Why focus on happiness when goals are more influential

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WR122-01W

May 5th, 2020

Abstract

In the following paper you will be exposed to the emotion of happiness and how it can positively affect one’s life or most likely negatively affect it from increased focus. I will detail what the differences between happiness and meaningfulness along with why meaningfulness is seen to be better by multiple authors. Although happiness is seen widely as the thing to aim for 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 can’t 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 and many more in my paper 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 moments of happiness and sadness as their entire life; and therefore, have negative effects on their view of life.

**Why happiness should not be aimed for**

Happiness is seen as a goal for most people. After all its good isn’t it? The happier you are in life the better your life is, right? Well it certainly would seem that way for most people, but multiple studies and psychologist have started to think happiness is something temporary in life. Yes, you should be happy in life, you should experience happiness, but the focus on achieving constant happiness can lead you down the wrong path. So then what are people supposed to do? Well according to psychologist applying meaning is the answer, but most people don’t understand meaning enough to use it. So here is a definition; " psychologists agree that meaning exists as a concept for humans, that it can be found in the world around us, and that we can create or uncover our own unique sense of meaning as well." (Ackerman, 2020) This definition isn’t one you would find in the dictionary but rather in an explanation that you would get from someone. It suggests that not only is meaning a fluid concept but also that it is different to every person.

Emily Esfahani Smith's TED talk *The Power of Meaning* elaborates more on meaning. 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?**

Life changes through time as many older generations will tell you. Although I grant that happiness is a metric by which someone can gauge their life, I still maintain that meaning allows for better decisions and achievement of a good life. The key to this argument is change. As stated, life changes and as it changes past decisions can make you feel different ways. Happiness being one of those ways you feel. So as time goes on how do you know that you will like your past decisions. Will they make you happy for your entire life? Or will the knowledge that you are headed toward a set goal, or an end make you feel the best? Well according to many psychology articles the feeling of happiness actually doesn’t prolong what you feel in life. Rather negative events help you more in life. "Researchers discovered that while negative events may decrease happiness, paradoxically they may increase the meaning in life." (Sword, 2013) So the old saying about how pain helps you learn, and grow is true, and meaning is what helps you turn that pain into something useful.

So why is it that momentary happiness is not that great after all? Well it’s true that happiness makes you feel good. There is no doubt about that, but its temporary as is life. As you constantly change and grow the things that made you happy that one-time don’t anymore. Art Markman a professor of psychology talks about the change through your life in his paper *How Do People’s Values Change as They Get Older?* He states "People were more interested in power and success when they were younger. The idea is that in early and middle adulthood, people are focused on children and family and so success broadly may be less of a concern than it is early in life or later, when child-raising responsibilities have been completed." (Markman, 2015) This idea relates strongly to the argument that people who have kids often change their meaning in life to the prolonging of information and knowledge. They no longer want happiness all the time, instead they want the children to have happiness which gives their life a purpose and applies meaning. As stated by Philip Zimbardo, a psychologist and professor, "Happiness is not generally found in contemplating the past or future ... it’s about living in the present and doing things that bring us temporary pleasure.” (Sword, 2013) This shows that happiness can only be achieved in the moment of time and is not something that you can plan for and achieve over time. This is largely due to the factor that people change over time.

Avram Alpert the author of *The Good-Enough Life* discusses how seeing others greatness can cause people 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)

**What is well-being in one’s life?**

So, if we are really aiming for wellbeing in life then what is wellbeing or having a good life? Here, many past generations would certainly take issue with the argument that happiness is not fundamental in the question of how to have a good life. So, lets define what a good life, or rather what well-being is to a person.

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.

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.

**How well-being is achieved through meaning**

Although multiple authors state that happiness is very important and that having it will help lengthen your life, a better examination suggests that happiness is often only achieved 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 satisfied 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 isn’t a onetime thing, instead it is the building blocks that help construct 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 than the short. Much like children people don’t know better and often don’t think ahead of that moment 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 positive 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 one’s 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 multiple explanations of Carr's family where they found much more happiness at the end of their lives after contributing to the newer generations. This suggests that the "meaning" in their lives was to contribute to what is after their own lives. This is often a common source of meaning for most people because it gives a reason for their 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

**Concluding remarks**

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 on happiness can only lead to brief moments of success in one’s life; applying meaning and goals allows for you to combat the negative effects of the ups and downs of happiness and achieve that better life.

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