There's a Specific Kind of Joy We've Been Missing

July 10, 2021

The New York Times. Opinion: Guest Essay

By Adam Grant

Dr. Grant is an organizational psychologist at Wharton focused on how people find motivation and meaning in daily life.

In late June, over 15,000 vaccinated people packed in to watch the Foo Fighters reopen Madison Square Garden. When the band brought the comedian Dave Chappelle onstage to sing the Radiohead song "Creep," the audience erupted in the closest thing I've seen to rapture in a solid year and a half.

No one cared that Mr. Chappelle was off key. They were all participating in an experience that was unimaginable just months earlier. One day they'll tell their grandchildren about that night, when New York City came back to life and their favorite band performed another band's song, and they tried to carry a tune with a legendary comic doing lead vocals.

Most people view emotions as existing primarily or even exclusively in their heads. Happiness is considered a state of mind; melancholy is a potential warning sign of mental illness. But the reality is that emotions are inherently social: They're woven through our interactions.

Research has found that people laugh five times as often when they're with others as when they're alone. Even exchanging pleasantries with a stranger on a train is enough to spark joy. That's not to say you can't find delight in watching a show on Netflix. The problem is that bingeing is an individual pastime. Peak happiness lies mostly in collective activity.

We find our greatest bliss in moments of **collective effervescence**. It's a concept coined in the early 20th century by the **pioneering sociologist Émile Durkheim** to describe the sense of energy and harmony people feel when they come together in a group around a shared purpose. Collective effervescence is the synchrony you feel when you slide into rhythm with strangers on a dance floor, colleagues in a brainstorming session, cousins at a religious service or teammates on a soccer field. And during this pandemic, it's been largely absent from our lives.

Collective effervescence happens when joie de vivre spreads through a group. Before Covid, research showed that more than three-quarters of people found collective effervescence at least once a week and almost a third experienced it at least once a day. They felt it when they sang in choruses and ran in races, and in quieter moments of connection at coffee shops and in yoga classes.

But as lockdowns and social distancing became the norm, there were fewer and fewer of these moments. I started watching stand-up comedy specials, hoping to get a taste of collective effervescence while laughing along with the people in the room. It was fine, but it wasn't the same.

Instead, many of us found ourselves drawn into a dark cloud.

Emotions are like contagious diseases: They can spread from person to person. "Emotional contagion is when we are literally infected with other people's emotions," my colleague Sigal Barsade, a Wharton

management professor and a leading researcher on the topic, has explained. “In almost all of our studies, what we have found is that people don’t realize it’s happening.”

When the pandemic began in 2020, the first negative emotion to spread was fear. Waves of panic crashed through communities, compelling people to purify packages and hoard hand sanitizer. As too many people lost loved ones, too many others lost jobs and everyone lost some semblance of normal life. The number of adults with symptoms of depression or anxiety spiked from one in 10 Americans to about four in 10.

And there’s reason to believe these symptoms haven’t been caused only by the crisis itself — they’ve actually been transferred from person to person. Studies show that if your spouse, your family member or your roommate develops depression, you’re at heightened risk for it. And contagion isn’t limited to face-to-face interaction: Emotions can spread through social media posts and text messages, too.

Emotional contagion can in part explain so-called Zoom fatigue, a phenomenon that has mostly been attributed to sitting still, staring at oversize virtual heads, feeling self-conscious at seeing your own reflection and juggling the cognitive load of reading glitchy facial expressions. The science of contagion suggests that the negative emotions we feel from video-call overuse could be partially driven by hours of communicating with people who are also sad, stressed, lonely or tired. (How to survive a Zoombie apocalypse: Avoid eye contact at all costs.)

When it first became clear that people would be encouraged to stay at home and avoid large crowds, a joke circulated in which introverts declared, “I’ve been preparing for this moment my entire life.” But the data tell a different story: During the pandemic, it’s generally been introverts, not extroverts, who have reported more depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness. Extroverts may seek more connection, but introverts need it as well — they are also energized by social interaction. In isolation, many introverts may have been surprised to feel forlorn. They were missing collective effervescence, too.

This spring, I wrote an article about languishing — the stagnation and ennui between the valley of depression and the peak of flourishing. I’ve never seen people so enthusiastic about discussing their lack of enthusiasm. One poignant response came from a woman who owns a bakery in Chicago, who shared with me that she missed the hours she used to spend absorbed in baking bread. Maybe it wasn’t just about finding flow in an individual task. Could she also have missed the collective effervescence of baking with and for others?

When **Émile Durkheim** first wrote about collective effervescence, in 1912, it was the eve of World War I and six years before the Spanish flu began its deadly spread. But the Roaring Twenties brought it back in full force. People sang and danced together and watched and played sports together. They didn’t just find collective effervescence in the shallow fun of frivolous activities; they also forged it in the deep fun of creating together and solving problems together. That decade brought an explosion of popular art like jazz and talking films, recreation like water skiing and medical advancements like insulin.

As some countries start to reopen, collective effervescence will happen naturally — and it already is. There will be fewer Zoombies roaming the internet in their pajama bottoms, reaching out listlessly through their computer screens. Some of us have already started feeling the thrill of creative collisions at work and the rush of a real vacation. But getting out of the house doesn’t guarantee that we’ll pursue happiness the best way.

Psychologists find that in cultures where people pursue happiness individually, they may actually become lonelier. But in cultures where they pursue happiness socially — through connecting, caring and contributing — people appear to be more likely to gain well-being.

The return to normalcy in the United States, or something like it, is a time to rethink our understanding of mental health and well-being. We should think of flourishing less as personal euphoria and more as collective effervescence. Happiness lives in the kinds of moments that we celebrated in the early days of Covid, when people found solidarity singing together out their windows in Italy, using dish soap to turn their kitchen floors into treadmills in Brazil, and clapping and banging pots with spoons to honor essential workers around the world. It was reborn in New York City when more than 15,000 strangers heard Dave Chappelle sing, “I don’t belong here,” and they all felt they belonged there.

The Declaration of Independence promised Americans unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. If we want that pursuit to bring us bliss, it may be time to create a Declaration of Interdependence. You can feel depressed and anxious alone, but it’s rare to laugh alone or love alone. Joy shared is joy sustained.