

The Happiness  
Hypothesis: Finding  
Modern Truth in  
Ancient Wisdom by  
Jonathan Haidt, PhD

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## WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

Before elaborating on the problem of happiness it can be useful to touch upon the reasons why people are unhappy in the first place. This is an example of a “negative” definition, as it describes what happiness isn’t. Although, it can look irrational to utilize such a definition, it is actually useful as it at least gives us a short glimpse into the desired phenomena.

When encountering such complex and abstract phenomenon, like happiness is, “negative” definitions are inevitable as “positive” ones prove to be hard to make. For thousands of years, philosophers tried to find the true meaning of happiness, yet we still don’t have a definition that resonates with every stream of thought.

Due to these difficulties, it is important to be aware of instances when happiness is absent:

1. *Inability to delay gratification*, in its extreme, leads to impulsiveness, but it is usually present in its tacit, insidious form- *continuously thinking about satisfaction*. Gratification cannot be infinitely delayed. That is an important part of being human, the necessity of which we tend to neglect, or, at least, underestimate, especially in modern times. Later we will see how some thinkers that we now regard as regressive, completely grasped the importance of this necessity.

One research, designed by Mischel in 1970 (Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990), depicts the importance of this ability to *delay satisfaction*. Mischel measured this ability in children, and could predict various measures of success, like college education, etc., *decades after the initial measuring*. But his research is important as it also proved that children differed in strategies that they used to delay gratification, *and these strategies can be taught*.

2. *Intrusive thoughts* tend to coincide with the aforementioned inability to delay satisfaction, for example, when we constantly think about eating cake when we ought to lower our sugar intake. Actually, by trying to suppress undesired thoughts, we make our mind more susceptible to them. Another interesting research, done by Wegner (Wegner, n.d.), suggested people not to think about a white bear, and found out that they were thinking about a white bear. *The essence of this research is that, sometimes, paradoxically, we can gain control over our thoughts by not controlling them*.
3. *Contentions*- heated debates with our companions tend to undermine a sense of well-being and overall happiness. In most of these cases, we have a preference towards “standing our ground”, even if we’re trying to give away an air of rationality and self-criticism. In other words, we have decided to stand our ground long before, and we shall not succumb to the

arguments of others, no matter what. This stubbornness is quite often superficially justified with our feeling of what's wrong or right. Later we will see how having an awareness of our moral compass' variability can lower our irritability in heated debates. Knowing that, in most cases, discrediting something according to our "moral" feeling is pure, blatant ignorance can also help us resonate with others more.

## **INEXTRICABLY DIVIDED**

We mostly have a picture of the human being as a being that exists as a coherent unity, in complete harmony of parts that comprise it. Quite a number of ancient, but also modern authors would contest this statement. A long line of authors found great inspiration in the unexplainable divisiveness of human species.

Aforementioned cases of happiness' absence are quite broad and actually stem from other, less conspicuous difficulties or disharmonies, that are even harder to grasp, but because of which they are not less important. These secret problems can be summed into 4 dichotomies. These categories can overlap, but still it is useful to keep them discerned:

1. *Body and mind*- this is a long lasting division, which we are still trying to understand. Even with a modern arsenal that long ago overpassed philosophy as a main "participant" in this race for knowledge, with cognitive scientists, neurology, etc. , still we are unable to appropriately grasp the true meaning of these two categories. But what is quite evident is that, taken aback by the rapid progress of science, modern people tend to underestimate the independence of the body.

To employ an analogy, they tend to view the body as completely under control of the mind, like a car rider has complete control over his machine; underestimating a comparison Buddha once made of a rider and the elephant he rode. This analogy is probably more pertinent as it nicely depicts the fact that *the body can have a mind of its own*, and can sometimes be quite stubborn, like an elephant.

2. *Controlled and automatic*- self-control and discipline are essential traits of Western civilization. But because of this, automatic processes that are equally important are often neglected. There are thoughts, reactions, etc., that are completely out of our control, but are not less important because of that. Take *intrusive thoughts* as an example. They seem to come out of nowhere, but can be quite bothering and cause us a sleepless night.
3. *New and old*- millions of years were needed for us to attain the present situation. More basic processes, like perception and somatic responses therefore had a lot more time to develop than more rational and conscious ones. This can also be seen in the brain's development, in *paleocortex (the old cortex) and neocortex (new cortex)*. The *Paleocortex* is situated deep in the brain and can only be seen by dissection. It controls all the basic processes like heart rate, pulse, blood pressure, breathing, etc. These processes had a lot of time to come to perfection.

