



Psychology of Happiness



Juan Moises de la Serna

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To talk about happiness means talking about an illusion, a goal in life, something very desirable but at the same time ephemeral. At least if we are referring to the idealized “happiness” sold through commercials, television or radio. But happiness is much more than achieving a desired goal in particular; it is a daily effort to maintain that state, otherwise, what would be the purpose of achieving happiness if we have to lose it afterwards? To talk about happiness means talking about an illusion, a goal in life, something very desirable but at the same time ephemeral. At least if we are referring to the idealized “happiness” sold through commercials, television or radio. But happiness is much more than achieving a desired goal in particular; it is a daily effort to maintain that state, otherwise, what would be the purpose of achieving happiness if we have to lose it afterwards? In this book you will find the latest investigations related to happiness and the answers to what it is and how to achieve it. You will also find what happens if you don't achieve happiness and what happens when the inconveniences and barriers to achieving happiness appear. It will all be explained in a clear and simple way in order to offer you an enriching experience that will be able to help you in your personal search for achieving happiness; but a happiness that will be real, possible and attainable, and above all, lasting.

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Psychology
of
Happiness

The journey is now available to everyone

Juan Moisés de la Serna

Translator: Ana María Carrizosa De Narvaez

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“Psychology of Happiness: The journey is now available to everyone”

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Foreword

To talk about happiness means talking about an illusion, a goal in life, something very desirable but at the same time ephemeral. At least if we are referring to the idealized “happiness” sold through commercials, television or radio. But happiness is much more than achieving a desired goal in particular; it is a daily effort to maintain that state, otherwise, what would be the purpose of achieving happiness if we have to lose it afterwards?

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It will all be explained in a clear and simple way in order to offer you an enriching experience that will be able to help you in your personal search for achieving happiness; but a happiness that will be real, possible and attainable, and above all, lasting.

Surely many times
very happy you have been
but have you ever thought
why did it happen?
And why day after day
we are never happy?
Why is it difficult for us to smile
or make our brother happy?
Searching for an answer
roads I have traveled
I have asked many

no one has defined it.
—Happiness— they answer—,
I don't know where it will come from
but I know I am happy
—someone will say so.
—Yes, I already know that
—to that one I have replied—
but tell me why.
—I don't know —he has spoken.
Happiness sometimes
it's hard to find
because we are demanding
and we don't want to stop.
It is a quiet moment
that can be breathed
playing with a child
or looking at the wide sea.
It is only those moments
that you may remember
when you become overwhelmed
and cannot rest.
Happiness is that
what cannot be touched
a smile, a kiss
an "I love you, truly!"
It is always thinking about the other
selfishness forget
make an effort to smile
and think of others.
Dedicated to my parents

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CHAPTER 1. THE EMOTION OF HAPPINESS

The first thing we need to know about happiness is that it is an emotion. Emotions are part of life, whether we are aware of it or not. They are present in each and every action and decision taken, hence the importance of studying them.

Among emotion theorists there are two perspectives: those who consider emotion as a univocal and inseparable concept that includes both positive and negative affect in a continuum; and those who consider it to be a multidimensional concept, composed of cognitive, behavioral and physiological elements.

Emotion can be considered as a particular state experienced by a subject, which allows him to perceive and respond to the environment (as a kind of arousal).

Simplifying, one could consider three possible states: the positive (joy or happiness), the neutral (indifference), and the negative (sadness, displeasure or unhappiness). Therefore, emotion would be a way of perceiving and responding to the environment.

When a state becomes chronic, it is considered to be a “trait” of personality, that is, the individual turns it into their usual way of responding to internal or external stimulation.

When chronic emotional states “get out of adjustment”, abnormal deviations of emotional processing appear, ranging from the accentuation of anxious or phobic traits, to pathologies such as generalized anxiety disorder or major depression disorder.

Another approach to emotion is to consider it as an adaptive procedure of cognitive, physiological and behavioral reaction to environmental or internal stimulation, which can be positive or negative. For those reasons, one can state that emotion has an impact in thoughts, as well as in the organism and in behavior.

The processing of emotion can be divided in two: emotional perception and emotional experience. The first one involves a low-level cognitive processing, where the emotional stimulus is perceived and evaluated; while the second involves a high-level cognitive processing where the perception is contextualized and interpreted according to previous experiences.

These processes appear to be independent; therefore, the processing of the emotional perception may or may not involve an emotional experience.

With regard to the relationship between cognition and emotion, there are three main stances:

- On the one hand, there are authors who defend that, in certain circumstances, the emotions block and nullify cognition, since the skills and abilities for affection are precisely the traits that characterize the human race in comparison with the simple mathematical and categorical processing of data that takes place in computers.

- The opposite posture defends that the superior cognitive processes define humans and differentiate them from animals. This posture relegates emotions to secondary, irrational and almost always equivocal processes, characteristic of animals.

