

The Study of Happiness: Why Not Examine the Brighter Side of Life?

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In several of my website articles I have described the emergence of "positive psychology," a field of study that emphasizes strengths and virtues rather than weaknesses and pathology. The articles and books that my colleague Sam Goldstein and I have authored pertaining to resilience fall within the domain of positive psychology. Given my interest in a strength-based perspective of human development and functioning, I was especially drawn to a recent issue of *Time Magazine* with a cover titled "The Science of Happiness." The issue contained an array of articles related to the study of happiness, featuring the works of such noted psychologists as Martin Seligman, Edward Diener, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Daniel Kahneman.

I find refreshing the increased attention being directed to understanding factors that contribute to contentment and happiness. While we must not lessen our commitment to learn as much as possible about psychiatric disorders if we are to develop effective interventions to ease the pain of those burdened with these disorders, it is equally important that we not neglect the study of more positive thoughts, emotions, or behaviors. Although the field of positive psychology is still relatively young, a body of research is emerging that has major implications not only for child development and parenting but also for the ways in which we choose to lead our adult lives.

At the beginning of the *Time Magazine* section about happiness, reporter Claudia Wallis asks, "So what has science learned makes the human heart sing? More than one might imagine - along with some surprising things about what doesn't ring our inner chimes. Take wealth, for instance, and all the delightful things that money can buy. Research by Diener, among others, has shown that once

your basic needs are met, additional income does little to raise your sense of satisfaction with life. A good education? Sorry, Mom and Dad, neither education nor, for that matter, a high IQ paves the road to happiness." I smiled when I read this last statement since I emphasize in my parenting workshops that high grades and SAT scores are not the best criteria to measure or predict happiness or contentment and that we frequently place too much emphasis on the grades of youngsters rather than on what Daniel Goleman calls their "emotional intelligence."

Wallis, continuing her discussion of research findings, observes, "Youth, no again. In fact, older people are more consistently satisfied with their lives than the young. And they're less prone to dark moods. . . . Marriage? A complicated picture: married people are generally happier than singles, but that might be because they were happier to begin with."

Not surprisingly, our connection with others is definitely a source of happiness. Wallis refers to a 2002 study conducted by Diener and Seligman that found that "the most salient characteristics shared by the 10% of students with the highest levels of happiness and the fewest signs of depression were the strong ties to family and friends and commitment to spending time with them." Diener suggests, "Word needs to be spread. It is important to work on social skills, close interpersonal ties, and social support in order to be happy."

Lyubomirsky, based on her research findings as well as others, offers eight recommendations for achieving a life filled with satisfaction and contentment that are in concert with what Sam Goldstein and I advocate for leading a resilient lifestyle. Lyubomirsky's suggestions together with my own comments are listed below. As you review this list it may be helpful to ask, "To what extent am I engaged in the activities she suggests?" Relatedly, "If I am not currently practicing these activities, what realistic steps can I take to do so?"

Count your blessings. As I noted in last month's article, research indicates that when individuals record on a regular basis two or three things for which they are grateful, they experience greater optimism, connectedness to others, and more peaceful sleep. In our frenetic world, we can easily get caught up with pressures, stresses, and negativity and fail to appreciate the good things in our lives, something as simple as a child or grandchild giving us a hug, a boss writing us a note of appreciation, a friend taking the time to send us an e-mail with a series of jokes, or a spouse saying, "I love you."

Practice acts of kindness. This has been a constant theme in my writings and seminars for the past 20 years. For example, in research I conducted about school climate I asked adults for their most positive memory of school, a memory involving a teacher or school administrator saying or doing something that boosted their self-esteem and motivation; respondents most frequently reported an occasion when they were asked to help others (e.g., tutor a younger child; assist in the secretary's office; pass out the milk and straws). There appears to be an inborn desire to provide support and assistance to others, a desire that lasts a lifetime. For instance, elderly people who are actively involved in helping others have been found to lead more meaningful, longer lives.

Savor life's joys. We live in a world bombarded with technology that pervades all aspects of our life. I am not against technology (I often wonder what I ever did before the advent of computers and word processing and e-mails), but what concerns me is when we permit technology to interfere with enjoying the moment. Must a meal at a restaurant with close friends or playing with one's child be interrupted by answering a phone call? Or, as I witnessed recently, must one be on a cell phone while jogging? Or must the television be on while your family is eating dinner? Distractions such as these lessen our enjoyments.

