

In Pursuit of Happiness

Synopsis of a Symposium

May 2021

Bottom Line at the Top: Recurrent themes from happiness experts: Don't expect others to make you happy. There is no "right" happiness profile. Changing one's expectations often helps. Things don't make you happy. Don't just wish for it, manage your mind to enable feeling happiness.

The May 2021 *In Pursuit of Happiness* seminar organized by **The Atlantic Monthly** magazine and sponsored by Equitable Advisors was timed perfectly. The pandemic had socially distanced people into isolation from their emotional and physical support systems, stripped people of their incomes, killed loved ones, disrupted education and deprived children of critical social interaction. More victims were secluded with their abusers. The fatal drug overdose rate spiked. A lot of us were unhappy. Even for those who were not particularly unhappy, the life disruption led to reconsideration of what we need in life to get by and be happy.

Here I present snippets from 6 hours of thoughts and advice from well-known leaders in the fields of wellness, health, psychology, education, parenting and philosophy. I have condensed their statements so much that it is best read slowly, to consider their real-life ramifications.

Arthur Brooks, Professor, Harvard Business School and author of The Atlantic's How to Build a Life column. "Happiness is not the opposite of unhappiness." There is continuum with a blank middle ground. It takes a conscious attitude change to move from the absence of unhappiness to feeling happiness.

He suggests that we: 1) Reframe questions: For example, rather than considering what you missed or hated about the pandemic, identify what you did not miss during the lockdown and what you liked about being in your own home. 2) Create a reverse bucket list, because when we get the things/trips/goals we want, there is always something more to want. A reverse

bucket list contains the things we can do without. One version of happiness = what you have ÷ by the number of things you want. To the extent that some fraction of happiness derives from having our needs met, if we are satisfied with what we have, the denominator is 0, so the index of that part is infinite.

He also addressed how outside influences can affect our happiness, saying things like "Social media is the junk food of the 21st century, contributing to mental malnutrition" and providing research data suggesting that each minute of watching politics makes one more unhappy. "When we hate, someone is profiting." He quoted Nelson Mandela: "Resentment is like drinking poison and thinking it will kill the enemy."

He mentioned the beneficial hormonal surges that occur with direct eye contact and physical touch (peaking with a 22 second hug). For those who like doing self-surveys, The Authentic Happiness Website at the University of Pennsylvania has questionnaires to help map one's happiness.

The Dalai Lama: Happiness is the very purpose of daily life. Improving physical hygiene is to take care of the body, emotional hygiene is entirely dependent on the self. Fear, negative thinking and poor self-confidence are destructive. Feeling our life is meaningful and useful brings peace of mind.

Even the poor can be incredibly happy. Prosperity may affect happiness, but happiness is in the mind and heart. Rich people might have a life of plenty but may still be unhappy from always wanting more and having distrust, fear and anger. Materialistic life is important, but we have to keep our emotional life peaceful.

Humans have a complicated mind, with desire and doubt causing more problems than exist in animals. Happiness and sadness come from our own mind.

One can't just meditate, we have to think about and visualize what is in our own mind.

Laurie Santos, Professor of psychology, Yale University, who has a popular Podcast called The Happiness Lab. "Happiness *in* life relates to how is life

going. Happiness *with* life is a deeper feeling.” Some heritable traits affect happiness, but those genetic tendencies can be modified or overcome by behavioral choices. Animals are better at expressing joy than humans.

The joy from something new and pleasurable wears off with time, causing us to take it for granted. It takes a conscious effort to be grateful for what we have and have accomplished and to continue to be happy about it. This can be hard to do, given that social comparison is a natural tendency. It is easy to find outside comparisons that make us feel bad about ourselves. We would be happier if we appreciate what is going well in our lives, independent of outside comparisons, recognizing that they are fragile and could be instantly gone. Happiness requires maintenance, consciously valuing and feeling gratitude for that which gives joy.

What brings happiness has been known for a long time, but most people are not paying attention. Often what makes us really happy are not the things that we crave or for which we will work. For many people happiness improves with better social connection. Emerging from the pandemic, we should intentionally savor in-person social activities that we previously took for granted.