- A third posture would be the one that considers both cognitive processes as independent, but working together in certain circumstances.

The existence of an emotional-perceptual-memory circuit in the human brain is widely accepted, with the amygdala playing a crucial role in registering the events of emotional stimuli. Thus, it is significantly more likely that the information with emotional content will be stored and retrieved better than the information with neutral content.

The extensive connection between the amygdala, the extrastriate visual regions and the hippocampus, allows the amygdala to modulate its functioning and facilitate perceptive and mnemonic functions in these areas.

However, evidence shows that emotional learning associated with the amygdala is temporarily limited and that the subsequent effects on memory may be due to the participation of other brain regions, like the orbitofrontal cortex.

As previously mentioned, we would be facing an emotional processing circuit different from the specific cognitive processing path.

In the emotional circuit, the stimuli seem to be automatically analyzed in a rougher and faster way, following a strategy of configuration. It is a simplified communication, but with information of great relevance, necessary for survival and for an adequate development within an ecological niche.

As previously mentioned, this processing capacity in parallel represents a competitive advantage for surviving in the environment, since it allows the subject to avoid threats and dangers immediately, even before the information is consciously evaluated in the prefrontal cortex.

According to what can be verified, the emotional world is more complex than what can be seen on the surface. Talking about the components of emotion, depending on where the focus is placed, at first sight we can say that there are three expressions of emotion:

- The neurophysiological, which includes all the neural pathways and structures involved particularly in each emotion, as well as the vegetative responses of vasoconstriction, tachycardia and accelerated breathing, which accompany emotions.

- The behavioral one, in which the body becomes a “mirror” of emotions. They manifest themselves involuntarily through facial expression and through the rest of the body, tensing or relaxing certain muscles, which can expose what we feel, even when we try to “conceal” it. Likewise, this component shows what is going to be done or not if the emotion is followed, that is, how all those motivated actions will be expressed in behavior and in the way of relating to others.

- The cognitive, which has more to do with how one’s own and others’ emotion is perceived, and how it is interpreted, that is, the subjective experience of feelings. A problem in this area is found in alexithymia: due to an inadequate emotional education, the person is unable to correctly identify and interpret their own emotions and those of others.

Therefore, happiness will not only be something that involves a temporary state, but, being an emotion, it will have an impact on the way of thinking, feeling and behaving, that is, one will feel happy with all the organism.

It is also possible to talk about the components of emotion to refer to its qualities and characteristics, such as:

- Positive emotions versus negative emotions. Amongst the first ones there would be love, hope, desire, compassion, joy... and amongst the negative ones there would be anger, hate, desperation and sadness... Without any doubt, happiness is, fundamentally and by definition, a positive emotion.

- Emotions of high and low activation. Amongst the first ones there would be euphoria, anger, rage... while amongst the others there would be sadness, melancholy and apathy... Happiness can be one of the fullest experiences with an important activation component similar to euphoria.

- Primary emotions versus secondary emotions, being amongst the first ones rage, happiness, fear and sadness while amongst the secondary: love, surprise, shame and aversion. When thinking about happiness, one can believe that it is something “primary” and basic in a person, but it corresponds more with a secondary emotion, like that of love.

For John Rof, father of psychosomatic medicine, when someone is happy, parts as important as memory are activated; beautiful memories of the moment are created, expressed and shared with people around. The muscle tone will improve. One feels comfortable and satisfied with the moment.

Especially face muscles are a group of muscles that give away emotion, in particular happiness. They are the best business card.

The face and its gesticulation have become an important element serving both to express emotions and to identify them in others. This is so true that babies pay more attention to faces than to any other stimulus. Thus, it can be said that humans are predisposed to analyze faces.

The face has more than thirty muscles controlled by cranial nerves such as the facial, the oculomotor, the trochlear or the trigeminal, from which the brain receives the proprioceptive information to identify its own emotions while activating the muscles to express them.

Although some patterns in the expression of emotions have been identified, it seems that there is a high component of social learning in them. According to multicultural studies, depending on the region of the world, the same emotion will be expressed in one way or another. Nevertheless, almost all recognize the same traits in the case of happiness:

- Commissure back and up, cheeks raised, wrinkles under the lower eyelid; age-lines at the lower corner of the eyes, nasal-labial fold wrinkles.

The importance of the emotional world, which plays a prominent role in how we feel, goes beyond a simple “reflection” of oneself, since the negative emotions can cause illness when they stiffen.

Internal feelings of activation, such as euphoria or rage, will overexcite the organism, modifying its resting baseline level, causing us to think and behave differently from how we usually do. To the same extent, feelings of deactivation such as grief or sadness will reduce the activity of the organism, modifying thoughts and behavior.

