

Choosing Happiness

Alia Fons-Scheyd, Pre-Doctoral Intern, Student Counseling Services

How do you know when you are truly happy? Can we choose to be happy? What does happiness mean to you? These questions are not easy to answer. Many times, we are more concerned with getting rid of the negative than with celebrating what is working for us. However, we can make choices that impact our experience of authentic happiness.

Happiness can be complex and elusive. The self-indulgent pleasures of eating a good meal or watching a great movie can feel fantastic, but these pleasures last only a short time. However, full engagement in life—not just going through the motions—adds an important dimension to happiness. Feeling one has a meaningful life allows for a subjective sense of well-being that also contributes to feeling authentically happy.

Martin Seligman, a well-known psychologist, has studied happiness, and determined that while aspects of happiness can be influenced by genetics and life circumstances, happiness is also largely influenced by ‘voluntary variables,’ or things we can impact. Examples include positive emotions about the past, present and future, e.g., practicing forgiveness, gratefulness, and hopefulness over time. Being mindful about our thoughts and emotions can lead to feelings of satisfaction, contentment, fulfillment, pride and serenity (read: happiness!).

Who tends to feel happier? People with close relationships (friends, family, romantic partner) and who find meaning through hobbies or volunteering usually feel happier. Feeling satisfaction through work, hobbies or volunteering that consumes and focuses the mind often lead to the experience of “flow,” or a sense of transcendent

absence of emotion that feels, well, happy! And, those who take time out to think about what they're grateful for tend to be grateful that they have, for they feel happier over time.

What doesn't bring happiness? Beyond having money for basic needs, happiness does not come with more money. The more we get, the more we want, and we tend to compare ourselves to others who make more money than we do. Living in a fabulous climate does not improve experience of authentic happiness, likely for the same reason. Happiness knows no bounds: education level, race and ethnicity, and most demographic differences are not related to how happy people feel. And, people who never feel other feelings usually also do not feel authentically happy; learning to feel can bring lasting pleasure.

Happiness is something we can mindfully impact through the choices we make. Choose to invest in relationships, not possessions. Find work that is meaningful to you. Don't rely too much on things like food, sex, or shopping to bring you happiness in the short term, leaving your happiness investment account depleted over the long haul. Not that happiness is always easy—an anonymous quote says it best: “Happiness is a choice that requires effort at times.” Encouragingly, whatever our circumstances, we can choose to improve our experience of authentic happiness.

With questions or comments, e-mail me at alfonss@ilstu.edu. Contact Student Counseling Services at 438-3655 or <http://www.counseling.ilstu.edu/>. Information about Martin Seligman's happiness research and positive psychology can be found at <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/>.