Vivek Murthy, Surgeon General: Happiness means joy, fulfillment and meaningfulness, and should not be seen as self-indulgent. Meaningfulness does not require recognition or publicity. People are happier when they make life decisions that match their personal values.

“The world doesn’t benefit from our unhappiness.” We should not close ourselves off from the experiences of others, since our successes are always built on efforts of others. We must be generous enough to offer support to others so they can succeed. One of the great lessons of COVID is that success is found with cooperation.

Dr. Murthy wrote a book about loneliness. His patients were coming to appointments alone even for big decisions and had no one who cared. They had to carry all their life burdens by themselves. He realized that the problem generalizes to non-medical situations: Many people are essentially alone, despite having many contacts via technology and in person. Loneliness increases the risk of depression, anxiety, heart disease and death. We can change conditions that promote loneliness and happiness by promoting social connectedness.

COVID has been incredibly difficult, but many people were unhappy before it. Post-pandemic we should build our lives around new sources of happiness and paradigms of relationships. As a country, we should redefine what we consider strength to be the ability to express love in all its forms.

Bishop T.D. Jakes prefers the goal of peace, rather than happiness. We should be at one with ourselves, sometimes requiring shutting out extraneous noise to be able to become centered. To attain peace and tranquility, we should balance our lives with the people who need (consume) us, feed (support) us and know (are present for) us. We are most centered by things that are intangible. One of those for him is religion, which gives him assurance that things will work out the way they are supposed to. It is a refuge rather than a catalyst for change/improvement.

Gretchen Rubin, author and podcast host, Happier with Gretchen Rubin discussed the “four tendencies” of how people respond to expectations, both from others (external) and ourselves (internal). “Upholders” meet both external and internal expectations, and to do so make functional habits. “Questioners” turn every thing into an inner expectation, meeting external expectations only if convinced they meet an inner goal. “Obligers” respond to external expectations only and pretend they are internal. “Rebels” reject all expectations: “You cannot make me do it and neither can I.” Understanding our own and other’s types helps us to approach life in a way that is more likely to achieve one’s aims, dramatically affecting happiness.

Jean Twenge PhD, Professor of Psychology, San Diego State Univ, Amit Paley, CEO & Exec Dir, The Trevor Project and Brian Offutt, Chair of Board of Project Healthy Minds discussed happiness in young people. Data show that the strongest link to depression in youth equals the time spent online and engaging with social media. Having technology to link us to others during the pandemic was great, but it is not the same as in person contact. Moderation, time limits for tech engagement and not having a phone in bed or during social events and meals are key controlling depression from social media over-engagement. Dr. Twenge quoted FaceBook’s first president, Sean Parker, “FaceBook exploits a weak link in human psychology, but we did it anyway.” In addition, almost all LGBTQ youth say discriminatory politics have adversely affected their mental health.

There was a fascinating discussion of parenting suggesting that we should think less about what we can give to kids and more about how to engage them in helping and teaching others. This would improve their autonomy and sense of self-worth.

Meditation: Some presenters proffered meditation as a skill that enables happiness. It stimulates the nervous system to lower heart rate, calm breathing, reduce stress and improve sleep. Perfection in life and also in doing meditation are impossible and there is no silver bullet for happiness, despite what self-help books say. The personal skills, including meditation, that make it easier to be happy are skills that can be improved over time. The goal is to be aware of what is inside our heads and be able to refocus and pull back to calm. This increases mindfulness and emotional and mental resilience. We can mitigate anger's toilet vortex consequences with "loving kindness" meditation.

Deepak Chopra, medical doctor and metaphysical thinker, diverged from the other speakers. He feels that happiness and joy are innate, internal states of euphoria, without identifiable causes. Pursuit of happiness implies there is something to pursue, which he denies. He feels that we achieve happiness when we remove resistance to joy by employing shaktis to consciously remove the causes of suffering that block feeling happy. He names fear, ego and attachment as the causes of suffering. These result in 1) not knowing who we are, so we cling to our ego identity; 2) grasping at something ungraspable; and 3) recoiling from pain and fear of death. To him, happiness = a brain set point + living conditions + daily choices.

Conclusion: All and also none of these people have the exact formula for any particular individual's happiness. We should just try on various approaches and see what works for us.

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