Alterations due to active and passive feelings, which could lead to changes in the levels of anxiety, breathing, pain and muscle tone, will have in turn effects on the sleep cycle or the immune system, among others. If the emotions are transitory, they will not have major consequences. But if these emotions remain, they can lead to psychosomatic problems.

Thus, a situation of psychological pain (grief) or depression, can trigger specific anxious states, characterized normally by a deflated state, superficial and slowed breathing, feelings close to melancholy with hypersensitivity to external stimuli, such as light, sound and also smell. The person will be much more sensitive to any external “aggression”. Any interest for physical activity will be lost, presenting a weakened and flaccid muscle tone.

Sleep will be hindered by thoughts of guilt and uselessness, which accompany those states, with memories about the circumstances that motivated that grief and depression. There will be “mental rumination” in which the same negative emotions repeat themselves over and over again. All of these will prevent sleeping well, damaging the quantity and quality of sleep. This, among others, will reduce the functioning of the immune system that will not be able to perform its functions during the night. If this situation remains for too long, it will have a negative impact on the whole organism, starting with the immune system.

On the other hand, an emotion of activation, such as euphoria or rage will be expressed in high levels of stress, which will provide a “false” clarity of thought, a feeling of “now I understand everything” and I can decide anything without making mistakes. In these states, hyperventilation occurs, increasing blood oxygen levels, with accelerated and shallow breathing. An attention “narrowness” takes place. A lot of information is lost, which in a normal state could be interesting. Whatever is not “my goal” is discarded, with reduced sensitivity to pain, both physical and psychological. There is an over-activation of muscle tone, which doesn't allow being “still”, having to wander from one place to another.

Due to high levels of stress and over-activation, sleep is negatively affected, both in quantity and in quality. This reduces the “functioning” possibility of the immune system. Thereby, the capacity for wound recovery is reduced, damaging the learning process as well.

If this situation remains, the weakness of the immune system will facilitate infections, generating also a progressive depletion of the organism's resources, due to high levels of anxiety and therefore, high levels of cholesterol in the blood.

That is why it is possible to understand that happiness cannot be a permanent “atrophied” state of a person, since it will also bring consequences on health, due to the organism's over-activation.

A “healthy happiness” would be a particular state that the person can enjoy and share, but a state that allows the person to return afterwards to their basal level, where the organism can recover from that emotion in order to lead a “normal” life.

But not everyone is able to feel happiness in the same way. To experience it, the person must have an adequate emotional development. If the limbic system suffers atrophy, the person’s life will become “discolored”, not only emotionally but also in all areas.

Likewise, people with high levels of alexithymia have difficulties to feel and express happiness. They show problems in their social relationships and when making decisions, because they are unable to know how their own body feels or which are the feelings of others. This makes the person socially “incompetent”, since people around will handle themselves through emotional keys that they are unable to “see” or process properly, appearing cold and distant.

This kind of people has a correct functioning of their limbic system. What happens is that they don’t learn to “value” it or they simply “discard” their emotional world by considering it “weakness” or something useless.

The decision making process of people with alexithymia is most likely to be logical, cold and calculated. They make decisions that are scarcely taken, bearing in mind what is convenient for all, based on pros and cons, where the column that adds up becomes the optimal decision, without giving improvisation a chance.

For them, it is the same to read a recipe for cooking something, than to read a book of law or a romantic novel, since their experience will be the same. They have evident personality traits framed within type D: hyperactive, self-demanding and with low self-esteem.

But these people are far from “living without emotions” as one might think. They suffer from a “disconnection” between their internal emotional world and it’s external expression. Therefore, the body becomes the vehicle through which emotions go out, producing their somatization.

They show a greater probability of becoming psychosomatically ill, with the appearance of ulcerative colitis, peptic ulcers, and vascular disorders such as hypertension or ischemic heart disease, as well as mood disorders such as depression and anxiety.

All of this is due to their incapacity to allow emotions to get out by other means, such as using words, writing or simply “breaking into tears”.

A study conducted by the Banaras Hindu University (India), whose results were published in a scientific journal named S.I.S. Journal of Projective Psychology and Mental Health, analyzes the relationship between health and alexithymia.

They studied a hundred and fifty adults to evaluate alexithymia levels, mental health and experiences of positive and negative emotions.

The results indicate that high levels of alexithymia are related to a greater probability of becoming ill with psychological disorders. This is explained in part by the component of anhedonia present in alexithymia itself. With this element, positive experience of emotions is lost, thus favoring more negative experiences.

People with high levels of alexithymia are exposed to suffer greater physical health problems with the appearance of ulcers and other psychosomatic disorders. Additionally they are more likely to suffer from psychological problems. This is due to and inadequate development of E.I. (Emotional Intelligence).

As indicated by the results of the study, it is foreseeable for these people to have difficulties in achieving adequate levels of happiness, despite attaining many of their life goals. These are the people who, despite having everything, are unable to be happy about it.

