Abstract

In the following paper you will be exposed to the emotionn of happiness and how it can positively effect ones life or most likely negatively effect it from increased focus. I will detail what the difference is between happiness and meaningfulness along with why meaningfulness is seen as better by multiple authors. Although happiness is seen widely as the thing to aim for most in life my evidence and supporting authors will make you think twice about seeing happiness as what life needs most.

Why focus on happiness when goals are more influential?

Happiness is seen as the goal for most people and has been the center of attention for most behavior psychologists for some time now. In the 1990's the positive psychology movement came about and caused a large amount of psychology research to focus on human happiness. So why haven’t we found out what makes us happy? Well the answer is simple and is given in many of those research studies. Happiness is not something that we need to focus on. As a whole our life consists of tons of ups and downs of happiness so focusing on it all the time can often have the reverse effect that you want. Instead you have to set goals and needs so that you can progress through your ups and downs of happiness. Then when looking back on your life to this point you will not just see those times that you have been sad or unhappy but instead you will see everything that has been accomplished.

This idea is brought up in both Emily Esfahani Smith's TED talk The Power of Meaning and in Avram Alperts article The Good-Enough Life. Both these authors state that happiness has been molded into this false idea of something that cant be seen or achieved, when instead happiness is a secondary characteristic of meaningfulness of one’s life. This topic is also brought up in Robert Waldinger's TED talk What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness were a 75-year study showed that personal relationships were a large factor in the achievement in happiness or rather meaningfulness. All these authors demonstrate that happiness in one’s life is always changing and if focused on will be impossible to reach. Instead creating goals, personal relationships, and applying meaning to your life can change the way you think about living.

The lack of knowledge about happiness and the ways to have a good life cause people to view brief momements of happiness and saddness as there entire life; and therefore having negative effects on there view of life.

Why happiness shouldnt be aimed for

So, what is meaningfulness to someone? Well Emily Esfahani Smith's TED talk The Power of Meaning gives a great outline. Stating that there is more to life than being happy, and that the pursuit of happiness almost always ends in the opposite. She suggests in her talk that happiness is the unachievable fantasy that we often aim for, when in reality it is better to focus on the meaning of your life. In her talk she gives an example of her father who instead of focusing on the day to day happiness levels decided to apply a longer goal. Causing him to have a purpose in life and apply meaning to his life. She states "That's the power of meaning. Happiness comes and goes. But when life is really good and when things are really bad, having meaning gives you something to hold on to."(Smith, 2017) These points made by Smith suggest the possibility that people focus only on happiness because they do not know any other way. The possibility that they have never been exposed to applying meaning to their lives or achieving goals could be causing this focus on unachievable happiness.

Why is happiness not as important as meaning

Although I grant that happiness is a metirc by which somoene can guage there life, I still maintain that meaning allows for better descions and achievement of that good life.

What is well-being in ones life?

Of course, many will probably disagree on the grounds that happiness is not a relevent measure in ones life, and dismiss the information from supporting authors that meanging and goals are more important.

This same point is brought up in Avram Alpert article The Good-Enough Life where he discusses how seeing other greatness can cause them to have their own desire to be great. Instead of looking for the meaning in their own lives they focus on greatness which can be an obstacle to their potential. Alpert suggests in his article that a pre-defined life is one that will always be filled with disappointment, instead of defining it you should evolve with life to decide what is "great" and what is just okay. He supports his claims by reviewing several points of view from great thinkers where often the result of greatness is the failure to achieve it and instead forgetting about pre-determined ideas of accomplishment is the best way to live a "good enough life". Saying "If we do manage any of these things, it will not be because we have achieved greatness, but because we have recognized that none of them are achievable until greatness itself is forgotten."( Alpert, 2019) Alpert proposes this idea in order to separate people from thinking that certain ideas are great and that greatness in a whole is so fluid that you can aim for it in life achievement. This idea transitions to the question of what good enough is for some people. When thinking about yourself instead of others you need to determine what personal wellbeing is for you, because "we really should not think of happiness as a substitute for well-being. It is a completely different notion.” (Kahneman, 2010)

Pilar Sanjuan, a research professor that focuses on emotion regulation, talks about this in his paper entitled Affect Balance as Mediating Variable Between Effective Psychological Functioning and Satisfaction with Life. Where he gives sound evidence about 'well-being' and what causes that well-being. Using Psychological background about well-being along with a study that included over 100 participants. The most important part of the study showed that balance in life mediated the relationships between some positive life attitudes and satisfaction with life. Therefore, reinforcing the idea that having overall meaning in life negates the negative effects of once in a while disappointment. This is a slightly different approach then the other articles to find out what wellbeing, and happiness but it gives sound evidence on what is needed to live that good enough life.

