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### The Knowledgeable Pursuit of Happiness

Nothing beats the thrill of a roller coaster! They send people down the track at blazing speeds, whip them around tight corners, shake them, scramble them, and fling them around like rag dolls, but they are quite an awesome experience. Life is much the same way. It has ups, downs, twists, and turns, but it can also be an incredible experience. Bobby McFerrin sang, “Don’t worry, be happy”. From world leaders to McDonald’s employees, and from the unemployed to the incredibly rich, people aspire to reach an ideal known as happiness. But what is happiness? This ideal can mean a variety of things in one culture. Taking this concept to a worldwide level creates a debate and confusion greater than any other. Dr. Ellen Kenner offers a precise definition:

Happiness is not merely a life lived by accumulating moments of pleasure. On the contrary, happiness is a long lasting enduring enjoyment of life, it is being in love with living. It is your reward for achieving a good character and personal rational values in life. Some important values are a productive career, romance, friendship, and hobbies (Kenner).

Dr. Kenner offers a good basis for defining happiness to be in line with life satisfaction. Many theories of how to achieve happiness exist. Some researchers claim that people can regulate their own happiness by changing how they view events of their own lives. Other experts say that people are born with a natural ability to enjoy life; they just have to let their brain take control.

Examiners of human behavior claim that happiness and satisfaction are direct results of how events match up with expectations. In this paper, all three will be wrapped up into one ideal: People should work to control their expectations and how they view the events of their lives to become happier.

In order to properly determine if humans can control their level of satisfaction and enjoyment of life, a brief background of the evolution of happiness and what makes people happy must be discussed to identify how each concept has developed. Happiness has different connotations in each region of the world. In older times, people believed that “God would encourage a person who ‘allowed no joy or pleasure, but a kind of melancholic demeanor and austerity’” (Stearns 2). Religious beliefs supported the ideal that a strict, harsh realization or reality would please God. As the Enlightenment came around, so began the quest for happiness. People would write of their interests in being a happy and independent individual. Shortly after, religion began endorsing the idea that happiness is pleasing to God. Literature originating around the 1920s reflects the “importance of being happy, the personal responsibility to gain happiness, and the methods available” (Stearns 4). Books were written with titles such as “Happiness is a Choice” and “A Thousand Paths to Happiness”. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people even began posing in photos all over the world with smiles plastered across their faces.

As America was developing as a new nation, so did the ideals of happiness that settled into place. America had developed garden cemeteries that depicted a sense of contentment and happiness as life came to an end. The ideal that working should be a source of happiness also began to develop. Members of the working class were said to have higher earnings and social mobility, on top of the intrinsic happiness, as rewards for their efforts. Some said, “The working people had no reason not to be happy” (Stearns 3). On the opposite side of hard labor developed

the impression that laziness and bad habits would disturb overall performance and, in turn, happiness and satisfaction. The British were amused by the “good humor of Americans” (Stearns 3) and believed American people were unwilling to show signs of being unhappy from a fear of sympathy or disapproval. Americans utilized their reputation as a happy people to entice others to immigrate to their great country.

Nowadays, happiness is a happening topic amongst researchers and generally in people. Everyone is looking to find the secret of happiness. People have goals to end up happy or be happy with their lives. Studies have been conducted to define characteristics of life that lead to happiness. These studies compare men versus women, Western society versus Chinese society, and healthy individuals versus chronically ill patients. Western society believes that individual striving, control, and achievement will develop a sense of happiness and personal satisfaction. Chinese culture focuses more on external evaluations, such as longevity of life, health, virtue, peace, personal improvement, and self-control. In the United States, both men and women value being loved by loved ones, being healthy and well, and having self-confidence. Males value close relationships while women value a network of friends. Happiness in the workplace is a result of trust and sharing within the company. Dr. Sarah Whitton of the University of Cincinnati Department of Psychology found through her research with the group Today’s Couples and Research Program that being involved in a committed and highly romantic relationship can fight off feelings of depression and increase feelings of life satisfaction. This is a brief framing of some of the contributing factors to happiness and life satisfaction in today’s society.