Thank a mentor. In my workshops for educators I often ask if they have ever received a note of thanks from a former student. A number raise their hands and share how gratifying it felt. I then ask

how many of them ever wrote to one of their favorite teachers to offer words of appreciation. Many have not. I strongly urge them to do so, noting that it will not only be a gift to that teacher but to themselves as well. I have received many e-mails from individuals who followed my suggestion and thanked a person who has enriched their lives; they report that doing so helped them to feel more satisfied and happy. Think about a significant person in your life (it could be a mentor, a friend, a relative) and write that individual a note of appreciation. Notice the feelings that are generated.

Learn to forgive. The topic of forgiveness is receiving increasing attention, especially within the field of positive psychology. I have conducted therapy with men and women whose difficulties letting go of anger and resentment have been major obstacles in their lives. Patients have frequently told me that it is not easy to forgive. I agree, especially in cases involving emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. However, I share with patients that I do not view forgiving as the same as forgetting, minimizing, or denying hurtful actions. Rather, a major feature of forgiving is to insure that our lives not be dominated by intense anger and thoughts of revenge. We must appreciate that while we may not have had control over hurtful actions, we have more choice than we realize in determining our response to the negative behavior of others.

Invest time and energy in friends and family. In our book *The Power of Resilience*, Sam Goldstein and I highlight the importance of connections in promoting a resilient lifestyle. Unfortunately, as I have frequently witnessed in my clinical practice, many people do not devote the necessary time nurturing significant relationships. They tell me that they want to build these relationships but that other commitments, especially work-related, interfere with their being able to do so. It is little wonder that they experience anxiety and depression, since they are not living a life in concert with what they say they value. I do not believe most people can change their schedules overnight. However, I have seen many individuals slowly and realistically build in time with their spouses, children, and

friends. When we set as a priority the strengthening of our relationships, it is possible to accomplish.

Take care of your body. In an earlier article I discussed the importance of proper diet and exercise for children, especially in light of the rise of obesity and health issues (e.g., diabetes) in our youth. Adults are confronted with the same issues. Health care experts have used the word "epidemic" to describe the number of children, adolescents, and adults who fail to exercise, who rely on junk foods and eat a poorly balanced diet, and who are very overweight. I recognize that it is not easy to modify one's eating habits, but I believe that realistic diets and exercise regimes can be achieved. Choosing to walk rather than drive one's car to a near-by destination, to climb some steps instead of taking the elevator, or to spend a half-hour taking a stroll rather than watching television are excellent places to begin. Proper exercise and diet will lead to weight loss, a better sense of oneself, and a feeling of control of one's life - all important ingredients in promoting satisfaction and happiness.

Develop strategies for coping with stress and hardships. I was once asked during a workshop if being resilient meant that you were free from stress and pressure. In response I mentioned that before the word resilient became such a popular part of our lexicon, the word that was used most often in psychological writings to describe children who had overcome adversity was "invulnerable." I always had reservations about that word since I felt it suggested that these youngsters were superboys or supergirls. Leading a resilient lifestyle does not imply the absence of problems and stresses, but rather that when hardships arise, the person has developed effective ways of coping. When confronted with challenges, resilient individuals do not moan in resignation, "Another burden that I will have difficulty handling." Instead, they are prepared to cope with these challenges in productive ways.

For example, one woman with a provocative teenage daughter learned that when they began to engage in a heated argument, she

would simply say, "When we become this angry, it's hard to settle anything. I'm taking my own 10-minute timeout." It proved to be a very constructive strategy. A man with a pressure-filled job learned to meditate for a few minutes in the morning and afternoon and reported being better able to handle his work demands. The key factor is to be proactive rather than reactive by developing a wide range of coping strategies. When we feel in command of our emotions and behaviors, we are more inclined to experience contentment.

Concluding Thought

In a world often dominated with negativity, I find it hopeful that researchers and clinicians are displaying an increased appreciation of the importance of studying positive aspects of life such as empathy, caring, compassion, altruism, integrity, forgiveness, spirituality, and humor. I believe that as research continues to identify those factors that contribute to happiness, optimism, and resilience, we will be in a better position to make choices about our lifestyle that can enhance our emotional and physical well-being and our relationships with others. It is research well-worth our time and attention.

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