

What makes us lastingly happy?

Happiness comes in two varieties. One is momentary happiness, which occurs when we see something funny, or taste something good, or have our back scratched. It is based on physical sensation, and comes and goes quickly. Since it doesn't last, it doesn't get us what we really want, which is consistent good feeling. It's a brief bit of happiness, but not a full experience. And if we chase after more of it, as many people choose to do, we end up frustrated and less happy. It's good to have pleasurable moments, but not so good to build a life around seeking them.

The second variety is fundamental, enduring happiness. We feel down-deep satisfied, content, that life is going well. Which is why this kind of happiness is often called well-being. That's what we'll talk about here.

Of what does the experience of well-being consist? As in any other way we perceive ourselves and the world, it has three components: thought, feeling, and behavior. When we're living well, our thoughts are positive and optimistic. We tell ourselves what's happening at present is desirable, and will be in the future. "Alright now, alright later."

Our feelings are similarly positive. We smile, feel satisfied, have enthusiasm for life. While clouds occasionally cross our emotional sky, most of the time it's clear and bright. "I feel good."

Our behavior reflects and promotes our positive internal state. We do things that produce more happy thoughts and good feelings. We treat ourselves and others well, and are rewarded for doing so. "I take care of myself and the people I care about. And that makes me happy."

Thoughts, feelings, and actions. What allows them to become and remain positive? What points them in the right direction? As living beings, we have basic needs. If we are aware of and satisfy them, we experience well-being. Simple as that!

What are these fundamental life needs? Many people throughout the ages have provided varying answers to that central question. I think there are six. Two are primarily about survival, two especially pertain to growth, and two address fulfillment.

This way of ordering the needs makes obvious developmental sense. A living being needs, first, to survive, then to grow, and finally to fulfill its purpose. A fruit tree must put down roots and take nourishment, grow in stature, and then flower and fruit. A human child must be taken care of, grow up, and then live as a generative adult.

Survival needs: in my view, there are two, **sustenance** and **safety**. As an infant, and now, are we getting the physical and emotional nourishment we need, and is our bodily and psychic integrity protected? If so, we can continue to grow. If not, we are in danger of losing life. At this foundational level, are we well and happy, or unwell and unhappy?

Growth needs: **nurturance** and **opportunity**. The young person (or plant) needs to be provided for and guided. We must ensure the proper conditions and instruction for that being to grow and develop. We make sure to teach our children how to work the world and interact with others. And they need the proper conditions to learn and practice those skills. No

matter what their potential, if they are growing up impoverished and deprived, they may never get to actualize that potential. Without good instruction, lacking stimulation, absent successful role models, and with no clear path forward, they may fail to develop fully or even adequately. Like a plant in the wrong growing environment, they may wilt instead of flourish.

Fulfillment needs: my terms for these are ***communion*** and ***contribution***. For an apple tree, this means communing – having deep interaction – with a bee, and contributing new life in the form of apples. For an adult human, this entails establishing intimate, enduring relationships, and working to provide for others. If you want to know if a person is happy, ask them about how well they love and how they feel about what they're doing. As Freud said when questioned about what a healthy adult should be able to do, "Love and work."

Lasting happiness is the natural consequence of having these six fundamental needs satisfied. To experience full well-being, we need to survive, grow, and find fulfillment. We need sustenance and safety (the survival needs), nurturance and opportunity (the growth needs), and communion and contribution (the fulfillment needs). To the extent that these needs are addressed, we are happy.

To the extent they are not, we are unhappy. The variety of unhappiness we experience stems from which need or needs are not fully satisfied. For example, if I perceive that my job is at risk, I feel insecure and anxious. If I lack a best friend or an intimate partner, I feel sad and empty.

Viewed this way, the causes of psychological distress become clear. And the way to make things better becomes similarly obvious. A teenager has no prosocial role models and is acting badly? Give him healthy adults to interact with. A twenty-something is feeling depressed because she can't find meaningful work? Help her to obtain some. A number of old people are dejected because they have lost their loved ones? Get them together to start a community project.

Instead of pathologizing a person who is suffering psychologically, we see that person as reacting in a natural way to an unhealthy life situation. Their symptoms are not indicative of something amiss within them. On the contrary, the symptoms are valid indicators of something wrong around them. Rather than considering them broken and needing to be fixed, we see their suffering as understandable. And we help them to improve the situation in which they are living.

This is not to say that some unhappiness doesn't have a physical origin and should be treated medically. If the root cause of distress is organic, it must be addressed on that level. If there really is something fundamentally wrong in the brain and body, we must intervene there. However – and this is a big “however” – most psychological distress is not organic at the root. By treating it as if it were, we miss the opportunity to cure, rather than simply lessen, the difficulty.

In other words, we treat the wrong thing. And that has limited effect. Yes, antidepressants may make you less depressed. But will they make you genuinely happy about your life? Bottom line: unless there is clear evidence that unhappiness is physically caused, we should look at it as indicative of unhealthy life circumstances. As we change those

circumstances so that fundamental life needs are being met, we will restore natural health and happiness.

What I'm advocating is a therapeutic focus on how the person is living as opposed to treating the symptoms as the whole problem. But there's another component: an aspect of a person's life is their view of it. Sometimes it's our interpretation of events rather than the events themselves that cause us to feel anxious or defeated. We see threat that isn't really there, or we don't realize that all the doors aren't closed, that there are good options available to us.

In that not uncommon case, the therapy needs to address and correct the ways the unhappy person is misinterpreting events. Combining the two components, an examination and correction of distorted thought patterns and the support to change life circumstances, is often the best way to truly transform someone's life from suffering to success.

It is easy to see that the six basic developmental needs span three domains, three broad areas of life: health, occupation (whatever we do with our time and energy), and relationship. As living creatures, we strive to be healthy, act in life-promoting ways, and make life-enhancing alliances. A very simple formula for happiness is ***good health plus good work plus good relationships***. These sum to well-being, to a good life.

When that is not the case, we can look at each domain and see what needs are not being satisfied there. And we can take steps to provide what's missing. For instance, if an acquaintance is feeling sick and scared, we can make sure they're eating well (sustenance) and can contact us

when they're frightened or in need (safety). If someone we know is dissatisfied with what they are doing, we can encourage them to develop new skills (nurturance) and find a situation where those skills can be utilized (opportunity). If someone we encounter is without a close relationship and feels they're wasting their life, we can coach them toward joining a group of people with similar interests (communion) and adding to that group's efforts (contribution).

So, deep, enduring happiness – well-being – is a natural consequence of our basic life needs being met. We can identify six: two that insure our survival (sustenance and safety), two that promote our growth (nurturance and opportunity), and two that provide our fulfillment (communion and contribution). When we are satisfying these needs, we think, feel, and act in life-affirming, promoting, and appreciating ways. We do this in three domains: health, occupation, and relationship. As a result, we feel fully alive, and that feeling of full aliveness is what we experience as lasting happiness.

Spencer Sherman, PhD

www.drspencersherman.com

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