As seen through the extensive development of happiness, perception of events is key to determining happiness. People’s view of events is shaped every day. Some shaping occurs on a small scale: people pressuring others to enjoy similar foods, teams, etc. Other molding can shape

the remainder of a person's life: perception of everything after being diagnosed with a (potentially) fatal illness. Though people can choose to shift their focus or change their ways, it is not an easy task. Nonetheless, it can be done. Tamika Felder, a cervical cancer survivor, lost her fertility through her treatment regimen. She chose to look at life and be grateful for its blessings and greatness rather than dwell on the fact that she was unable to be a mother. Many researchers claim the path to happiness lies in where people place their values and what they consider important. Taking less notice of trivial matters and not sweating the small stuff will also enhance life satisfaction. Rory Sutherland, Vice Chairman of a branding and marketing company known as the Ogilvy Group, says it best in his TED Talk on perspective: "Things are not what they are; they are what we think they are." None of these tasks are easy. It takes practice, dedication, and time to be able to control event perception, but science has shown that people who can control their reactions to events are happier as a result. Thus, the sense of control of the situation has a great contribution to happiness. The key question that results from these findings is—Does control of the situation determine event perception or is perception independent of situational control? Evidence from this study would lead to the conclusion that control has a direct correlation with event perception.

Some research indicates that event perception can lead only to misery and suffering. For instance, two dogs are kept in separate cages for a simulation. One dog experiences a continuous electric shock until he presses a red button on the wall of his cage. Another dog experiences a shock of the same intensity and duration but has absolutely no control of the situation. The dog with no control shows significant signs of depression as the test is conducted. In this scenario, the dog recognized that he had no control of the situation and was unable to deal with it.

Innately, the default setting of the human mind is to be satisfactorily content with the present situation. If people do not get in the way of their brain by constantly worrying or questioning happiness, they will be happier. Psychologists have discovered that innate nature and mentality is shaped very early in life. People did not focus on ensuring the happiness of children until the last century, but everyone has become more conscious of the lasting effects a happy or unhappy childhood can have. Peter Stearns states that, "Happiness is as essential as food if a child is to develop into normal manhood or womanhood" (5). Research has also shown that as people get older, they become calmer and more aware of the ideal that life has an ending. Because they know life is not concrete, older people live in the moment, ignore small problems, focus on deepening relationships, and savor life. Older people have also experienced more and are better equipped to deal with emotions, such as anxiety or sadness, that depreciate younger people's level of happiness.

Multiple research groups have found that happiness can be synthesized in the human mind. Two key situations must be examined to prove synthesis occurs: first, a situation in which a person controls the outcome and a second situation where no control of the result exists. Having the freedom of choice makes people happy. They are in control. Having too many choices makes people miserable. They imagine the incredible results that could have resulted from another decision. How is this dealt with in the mind? Being unable to go back and change the decision allows the brain to cope with the decision, even if no clear best choice exists. For example, a study was conducted where people were given a painting of their choice out of a lineup. One week later, researchers discovered that people believed the painting they chose was better than the ones they did not choose. The same result was gathered from a similar test conducted with patients suffering from memory loss. When people have no control of the

situation, they still manage to synthesize happiness. If a relative or close friend passes away, people have the ability to overcome this adversity and develop a sense of happiness again. Dan Gilbert refers to this phenomenon as a human's "psychological immune system". Our mind innately will fight back against feelings of fear or sadness to achieve happiness.

Furthermore, people tend to participate and get wrapped up in activities they enjoy. Happiness will result from giving into emotions. In times of sadness, feel sad. In times of anger, be angry. Once these emotions have passed, life can return to the default state of happiness. If these feelings are suppressed, they will persist and it becomes difficult to move on. People know what they like and do not like to do. A happiness advice column from an analyst of *Sex and the City* indicates that people should not let others make their decisions or decide how to live their lives. People should take other's advice with a grain of salt: consider it for what it is but make decisions that meet their own needs and fulfill their passions. He also recommends taking time to be alone and reflect on life. Ultimately, giving into emotions will allow people the introspection that will tell their innate nature and passions whether or not they are happy with their situation. The key, also the most difficult aspect, of introspection is to listen to one's mind and thoughts. Listening and acting on those thoughts will lead to a happy life that hits the wants and desires of a person.