Robert Waldinger, a Harvard medical school professor, claims that personal relationships improve life in his paper What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness. Waldinger supports his claims by comparing the many different men in a 75-year study which recorded the ins and outs of their lives from 15years old to the present. The purpose of the paper is to show the lasting effects that personal relationships have on the human life, and what signified happiness to a person. After explaining the study and how data was collected Waldinger goes through the many pieces of evidence that comes to the conclusion that "the people who fared the best were the people who leaned in to relationships, with family, with friends, with community."( Waldinger, 2015) This final point that is given is the most important part of the talk but only after you think about it. You see this paper outlines something is very important to remember; happiness in the studies definition was determined by the participants. There was a scale of 1 to 10 and the participants filled in their answer. They were never given a definition of what happiness was or how they should feel. But something we do know is that their lives were happier yes but as a whole they seemed to hold more meaningfulness through relationships.

How well-being is achieved through meaning

Although multiple authors state that happiness is very important and that having it will help lenghthen your life, a better examination suggests that happiness is often only acheived after the application of meaning. Scott Kaufman a humanistic psychologist states that "The more meaning we find in life, the more happy we typically feel, and the more happy we feel, the more we often feel encouraged to pursue even greater meaning and purpose." (Kaufman, 2016) Kaufman continues to state that happiness has more to do with having your needs statisfied, or feeling good. Meaning on the other hand " is related to unique human activities such as developing a personal identity, expressing the self, and consciously integrating one’s past, present, and future experiences." (Kaufman, 2016) This shows that meaning isnt a one time thing, instead it is the building blocks that help contruct your life. "While happiness may make us feel good in the moment, the avoidance of negative thoughts and feelings may stunt personal development over time. After all, personal development often requires experiencing the full range of emotions."(Kaufman, 2016) So by having that one time happiness that may be achieved by taking the easy route in the moment, or buying something for yourself, that happiness can actually hurt you in the long run. This a classic example of thinking in the long term rather then the short. Much like children people dont know better and often dont think ahead of that momement in time. Instead we think that happiness we want or that good feeling is most important. Not seeing what will happen after.

So as shown above thinking ahead and meaning are very closely related. Not only does applying meaning give you a plan and a goal but it also helps overcome issues. In the long run "people who have a purpose, in other words meaningful goals which have to do with helping others, rated their life satisfaction higher – even when they felt personally down and out – than those who did not have any life purpose." (Sword, 2013) Rosemary Sword and Philip Zimbardo stated this in there article 'Happiness vs. Living a life with meaning' where they give the details about how postitive psychology studies have shown the difference in lives that apply meaning and those that seek out happiness.

Along with this Dawn Carr a professor of sociology has written and article 'What It Means to Live a Good Life' where she details reasons why living ones life while " engaging in activities that facilitate a strong sense of purpose; that provide opportunities to contribute to the well-being of future generations; and that allow you to feel like you really matter have a profoundly beneficial impact on your mental and physical health." (Carr, 2014) This point is achieved through mulitple explanations of Carr's family where they found much more happiness at the end of there lives after contributing to the newer generations. This suggests that the "meaning" in there lives was to contribute to what is after there own lives. This is often a common source of meaning for most poeple because it gives a reason for there lives. “Life has no meaning. Each of us has meaning and we bring it to life. It is a waste to be asking the question when you are the answer.” – Joseph Campbell

After multiple examples it seems clear that constant focus on happiness is not the way to achieve a good life; “Happiness is a feeling of in-the-moment joy that can’t be chased and caught.” (Wilson, 2020) Instead applying meaning to your life through goals, and personal relationships allows you to achieve more and have a better life. Emily Esfahani Smith certainly makes this point and by using the support from Avram Alpert, Robert Waldinger, and Pilar Sanjuan we are given a sound idea of what is needed for the human life. No matter what you call wellbeing or happiness it is shown that the constant thought of it will do nothing but hurt your chances of achieving it. So, what are we left with then? Should you constantly focus on other things in a hopeless attempt to achieve something you know nothing about? Well in a nutshell yes. I think Robert Breault sums it up with this quote; "Enjoy the little things in life, for one day you may look back and realize they were the big things."

The focus of happiness can only lead to breif moments of sucess in ones life; appyling meaning and goals allows for you to combat the negative effects of the ups and downs of happiness.