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In Pursuit of Happiness

Is contentment the impossible dream?

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"Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness": a phrase considered the benchmark of human endeavour since the US Declaration of Independence in 1776. In fact the pursuit of happiness remains our primary goal to this very day. But what exactly is happiness?

Why is happiness so hard to define?

Happiness is a highly subjective thing. Everyone has different needs in **life** and everyone experiences happiness in different ways. One man's happiness could mean solitude in front of the TV on a Friday night, while another's could be at

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While we all profess to want to be happy, the pursuit of happiness never reaches the top of our to-do lists. Our lives are busy, perhaps made up of caring for children and elderly parents, working to pay the bills and holding down a functioning home. Often we are 'happy' simply to complete our tasks for that day. We rarely ask ourselves whether these tasks are making us really happy.

The question of happiness is also a very difficult one to ask oneself. There are many things in life which we simply cannot change – our children and relatives for example – and many which, while not necessarily permanent, such as our romantic relationships or where we live, would require enormous upheaval to alter. There is so much at stake. Perhaps changing these things would make us less happy in the short term. Surely it is easier to just accept that things are the way they are, and carry on?

Happiness is a lot like love. If you have to ask whether you are in it or not, you are probably not.

— Daniel Nettle

Chemical happiness

The abundance of happiness chemicals makes the situation even more complex. These trick our brains into believing we are happy. Alcohol and drugs are the obvious candidates but the dopamine our brains produce when we tick something off the to-do list also belongs on this list. Dopamine is a

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feeling. If you enjoy the tasks you are ticking off, this is great. But dopamine is a false friend if you do not. Chemical happiness is no replacement for real happiness.

Does pleasure equal happiness?

So what is real happiness? Perhaps the best place to start is by defining what it is not. Many people believe that happiness is the excitement of new experiences, the thrill and passion of physical intimacy, or the delights of a fine meal. These are all wonderful experiences but are all essentially short-term. They have a definite beginning and end point. They are not a state of mind. These are all simply pleasurable experiences. If we had these experiences all the time, our brains would adapt and turn pleasure into routine. Once that happens, it takes even more to make us feel good again.



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Defining real happiness

The experts themselves even find it hard to agree. But theorists who resonate include psychologist and happiness pioneer Michael Fordyce who maintains that happiness is: "a longer-term sense of emotional well-being and contentment – a general "feeling" that one is happy." In his book *Happiness: The science behind the smile*, Daniel Nettle's opening line reads: "Happiness is a lot like love. If you have to ask whether you are in it or not, you are probably not." Nettle maintains that the final level to understanding happiness is the idea of flourishing and fulfilling one's potential. In other words, happiness comes when you feel satisfied and fulfilled. Happiness is a feeling of contentment, that life is just as it should be. Perfect happiness, enlightenment, comes when you have all of your needs satisfied.

Does happiness mean never experiencing negative emotions?

How lovely that would be! The truth is that we all experience negative emotions, even the happiest among us. Negative emotions are important: they shine a light on what is wrong and spur us to fix the problem. The difference is how happy people react when faced with these emotions. They search for solutions rather than catastrophising. They see life's upsets as short term rather than the new normal, a blip in an otherwise contented existence. In their 2005 study "Pursuing happiness: the architecture of sustainable change" Lyubomirsky et al. found that the frequency of negative emotions (rather than their absence) was decisive in determining happiness.

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and pride, but infrequent negative emotions, such as sadness, anxiety and anger, were perfectly normal.

Tips for finding happiness

- **Step aside from daily life** and ask yourself honest questions about which areas of life are making you happy and which need a rethink.
- **Understand you are an individual with distinct needs.** Maybe you need to feel surrounded by animals and nature to feel happy, or maybe you need the bustle of the big city? Maybe you appreciate solitude over family life? Accept that your needs might be completely different to someone else's and don't feel pressured into accepting their definition of happiness. The sooner you learn what makes you tick as an individual, the sooner you can make a plan of action.
- **Avoid chemicals which imitate happiness.** No-one is suggesting the occasional glass of wine will cause your downfall, but it is important to be aware that chemicals like alcohol only trick your brain into thinking it is happy. Real happiness comes from elsewhere!
- **Understand pleasure for what it is:** a short-term experience which contributes to a happy existence but does not define it.
- **Don't fall at the first negative emotion:** remember, happy people experience negative emotions too. But it is how they react to these emotions that counts.



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