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It’s Lonely at the Top

“We are not entitled to pain-free, trouble-free life. Embracing this will ease the collision between expectation and reality” Is this advice harsh, or helpful? It may seem unusual for religion to offer insights into science, yet Psychologists think that theologian John Piper is on the right track.

A team of psychologists led by Iris Mauss at the University of Denver have discovered a direct hormonal and emotional link that the desire for happiness can actually make us feel lonelier.

But wait, how can you even define happiness? Everyone’s idea of happiness is different, but Mauss aims to prove that personal ambitions can sap your social life. In one study, they found that people who prioritize happiness actually report feeling more isolated after a stressful day. People who don’t glorify success come away feeling more socially connected. The theory is that ambitious people tend to neglect relationships or even stomp on others to meet their goals, creating that disconnected feeling.

Ok, so we can expect perfectionists to feel disappointed with a less than perfect day, yet this holds true even for more laid-back people. In a second study, when all personality types were simply encouraged to value “happiness”, they came away feeling more socially alone. In Mauss’s second study, university students were given news articles that praised the benefits of happiness. The article claimed that happier people were more popular and more professionally successful, more physically healthy and lived longer. Unknowingly, half the students read an identical article, instead replacing the word happiness with “accurate judgment”. The “accurate judgment” article stressed the same benefits for more realistic people. Both articles were completely fabricated to influence the test subjects, yet those who read the “happiness” article reported lonelier feelings, while the more cynically worded article seemed to brighten students’ spirits. Students didn’t just self-report feeling lonely either. Strikingly, Mauss and her team discovered that students who read about happiness actually had lowered levels of the hormone progesterone by the end of the experiment. It’s known in psychology that low levels of progesterone directly indicate lowered social interaction. It seems that the power of the realists does indeed hold true over the idealists, at least in terms of feeling connected to others.

That’s right, psychologists want you to lower your expectations if you actually want to feel good.

Even the pressure to feel happy can make people feel, unsurprisingly, unhappy. “There seems to be this shame associated with not feeling happy, with feeling stressed out or inadequate” explains clinical psychologist Katie Newton from the University of Virginia, “Student’s assume they’re alone in these feelings, and they’re afraid to admit it”. A culture that promotes success may leave people feeling isolated.

These results were found consistently across gender, age, and socioeconomic status, in both cheery types and cynics, and both in people who rank happiness as the top priority and those who could care less. However, it should be noted that subjects were primarily white Americans. Culture can have a significant impact on the definition of happiness and success. In other cultures, happiness in the form of positive self-regard, optimism or generosity may have more social benefits. However, Mauss theorized that Western views of happiness are self-promoting. Polls reveal that American happiness often revolves around ambition, competition, success and self-esteem. Many people bet so much on future happiness, that they sacrifice themselves to unhealthy levels of stress and isolation day-to-day. Mauss explained in an interview that in shooting for these goals, we tend to push others away. “We may have to use and abuse, focus on ourselves, and cut back on time with family and friends to achieve success. It’s lonely at the top”

A demanding major that eats into social time, or a job that pits you against your co-workers rather than being cooperative can be soul-crushing. Yet if you believe everything will always work out for the best or that coming out on top is one of life’s great priorities, the disappointment of reality may be equally disillusioning. Consider the Facebook effect: a site that allows people to present the best possible version on themselves. By posting photos with family and friends, highlights from travel, and receiving positive attention, people paint an unrealistic picture of happiness, success, popularity and health , much like the one proclaimed by the fake article. Many people report coming away feeling lonely after using sites like Facebook, and the reason why is clearly connected to our expectations about happiness. People, especially adolescents, often underestimate their peers’ troubles and turmoil. They feel isolated from others when they assume they’re not as happy as everyone else. Others hope that better social relationships would remedy their problems, and as a result feel lonely.

We often expect happiness to be the end-all-be-all measure of a successful day. However, this is not beneficial to our mental well-being. Instead, we should allow negative and positive experiences, along with successes and setbacks, to run their course in order to achieve happiness. When it comes to working hard and goofing off, the solution is balance. Many people believe happiness means a high-paying job, a great relationship, healthy kids, fashionable clothes, European vacations and a high def TV. However, in a nation-wide survey in 2003 some of America’s most prestigious professionals, results varied, yet the answered revealed a startling trend: for far too many successful individuals, it simply wasn’t worth it.

You may feel that your promotion or degree will somehow make you happy in the long-run, but focusing on those alluring future rewards could be causing you to miss out on the very real chances to be happy right now. Spending the majority of your time striving for success is setting you up for disappointment and deteriorating relationships. It’s important to relax and find happiness and whatever brings you daily inspiration. Have a picnic, look at a painting, party with your friends, smile at a baby. Those examples are probably some of the dumbest things you’ve ever read. I bet you think of 10 things that sound easily more fun. Okay now write down two or three of them and go do them this week. Hey you might feel better.

Socially desirable responding is the tendency to give positive self-reports, or to give self-reports that are inaccurate because of social expectations about what is positive or common.

Important:

These results suggest that valuing happiness is linked to greater

loneliness and that this association was not due to key potential

confounds. These findings are suggestive but not definitive of a

causal relationship between valuing happiness and feelings of

loneliness. Thus, in Study 2 we tested such a causal relationship.

Participants in

the “valuing happiness” condition read a bogus newspaper article

that extolled the benefits of happiness and closely matched the

dispositional values measured in Study 1. The article included the

following material:

People who report higher than normal levels of happiness experience

benefits in their social relationships, professional success, and overall

health and well-being. That is, happiness not only feels good, it also

carries important benefits: the happier people can make themselves

feel from moment to moment, the more likely they are to be successful,

healthy, and popular. (. . .)

Consistent with the idea that effects of valuing

happiness are specific to loneliness, this effect was not due to state

affect. These patterns emerged regardless of whether (a) happiness

values were measured as an individual difference or manipulated

experimentally, (b) loneliness was measured via self-report or

hormones, (c) the effects were measured immediately versus over

two weeks, and (d) loneliness was measured in the context of a

stressful or a nonstressful affiliative context.