CHAPTER 2. DISCOVERING HAPPINESS

In this section, the different variables and elements that facilitate the state of happiness will be explained, knowing that there are many associated benefits both for the mood and for social relationships.

Before that, we must clarify that happiness is an abstract concept. It has become something that people are continually searching for, a goal for today's society. But unlike what we may think, there is neither a single definition nor a clear way to achieve a state of happiness.

This means that there are many unanswered questions on the matter, like how it is produced, how it is maintained and if the state can be recovered when it is lost?

That is why constant research is carried out in an attempt to verify which variables have an influence in the state of happiness, or otherwise expressed, which are the elements that determine the greatest happiness?

The research carried out by the University of Western Carolina in the US tried to give an answer to that question. The results were published in a scientific journal named Europe's Journal of Psychology.

One hundred nine adults between 19 and 61 years of age participated in the study. Sixty-six were women. The survey was done through the Internet, and the ones polled received money for their participation.

All of them answered to three standardized questionnaires. One on the affective style called Affective Style Questionnaire, another one on the humor style called the Humor Style Questionnaire and the last one, the Subjective Happiness Scale, evaluated the participant's level of happiness.

The affective style gives an account of how the person relates emotionally with others, either with trust or distrust, in a generous or sullen way...

The humor style is related to how the person "undertakes life", with humor, seriousness, or seeing everything through a dark lens...

The subjective happiness scale is the measurement one gives to the feeling of happiness in one's life.

The results indicate a relationship between the affective style and the humor style, and a positive relationship between the above two with the subjective level of happiness.

Therefore, cultivating any of these elements, the affective style or the humor style is enough to increase positively the subjective happiness level that participants and people in general have.

These results, on the other hand, are foreseeable, having in mind that in individual cases the positive relationship between the humor style and happiness had already been observed. This means that if a person is happy and funny, it will be easier for him or her and others to show a better state in general, which becomes happiness.

As indicated so far, happiness is a construct related to many external and internal variables. But to what extent does it depend on a person's self-esteem level?

It has to be considered that self-esteem is also a construct that is shaped gradually from infancy, through positive and negative experiences. It indicates how we see ourselves, that is, our self-reflection, regardless of internal and external reality.

People with high self-esteem believe themselves as capable of achieving the goals they set. They are constant and fight for what they want. When they find inconveniences, they consider them as "trials" or "teachings" in life that have to be accepted and then move forward.

People with low self-esteem feel inferior to others, unable to do the same things as the rest and even unable to seek and achieve their own goals, showing great dependence on the opinions other people have about them. They have little tolerance to frustration. Even the smallest "bump in the road" becomes an insuperable slab, which only reinforces the idea of uselessness.

Although these are extreme examples, everybody has a better or worse self-esteem. Depending on that, we relate in one way or another with other people, whether it is at work or in our personal life.

Even though self-esteem conforms to experience, it can change over time. We can have a positive or defeatist attitude toward the same event, feeling that we have a “winning streak” or a “bad streak”. But, is self-esteem directly related to happiness?

This is what a research made from the Office for the Student with Disability and the Center for Student Counseling in the University of Nagoya tried to find out. The research was done together with the Center of Experimental Investigation in Social Sciences, the Department of Behavioral Sciences and the School of Literature Graduates of the University of Hokkaido (Japan). The results were published by a scientific journal named *Frontiers in Psychology*.

Five hundred thirty-seven youngsters participated in the study. One hundred and seventy-six were young women.

64% were freshmen students while the rest belonged to the universities' sophomore year.

All of them were given a series of standardized questionnaires, Life Scale and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, to assess both happiness and self-esteem and to verify whether there are correlations between the two.

The results indicate that the relationship between happiness and self-esteem varies depending on the circumstances that the person has to go through, thus, when facing a situation of uncertainty and change, such as entering in an education center where everything is new: subjects, teachers, classmates, the center itself... Happiness has a very strong relationship with self-esteem, that is, people who have high self-esteem feel happier than those who have low self-esteem.

But that relationship weakens when people find themselves in a stable environment, for example sophomore-year students, who already know the environment in which they perform. Despite small changes such as changes in subjects or in some teachers, the remaining conditions stay the same, causing other variables to acquire greater prominence in happiness. That is, now, in a stable environment, a person with high self-esteem does not necessarily have to be the happiest.

Although the results are clear regarding the relationship between happiness and self-esteem, the research was developed in a very specific area, in the academic world, and in a particular stage of the self-esteem formation such as the student period. Therefore, in order to establish the mentioned relationship, new analysis must be carried out in other environments, and at different ages, as it may be something characteristic only of young people.

As one can observe in this analysis, research on happiness can be done in a specific environment with a specific population, such as that of young people or students. But happiness can also be analyzed at a more global level.

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