when those goals are met. Maslow created the most basic understanding, yet ironically most complex, and often times difficult, stepping stones to a happier life—and I will continue to theorize that Maslow's pyramid of needs defines the exact aspects of a person's life that, if done correctly and with balance and composure, make themselves a happier, healthier individual.

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