On the other hand, the *neocortex*, and, more specifically, forehead regions of the brain, are evolutionarily speaking, quite young and still have a lot of development due.

4. *Left and right*- it is not only the division between rationality and irrationality that is important. Rational parts of human beings are also comprised of quite different parts. Take the two hemispheres of the *neocortex*. If we know something for certain, it's that left hemisphere controls language production and that the right one tends to be more active during visual and spatial tasks. Even here we don't have the complete unity we tend to generalize to the whole human being.

To employ the analogy of the rider and the elephant, we can say that, taking into consideration these 4 dichotomies, the rider evolved to serve the elephant, not vice versa. *There is an consensus in science that consciousness evolved as an adaptive instrument.* This of course goes on to support the Buddha's analogy.

It is invaluable to point out that, unlike some of the philosophers thought, all the primordial, rustic, atavistic human traits that people underestimate, are actually an essential part of being human.

There are specific brain injuries that make people unable to feel emotions in a normal way. These unfortunate individuals, nevertheless, usually have unhindered intelligence, are aware of social rules, and can, at least superficially, make rational decisions. And still, in spite of all the necessary knowledge they possess, they make irrational choices, like risky investments or socially unacceptable behavior. The core of their problem is pinpointed to the scarcity of their emotional reactions. Although they rationally know what's good or bad, they just don't get that "gut feeling" the absence of which leads them to bad decisions.

This was the case with Phineas Gage. He suffered a serious injury to his forehead, but he, miraculously, stayed conscious and, to his doctor's amazement, didn't seem to show any cognitive discrepancies. But his behavior started to change. He engaged in activities he avoided before his injury- a man with once strong work ethic now became uninhibited, impulsive, and irritable.

People should bear this in mind when dwelling on how their life would be better without emotions. The truth is that reason and emotions are incomprehensibly intertwined and that we discern them only for the sake of analysis. And additionally, no one complains about their good emotions, which is a theme on which we will reflect later.

Individuals have a tendency towards neglecting the existence of extremes of differences in opinions, blinded by the age of reason, it is usually forgotten that people can sometimes be *irrational, uncontrolled and act automatically.* *It's also forgotten how those older, less rational parts still exist and is an equally important part of being a human as being rational, controlled and civilized.* It could even be stated that Sigmund Freud's theory revolves around how this robust, rustic remnants of the past still rise to the surface of our consciousness through dreams,

language mistakes, misdeeds etc. The widespread influence that this theory rejoiced is testament to how much it resonates with reality, even if it is far from perfect representation.

From this unawareness, or to employ Freud's term, from this *repression* of everything that is in conflict with our vision of civilized, modern man stem various fallacies in judgment that bring decrement to people's ability to cope with everyday struggles. They act like Sartre's heroes from his work "The Age of Reason" who justify their inactivity and indifference in regards to the rising problem of Nazism.

The problem is repressed, and with its proliferation, larger and larger concessions are necessary until they become so large that we can no longer keep them out of our sight. The next step is open confrontation with the problem, in Sartre's novel, is war, in our analogy, it's becoming aware of the problem and starting to work on it, perhaps by visiting a mental health professional, or even talking to a friend about it.

There are several fallacies in judgment that stem from this unawareness:

