

20 The Happiness Problem Handout

1. The Control Strategy

Basic Idea

- Picture happiness as a project of control:
 1. Make a list of things you think you need (career success, money, status, ideal partner, etc.).
 2. Believe: If I work hard enough, I can get these things.
 3. Believe: Once I get them, I'll finally be happy and secure.
 4. Conclusion: I should devote my energy to getting and keeping these things.

Core Assumptions

- Happiness = getting the right external conditions.
- Security = being able to control outcomes (job, relationships, health, reputation, etc.).
- Insecurity is a problem to be eliminated, not a basic part of life.

Why Wren-Lewis Thinks This Is Problematic

1. Insecurity is inescapable
 - No matter what you achieve, many things remain outside your control:
 - Health, aging, death.
 - Other people's feelings and choices (partners can leave, friends can change).
 - Economic and political events (recessions, layoffs, crises).
 - So the promise "If I achieve X, I'll be secure" is an illusion.
2. Never-ending escalation ("moving the goalposts")
 - Once you get what's on your list, new goals appear:
 - Promotion → next promotion.
 - Finding a partner → wanting a "better" relationship, more status, etc.
 - You're never at rest; security and happiness are always postponed to the next achievement.
3. Narrow "problem-solving bubble"
 - You start treating your whole life as a to-do list to fix:
 - Constantly planning, optimizing, comparing, improving.
 - This crowds out attention to what actually matters to you:
 - You may pursue money or prestige because they're on your "standard list," not because they truly matter to you.
 - You risk waking up later realizing you built a life around the wrong goals.
4. "Going to war with reality"
 - Reality inevitably contains:
 - Loss, failure, aging, imperfection, uncertainty.

- The control strategy treats all these as enemies to be defeated.
 - This creates chronic tension: whenever reality fails to match the plan, you feel threatened or like a failure.
5. Control is only a means, not an end
- Wren-Lewis: controlling things is valuable only as a tool to pursue what really matters (relationships, creativity, contribution, etc.).
 - The control strategy mistakenly treats “having control” itself as the main goal.
 - Result: when control fails (and it will), you feel like you have “nothing,” because you never cultivated deeper sources of meaning.
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2. The Understanding Strategy

Basic Idea

- Instead of trying to eliminate insecurity, accept that it is part of being human.
- Shift from maximizing control to deepening understanding of:
 - Yourself.
 - Other people.
 - The world and your place in it.

Key Elements

1. Acceptance of insecurity
 - Recognize you cannot fully control outcomes.
 - Stop treating insecurity itself as a failure.
 - This reduces fear and frees energy for more meaningful questions: “What really matters to me?” “What kind of person do I want to be?”
2. Ongoing process of discovery and creation
 - “What matters” is not simply found like a hidden object; it is also created through:
 - Reflection (e.g. life review: looking back over your life to see what has actually brought you joy, meaning, pride).
 - Trying things, noticing what resonates.
 - Shaping values over time (e.g. caring more about relationships, less about status).
 - You are partially discovering your values, partially deciding and committing to them.
3. Commitment after reflection
 - You can’t search forever. At some point, you:
 - Decide: “These people/projects/values are what I will stand by.”
 - Accept you are choosing under uncertainty.
 - This is not blind control; it’s informed commitment grounded in understanding of yourself and the world.
4. Self-compassion and compassion for others
 - When things go badly:
 - Instead of harsh self-blame, respond with self-compassion: see failures in the context of human vulnerability.
 - Toward others:
 - Move from quick judgment to trying to understand their background, pressures, and fears (see Section 4).
 - Understanding itself has intrinsic value:

- Even if it doesn't fix the situation, it makes your life richer, more meaningful, and less reactive.
5. “Striving for peace with reality”
- The understanding strategy aims to live with reality instead of fighting it.
 - You still use planning and control, but:
 - As tools, not as your ultimate source of security.
 - You are less shattered when plans fail, because your sense of meaning doesn't depend entirely on controlling outcomes.
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3. Commitment: Risks and Rewards

What Is Commitment?

- A stable, long-term dedication to a person, role, or project, where:
 - You invest time, energy, emotion, and identity.
 - You stick with it even through difficulty and uncertainty.
- Examples:
 - Person: marriage or long-term partnership, deep friendship.
 - Projects: raising children, artistic or scientific work, a social cause, a challenging career path.

Rewards of Commitment

1. Deep sources of joy and meaning
 - Long-term relationships and projects:
 - Create shared history, intimacy, and trust.
 - Allow for deep collaboration and growth.
 - These are often the most profound sources of happiness people report.
2. Coherent identity
 - Commitments help answer “Who am I?”:
 - “I am a parent,” “I’m a teacher,” “I’m a researcher on climate change,” etc.
 - This stability gives your life direction beyond moment-to-moment pleasure.
3. Richness that only appears over time
 - Some goods emerge only with sustained effort:
 - Raising a child to adulthood.
 - Completing a demanding creative or intellectual project.
 - Without commitment, you may never reach these “deeper layers” of experience.
4. Freedom from endless searching
 - Constantly keeping all options open can be paralyzing.
 - Commitment ends the endless hunt for “the perfect option” and lets you deeply inhabit the life you’ve chosen.

Risks and Costs of Commitment

1. Exposure to pain and loss
 - Commitments make you vulnerable:
 - A marriage can involve conflict or end in divorce.
 - Children can suffer, struggle, or become estranged.
 - A beloved project can fail or be rejected.