According to Napoleon Bonaparte, former Emperor of the French, happiness was not an innate nature. It was not something guaranteed to all people of the world. Aspiring first to be a great writer, Napoleon responded to a competition essay prompt. "The question [posed]—'What truths and feelings are most important to instill happiness in men?'" Enlightenment authors of the time responded with answers surrounding the ideal of men being "born to be happy" and surrounding the idea of innate happiness. Napoleon, on the other hand, wrote that "When ennu

takes possession of a man's heart, sadness, black melancholy, and despair will follow. If this state endures, he will give himself to death" (McMahon 272). We can see this topic has been debated as far back as 1791, and continues to be argued in today's society.

In today's world when people discuss their emotional viewpoints, they typically identify as an optimist or pessimist: a dreamer or a realist. Is one better than the other? People are encouraged to be optimistic and think of the glass as half full rather than half empty. It is encouraged to expect greatness out of oneself and others. However, recent studies have shown that high expectations can lead to a low level of satisfaction. This applies to everything from a person's wedding down to the meal that they eat for dinner. Barry Schwartz says that the secret to happiness is "low expectations" in his TED Talk on "The Paradox of Choice". He is not the only researcher to come to this conclusion. A similar ideal is mentioned in by Darrin McMahon in his article "Happiness: According to Mr. Schwartz, as our options increase, it is also easy to imagine that the choice we did not make would have made us happier. As discussed previously, if people would give in to their emotions and let their brains work as they are programmed, the innate nature to be happy and satisfied with the current situation would take over. The idea of low expectations is a hyperbole used to make people think about lowering expectations. Other researchers have identified that having realistic expectations or no expectation at all will lead to a higher event satisfaction. The idea is lowering expectations to improve satisfaction and the resulting happiness, not necessarily having low expectations.

Life is an emotional roller coaster: it has its ups and downs, quick changes in direction, and it is shorter than expected. A key factor in controlling expectations is recognizing life has high points and low points. Kim Singleton, a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, says happiness comes from "maintaining a sense of peace despite those highs and lows. Singleton asserts, 'You

determine and create the happiness you want in your life” (Holmes 1). With recognition of the ever-changing state of life comes a more realistic expectation of what can be expected. Being mentally prepared for the low points of life makes them tolerable. Balancing the low points with the high points will bring to fruition the greatness in life that is uncertainty and excitement. A personal boost also comes from overcoming life’s obstacles. Conditioning the mind to be prepared for setbacks and obstacles, and knowing they can be overcome, will facilitate a huge opportunity for growth and lasting happiness.

Utilizing low expectations can take on many forms. A sub form is being flexible. Be accepting of change and be open to whatever happens in life. Recognize that life is unpredictable. Many people try to plan their lives out as far in advance as possible. Goal setting has become a huge part of today’s society. Many developmental psychologists think that setting goals has a direct correlation with potential for success. A crucial step is generally forgotten, however. When goals are set, they must be ever changing and constantly reevaluated. People’s dreams and aspirations are fluid. They change as we learn and experience new things. Thus, our goals must change through learning and experiencing. Along with fluidity within goals and aspirations, a good balance between career and home lives must be achieved. Make sure adequate quality time is spent with both in order to maintain a high quality of life.

By working to develop the skills required to control perception, innate behaviors, and expectations, people will become capable of achieving the highest levels of happiness. The desired behavioral modifications discussed previously are not achieved instantaneously and cannot be established within a few of life’s many experiences. These classes of thought must be conditioned and trained into the mind. It takes dedication and perseverance to maintain life philosophies of flexibility and viewing life as having limited time and enjoying every aspect of

it. It takes a great deal of effort, and sometimes a great tragedy, before a person is able to see the value in the simple things in life. People must work incredibly hard to not let their worries and fears interfere with the innate nature of happiness. Many aspects of life go into satisfaction: from decisions, to situational control, to options, to mentality, to expectations and beyond. That is the beauty and complexity of the world. Living life by all of these rules and guidelines is a daunting task in of itself, but if people can maintain these ideals and this balance in their lives, they will live the happiest and most satisfying life a person can live.

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