1. *Underestimating the power of genetics*- leads individuals to fallaciously recognizing exclusively themselves as the source of their problems. The wrongness of this can easily be dispelled by the fact that research can predict, at a quite young age, if the person will develop into an optimist or a pessimist. This can be done by measuring activity in various parts of the brain. In a society that values success above all, feelings of low self-esteem and anxiety are quite maladaptive and only perpetuate the person's struggle. It can be soothing for such a person to gain an insight into how inheritance shapes their lives. That could stop unnecessary blaming, or at least shift a part of the blame to genetics.
2. *Negativity bias*- is actually a direct consequence of a previously mentioned fallacy, but it deserves a separate mention. Simply put, human beings cannot afford to neglect a potentially dangerous stimuli, while not perceiving a stimuli that can possibly bring satisfaction is not life threatening. Therefore, the reaction to threatening signs is a lot stronger than a reaction to a sign of satisfaction of the same intensity. This bias is probably even stronger in people who are predisposed to become pessimists. It is invaluable to become aware of this as otherwise we could be tempted to attribute our overly anxious reaction solely to ourselves, and not to the whole human species.
3. *Implicit evaluation*- stems from the *controlled/automatic* dichotomy. In a world obsessed with reason and rationality, it is unthinkable that sometimes, even the most important decisions are made automatically, or according to automatic bodily responses to what happens to us. And yet, those implicit reactions shape our way of seeing the world. It is proven that people can be influenced by signals that they didn't perceive- which is called *subliminal conditioning*- and, furthermore, that they can act accordingly to this tacit reaction.

For example, a person is constantly late on her dates with her new boyfriend. Her boyfriend eventually breaks up with her after feeling frustrated, and she then slips into reactive depression.

What she doesn't understand is that she had shown signs disliked by her boyfriend which in turn led to the break up. Had she been aware of this, her self-esteem would probably have been less injured.

All in all, we don't need complex brain equipment to determine whether a person has a tendency towards self-loathing, dwelling over past mistakes, or being in a constant state of fret. We can simply ask if a person agrees with these statements:

1. I always look for ways to have fun and feel good
2. I am a chance-taker. If I see a good chance I take it without much forethought
3. Good happening in my life has a profound influence on me
4. I ruminate over past mistakes quite a lot. I can sometimes hardly get any sleep because of it.
5. I am not good at taking criticism.
6. I have a lot of fears.

Of course, pessimistic people tend to agree with the last 3 statements, while the first 3 go along with optimism.

Broadly speaking, there are 3 ways by which we can battle with all these inner demons:

1. *Meditation.* It helps us gain control over our thoughts, and, especially if we've been too uptight and anxious, it helps us alleviate our worries. Meditation exists for quite some time for a good reason, it works. But, like it's the case with the next remedy, Cognitive therapy, it needs perseverance. A short meditation session every day is more effective than a 3 hour weekly session.
2. *Cognitive therapy-* has its popularity and effectiveness probably because it insists so much on everyday practice of habits that are learned in therapy. Psychoanalysis, although quite good at providing individuals with insight, essentially leaves a person to her demons when it comes to everyday life. This is where cognitive therapy is the strongest, and that is the reason it works best with people who suffer from depression. What they need is not necessarily insight, but a set of tools that will help them get out of the bed in the morning, do the dishes, or lower their anxiety so they can sleep.
3. *Medications-* there are no doubts medications work. On the other hand, there are almost always some imperfections, like unwanted side-effects, that can be quite bothering. Here, a ratio of pros and cons should be considered. For example, a person that suffers from schizophrenia would probably have to endure the side-effects, as it's worth lowering the psychosis symptoms. Overall, it is useful to consider the remedies like therapy or meditation before resorting to medications; and to continue psychotherapy and other methods whilst taking them.

## **SOCIAL RECIPROCALITY**

A lot of problems that we consider as situated in a person emanate from various social discrepancies. There are even independent therapeutic schools which have founded their practice solely on this social aspect of human nature, the importance of which cannot be overstated.

Humans are innately social beings. This is nicely depicted in the fact that little babies are born with differential preference of human voices or faces. We cannot help but be social. Hadn't it been for our strong social relations, we would have perished long ago. But unlike some other species with strong societies our bonding is not entirely instinctively driven. We use our rationality to weight the pros and cons of getting to know a person. We consider the possibility to get back what we invested, however selfish it may seem.

This goes in line with Thomas Hobbes's famous statement that people are inherently selfish and egoistic, and that it is the society that keeps human species from slipping into total anarchy. The other extreme is Rousseau with his "Emile" whose essence can be summed up in this statement: People are inherently good; it is the society that makes them bad.

Leaving the question of true human nature to others to respond to, we shift to our main subject-*reciprocity*. This is by far one of the most important factors in social relations, the causes of which largely stay obscured, and which probably shift, even in the same person, from total selfishness to total altruism, from Hobbes to Rousseau.