- The deeper the commitment, the deeper the possible pain.
2. Restriction of options
 - Saying “yes” to one path means saying “no” to others:
 - Marriage can limit romantic freedom.
 - A demanding project can limit leisure or alternative careers.
 - You may worry about “missing out” or regret your choices.
 3. Risk of failure
 - You might:
 - Fail to finish the project.
 - Not be the partner or parent you hoped to be.
 - Under the control strategy, this feels catastrophic (because your worth rests on success).
 - Wren-Lewis recommends self-compassion instead:
 - See failure as part of a risky but meaningful human life, not as proof you’re worthless.

Overall View

- Without commitment:
 - You may avoid some pain and regret.
 - But you risk missing the most profound joys and meanings in life.
 - With commitment:
 - You accept vulnerability to suffering and failure.
 - But you open yourself to deeper fulfillment than the control strategy can provide.
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4. Moral Judgment vs. Deeper Explanation

Initial Moral Judgment

- When someone behaves badly (lies, is rude, breaks a promise), our first reaction is often:
 - “They’re selfish,” “They’re lazy,” “They’re a bad person.”
- This is a moral judgment: evaluating them in terms of right/wrong, virtue/vice.

Why Wren-Lewis Thinks We Should Not Stop There

1. Moral judgment alone is shallow
 - It labels the person (e.g. “selfish”) but doesn’t explain:
 - Why they acted this way.
 - What pressures, fears, or misunderstandings they faced.
 - It misses the complexity of their situation and psychology.
2. Judgment can block understanding and compassion
 - Once we label someone as “bad,” we may:
 - Stop being curious about their motives.
 - Feel no obligation to understand or help them.
 - This reinforces distance, anger, and conflict.
3. Deeper explanation helps genuine understanding
 - Looking for a deeper explanation means asking:
 - What past experiences shaped this person?
 - What insecurities, needs, or values are driving them?

- What circumstances influenced their options?
 - This does not necessarily excuse their behavior, but it:
 - Puts it in context.
 - Makes their actions more intelligible.
4. Better practical responses
- Understanding the deeper causes of behavior:
 - Helps you respond more constructively (instead of just punishing or rejecting).
 - Can suggest ways to support change or protect yourself intelligently.
 - For example:
 - If someone lies because of fear, addressing the fear may be more effective than simply condemning the lie.
5. Connection to the understanding strategy
- The understanding strategy is about:
 - Compassion for yourself and others.
 - Seeing people (including yourself) as vulnerable beings shaped by complex histories, insecurities, and environments.
 - Moral judgment is not banned, but it should be integrated with deeper explanation, not replace it.
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5. Example: Deeper Explanation → Deeper Understanding

You need to be able to describe at least one example where looking deeper changes how you understand a person. Here is one clear example you can use on an exam.

Example: The Rude and Competitive Co-Worker

Surface Behavior and Moral Judgment

- Situation:
 - You have a co-worker, Alex, who constantly brags, interrupts in meetings, and dismisses others' ideas.
- Initial reaction:
 - Moral judgment: "Alex is arrogant and selfish. He doesn't respect anyone."

Looking for a Deeper Explanation

You pause and apply Wren-Lewis's understanding strategy:

- You ask:
 - What might be driving Alex's need to dominate?
 - What fears or insecurities might be underneath this behavior?
- Possible deeper factors you learn or reasonably infer:
 - Alex grew up with very critical parents; success was the only way to get approval.
 - In his previous job, he was laid off and constantly told he wasn't good enough.
 - He now feels that if he doesn't appear confident and high-status, he'll be seen as dispensable and might lose his job.

Deeper Understanding

- You still recognize:
 - His behavior (interrupting, dismissing others) is wrong and harmful.
- But you now also see:
 - His arrogance is partly a defense against deep insecurity and fear of rejection.
 - He is striving for security in an environment he experiences as threatening.

How This Changes Your Response

- Emotionally:
 - Less pure anger, more mixed feelings: some frustration, but also empathy.
- Practically:
 - Instead of only complaining about him, you might:
 - * Set clear boundaries about interruptions.
 - * Also, at times, acknowledge his contributions so he feels less desperate to prove himself.
 - Management, seeing the deeper pattern, might offer coaching or support, not just punishment.

Why This Illustrates Wren-Lewis's Point

- You did not stop at the moral judgment ("Alex is a jerk").
 - You sought a deeper explanation in:
 - Past experiences.
 - Insecurity.
 - Social and work pressures.
 - This led to:
 - A richer understanding of Alex as a complex person.
 - More compassionate and effective ways of dealing with him.
 - This is exactly what Wren-Lewis means by using compassion and understanding, rather than relying solely on immediate moral condemnation.
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Summary for Exam Use

- Control strategy: Tries to achieve total security and happiness through controlling life circumstances; treats insecurity as a problem to be eliminated; is problematic because insecurity is inescapable, control goals keep escalating, it narrows life to a problem-solving bubble, and puts you at war with reality.
- Understanding strategy: Accepts insecurity; focuses on understanding self, others, and the world; sees what matters as something discovered and created; uses control as a tool, not as an end; aims at peace with reality and values self-compassion and compassion for others.
- Commitment: Necessary for deep joy and meaning but involves real risks (pain, loss, failure, fewer options). Wren-Lewis argues that without commitment we miss the deepest sources of fulfillment; with commitment we must handle failure through self-compassion rather than harsh self-judgment.
- Moral judgment vs deeper explanation: We naturally judge others' bad behavior, but Wren-Lewis says we should not stop there. For genuine understanding and better responses, we must look for deeper explanations (history, insecurity, circumstances). This is part of the understanding strategy and relies on compassion.

- Example: A rude, competitive co-worker initially judged as arrogant can, upon deeper investigation, be seen as driven by insecurity and past criticism; this deeper explanation leads to more nuanced understanding and more constructive ways of interacting.