Once again we can nicely understand the phenomena when considering situations that display its complete or partial absence. Let's take a love relationship as an example.

1. *Giving too much*- leads to the viewing of a generous person as a little desperate or naïve, which, paradoxically, can result in quite a dysfunctional relationship.
2. *Giving too little*- in turn makes a person seem indifferent, cold and distant. This situation is probably a bit worse as the other person could feel wronged, while the indifferent person is quite happy to give a little love in exchange for abundance of love.

## **HAPPINESS COMES FROM WITHIN**

The title is drawn from an ancient wisdom that was preached by the Buddha, who, although surrounded with all pleasures imaginable, as he was a prince, chose to abandon all emotional attachments.

Let's first discern the two main types of pleasures, which were found to be relevant by both self-aware contemplation of great minds, and careful analysis of data:

1. *Extrinsic pleasure* could be described as similar to the pleasure that most animal species can feel. It is a pleasure we get from eating chocolate, or having sex, for instance. This is the type of pleasure to which modesty should apply. Overindulging in it results in depletion and compulsive actions (one only has to consider pornography and nymphomania). But one should be careful not to restrict this type of pleasure exclusively to bodily desires. Whenever we want some new electronic device for example, we probably want to experience this type

of pleasure. This is why excessive buying brings satisfaction, at least for a short period of time.

This type of pleasure works with extrinsic motivation, as we want the object itself, and the necessary behavior that is needed to attain it is only regarded as an instrument.

2. *Intrinsic pleasure* is a type of pleasure that is driven by intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation means that we don't indispensably have a goal, or an object of desire. The actions are goals themselves. Consider, for example the vast array of hobbies. A man can like gardening simply because he enjoys spending time outside, in the lush flora. Fruits are only a by-product of his labor.

Generally speaking, the two main types of *voluntary actions* have a positive influence on our gratification. But, if we abuse the *extrinsic pleasures*, we could actually end up feeling worse, as we will be more and more focused on the objects (material or mental) of pleasure themselves rather than enjoying the moment.

*The state of flow* can be attained using intrinsic motivation, and in that sense belongs to the *V* of *Voluntary Action*, in the equation of happiness. This equation is also comprised of the factors - *C- life conditions, and H-heredity*. All 3 interact to produce a specific outcome- a certain level of happiness.

Consider, for instance, the writing profession. Popular writers inevitably have to produce a great amount of work. Some of it has to be driven by extrinsic pleasure. The other extreme could be someone like John Fante. Prior to being discovered by Charles Bukowski, Fante had been writing for quite some time, to no avail. In spite of this he kept writing, having no regard to the apparent lack of success. As there was no outside reward of any sort, he was guided by intrinsic pleasure.

What dogmatic Buddhism preaches is, essentially, renouncement of all pleasures, regardless of the type. This statement should be contested, as it is evident that not everybody could live in this disciplined way.

What can be inferred from the Buddhist practice is a certain shift from *extrinsic pleasures to intrinsic – with emphasis on attaining the state of flow*. It is sometimes referred as: we get consumed by what we are doing; focusing astutely our attention to what interests us. In this state we completely forget about ourselves, our anxieties and apprehensions. We feel completely tuned in with the task, and not overburdened by it.

There are few prerequisites for us to get into this *state of flow*:

1. *The task is interesting and is seen as a challenging one*
2. *The task matches our abilities*

3. *Immediate feedback*- Consider the example of a musician. She is constantly reinforced by audience applause, as well as the rhythm of other musicians if she is in a band. She realizes that she is doing well which further motivates her. Like her, continuously look to assess the outcome of actions.
4. *Effortlessness*- there should be certain automation in the task completion.

It is crucial that every condition is satisfied as their absence could lead to several inconveniences:

1. *Uninteresting task*- Our minds become distracted and lose focus, seeking interest elsewhere. It won't access flow.
2. *The task is too easy or too hard*- If the task is too easy, much like if it's not interesting, our mind will wander elsewhere. If the task is too difficult, however, we become frustrated and can even hurt our self-esteem. Choosing the right degree of difficulty is probably the most important element of attaining flow.
3. *Immediate feedback*- Lacking feedback will leave us deprived of the satisfaction we get from finishing parts of the task. It will also make us unable to estimate the value of what we accomplish.
4. *Being too conscious about the task*- Let's evoke the musician example once again. If the musician was conscious about every movement she has to make with her fingers, she would be overwhelmed. The task has to be, at least to some degree, automatic. This will leave more capacity for self-evaluating and creative thinking.

Some individuals have significant struggle with immersing themselves in an activity, be it the result of *anxiety and uptightness*, or *inertia and lacking of motivation*. These two main causes have quite different backgrounds, and affect our ability to attain the state of flow in different ways and could be resolved by having these two separate sets of tips in mind.

*Anxiety and uptightness* mainly hinder concentration, even though a person exhibits required motivation and possesses the activity which puts them in the state of flow:

1. *Deep breathing exercises* can be employed before starting the activity itself. This will provide the person with a new, calmer approach, which would otherwise be polluted with apprehension. Exercises can last just a few minutes, but should be used frequently.
2. *Meditation*, like breathing exercises, helps with attaining a satisfying degree of serenity. Here, the focus is on filtering all the thoughts that normally come to our mind- everyday problems like shopping or traffic commutes. While breathing exercises could be helpful to people who suffer from stress or undifferentiated anxiety, meditation suits people with

specific obsessive thoughts.

3. *Solidifying self-esteem*, although crucial to both sources of adversities of reaching the state of flow, it's especially important when helping anxious individuals. In some cases, thanks to meditation and breathing exercises, a person can become aware that she constantly compares herself with others, or with her past or desired achievements.

Not only does this shift her focus, but it also leads to a plunge in motivation and feelings of low value. A simple insight in these thoughts can sometimes be helpful, while other times a person should be advised that, even if any comparison is to take place, it should be after the activity is finished.

*Inertia and lack of motivation* can be a part of depression in the case of which a problem should probably be tackled in other, broader fashion. If a problem is isolated it could be solved by having these tips in mind:

1. *Making a list of satisfying activities*, after which a person rates these activities according to their desirability. Here a person is only advised to rate the activities in terms of satisfaction or level of interest.
2. *Pros and cons of activities- a highly desirable activity is not always the best one*. Let's take the example of mastering an instrument. Becoming a master musician could bring immeasurable satisfaction, but, the amount of time and energy that is needed can be overwhelming. In addition, people's self-esteem can easily be hurt when continuously faced with plateau in progress. On the other hand, an easy task could become tedious.
3. *Finding the ideal task*- the most ideal task is the one in which desirability and the sense of challenge intersects. This is the activity that will most likely occupy a person for a significant amount of time while also providing her with a challenge. It will also lower the possibility of failure, which in turn will keep self-esteem undamaged.

*Conditions* are a set of complex factors that signify:

1. *Race*
2. *Sex*
3. *Culture*
4. *Marital status*
5. *Environment*
6. *Age*
7. *Working status*
8. *Relationships*

Even this extensive list is shortened- these are only the most significant ones.

Although each and every one of these factors is important and contributes to the well-being of people, the findings are not unanimous. For instance, it is a widespread belief that younger people are happier- which is not necessarily true. Some data suggest that *happiness grows with age*. (Carstensen et al., 2011)

It also goes without questioning that wealthier people are happier, but this finding is relevant only in the range between extreme poverty and the middle-class (Diener & Oishi, 2000).

Between these groups there is indeed a significant difference in happiness that can be attributed to the level of income. But this relationship is more and more opaque as we progress towards the other end of the spectrum.

Extremely rich people are not necessarily happier than individuals with moderate income. And, what's more important is that even when people with moderate or low incomes come to a possession of a significant wealth- like the ones that won the lottery- the sharp spike in happiness tends to vanish in a short time span. This relates to our distinction- *intrinsic pleasure/extrinsic pleasure*. Winning a lottery is similar to short-lived pleasures like sex, or even drugs, and it tends to pale more and more as the time goes by.

This leads us to the distinction between the two ways of spending money (and time) - categories that correspond to the difference between the two types of pleasure:

1. *Conspicuous spending*- is mostly a status symbol. A whole range of commodities that we buy- from electronics to cars, watches, etc. - are things we don't exactly need but purchase anyway. In itself, conspicuous spending is not bad. But, as people have limited resources, spending money (and time) takes away from the other type of spending that is linked with the true sense of happiness.
2. *Inconspicuous spending*- instead of working longer hours to buy that new big house, why not take some time off to spend it with significant others? This type of spending has *intrinsic motivation*. We spend time and money exactly because we want it. Although this type of spending can involve material commodities, it has stronger links to spending time with people that we love, and making them happy. Unlike conspicuous spending, *meaningful experiences* won't pale over time, and could actually become more cherished to us as time goes by.

*To conclude, life conditions are far from trivial, but their relationships with happiness are anything but simple.* And we should be careful not to overestimate their importance at the expense of other factors.

The importance of *heredity* is already implied, but we'll elaborate. Although genetics are a significant factor, they cannot determine the level of well-being we ought to accomplish. Biologists agree that genes, at best, determine the whole range of happiness levels an individual could feel- rather than setting a fixed value- and that other factors, in interaction with heredity,

determine the exact intensity of well-being. *And again, even when this value is set, it is far from unchangeable.*

## **ENDURANCE**

We must first be careful not to take the old maxim: “What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger”, too literally. It goes without saying that, in response to intense stress, we can suffer greatly from various afflictions. Some go on to develop PTSD, for example, which is extremely distressing. There are other instances, however, in which suffering aside, we develop new perspectives and modes of living as a result of intense stressful events:

1. *Finding new capacities*- people can amaze themselves by the fact that they have endured something, giving rise to increased self-esteem and confidence. For example surviving a war is in itself a fact that shows courage and endurance.
2. *Filtering*- in times of adversity it is not all friends or supporters which actually come to be present for us, for one reason or another. Adversity filters those relationships and in doing so calls for us to appreciate our truer connections even more, and to not waste time on smaller contingencies with each other.
3. *Change of priorities*- There are numerous cases of epiphanies as a result of a stressful event. After such an event, people tend to look through a different pair of eyes. They become more aware of the fragility of their existence and are resolved to spend their future life the best way possible. There are many cases of former drug addicts, who staggered and sauntered through their life without finding any meaning whatsoever. After battling with their addiction, they become tenacious fighters against addiction and found employment – and meaning - in helping and counseling people who have similar problems as they have had.

People differ in their endurance strategies. It all comes down to several levels of personality:

1. *Basic traits*- these are the types of reactions we are mostly genetically predisposed to. If we stick to the Buddha’s analogy, these reactions are *the elephant*. These are very basic human personality traits like extroversion, neuroticism, openness, conscientiousness and warmth. The analogy between these traits and Buddha’s elephant is further supported by research that finds strong genetic determination of basic personality traits.
2. *Life story*- the other opposite, the rider, gives meaning to what’s happening around him. It justifies, ruminates, thinks about possible outcomes, about how, in the future, he or she could respond and manage him or herself.
3. *Characteristic adaptations are a product of the former two*. For example, a person that is high in neuroticism exhibits repression when faced with recurrent bad memories, and depression when faced with rejection. A person that is low on neuroticism, however, would

try to explain to herself why particular memories recur. It is the same with other basic traits. People high on extroversion will probably seek the company of others when faced with difficulties, while introverted individuals will try to find the solution on their own.

*Characteristic adaptations usually employ these 4 groups of motivators:*

1. *Wealth and achievement*- as already implied, this *conspicuous* way of spending time and money could hardly bring true satisfaction. However, work can be helpful for some people that need to shift focus from their ruminating thoughts.
2. *Relationship and intimacy*- tend to be helpful, and with the next two motivators, comprise the group of *inconspicuous motivators*.
3. *Religion and spirituality*
4. *Generativity*- means to contribute to society or to leave a certain legacy

Happiness is a complex phenomenon, and equating psychological sense of well-being with material well-being is pointless. Recent views on happiness are a synthesis of ancient esoteric contemplations and modern scientific research, which together build a picture of happiness as a product of several interactions. All these considerations teach us that we should be careful not to underestimate the importance of one factor at the expense of others.

In a confusing world focused on products and consumables, renewing our sense of being present in the moment and the importance of spending time with significant others is a breath of fresh air.

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