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## Moving Towards Happiness



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*The following are notes from a talk given at Rancho La Puerta, Tecate, Mexico, 2011.*

No one wakes up in the morning saying, “Dear God. Please let me suffer the whole day”.

This consciously or unconsciously implies we *want* to be happy. It is an inner drive. The Dali Lama, an extraordinary expert on the subject, says, “The purpose of life is to *be* happy. Happiness is what we all seek.” Americans consider happiness more important than moral goodness, and even going to Heaven. It is in our grain, i.e. “Life liberty and the pursuit of happiness”.

Getting it is not the issue. Keeping it, that’s the problem.

This is because of something call *hedonic adaption*, our minds ability to normalize the unexpected. If we get something good, pretty quickly we normalize it into something we expect, such as air conditioning on a hot summer day.

My favorite definition of happiness comes from Buddhist monk, former scientist and author on happiness, Matthieu Riccard, who called it, “Human flourishing”. It is a deep sense of serenity and fulfillment that *pervades* all emotions.

There is general agreement among religions that we are made for happiness, that the pursuit of happiness (human flourishing) is not at odds with the pursuit of holiness (often defined as discipline and practice). In fact, we don’t flourish by stumbling on it, but more through practicing it.

But additionally that happiness is mostly an inside out job.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was the last leader of the Chabad Lubivitchers. He was a well-known teacher, scholar and beloved by his community. Though at times controversial, there was no question his people adored him with reverence and deep respect.

One day Rabbi Schneerson got a letter from a man who wrote. “I need the rabbi’s help. I am deeply depressed. I can hardly go on. I pray and am not fulfilled. I am not moved. I feel no satisfaction. I need the rabbi’s help.”

The Rabbi, who used to be in publishing, did nothing nor offered any opinion or commentary, save for one simple action. He sent the letter back, and circled the first word in each sentence in red. The lesson was clear. You live a life of misery because you are focused on yourself.

The message was clear. If you want to know why you are miserable it is because everything starts with “I”.

Dan Gilbert, Harvard researcher and author of *The Pursuit of Happiness*, says there are two kinds of happiness, *natural* and *synthetic*. “Natural” happiness is when you have gotten what you want. “Synthetic” happiness is when you haven’t gotten what you want, but make the best of what you get. He defines it this way, “If someone picks their nose you might not date them, but if you are married to them you learn to smile and avoid the fruit cake.”

Additionally we know a few other things.

First, Money can’t buy happiness. Research shows once middle-class comforts are in place, the link between money and happiness is virtually negligible. The first 50-75 grand makes a dramatic difference, but after basic needs are met, the next 10 million does almost nothing.

In fact, 37 percent of the people on Forbes list of Wealthiest Americans are less happy than the average American. Education doesn’t seem to matter, IQ, or youth (older folks tend to be happier). Live in sunny California? Not happier than the Midwest. Though research shows Californians *think* they are happier.

Second, happiness is genetically influenced but not genetically fixed. In a landmark study on identical twins, 50% of one’s happiness depends on one’s genes. That’s your *set point*. 10% to 15% is a result of various measurable life circumstances and variables. Meaning the remaining 35-40% is a combination of unknown factors and the results of things we do to deliberately become happier. We get a genetic set point and the goal is to bounce it up.

Here are four strategies that I really like and have some data to support. Not the last word on the subject, just a few things to consider.

### **1. Surround yourself with happy people.**

Mark Twain said, “Whoever is happy will make others happy, too.” Human relationships are consistently found to be among the most important correlation factors with human happiness. But better than that, happiness is like a virus. It spreads!. In a *2008 British Medical Journal* 20-year study of 5000 subjects, it was found happiness spreads up to three degrees of separation.

Close friendships are one of the single most important predictor of one’s happiness. If you have close friends you are four times as likely to be happy. It’s no surprise that social engagement is one of the most important contributors to happiness. What is now different is that the *nature* of the relationship counts. You get more joy from spending longer periods of time with a close friend than shorter visits with more people.

### **2. Choose happy.**

Abraham Lincoln said, "People are just as happy as they make up their minds to be." Try to make conscious choices that make you happy. One way to do this is to repeat behaviors that have made you happy in the past, such as ski trips, favorite movies, or The Ranch.

Einstein famously said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting *different* results." Happiness research instead says to do the same thing over again and expect the *same* result.

### **3. Design in happiness.**

Changes don't have to be big ones to tip the joy in your favor. If can you transfer 30 minutes-one hour of your day from an activity you don't like to one you do like your overall happiness will increase. Think simple. Think small. Think incremental.

One strategy is to "landmine" your home with family pictures, happy photos, vacation shots or shots of The Ranch. Another is to make your bed, or complete any task. People are happier when simple everyday tasks are completed. Start baking, hula hooping, juggling, or yoga. Happy people tend to be ones who do things that occupy their attention 100%, so they are in "flow".

Finally, research shows happiness is greatly influenced by people who design in and seek *meaning* in their lives. Question? Who's happier? Stay at home parents or out of home parents. The answer? Both! But the happiest were the one's who felt their talents were well used and they had a sense of meaning in their lives. People doing the same job, were 24% happier when they felt their skills were meaningfully used.

### **4. Know your business.**

Research shows those who meditate are often significantly happier than those who don't. Why? Meditation is about among other things *detachment*. When I know what I can do, and not do, I am clear about my boundaries and spend less time on those things I have no control over or are none of my business. Author and speaker Byron Katie says, "There's your business, my business and god's business. God's business is well, god's business. But if I'm minding your business who's taking care of my business?"

Happy people have more positive experiences than unhappy people. No surprise there. But what is surprising is both groups have the same events and challenges. Thus what matters is what we do with what we get.

Said another way by Dave Gardner, "Success is getting what you want, happiness is wanting what you get."

Remember, people who have the most are basically no happier than those who have the least. But those who *like* what they have, who accept what they have with gratitude, are *twice* as happy as those who just have the most.

Its been compared to a child opening presents at Christmas. Who sits in the living room telling that child they could have done better? No one. But we do this internally all the time. We are self-inflicted judgment machines.

One way to track this pattern (and shift our internal judgment) is to raise your hands every time you have a negative judgment or internal thought for one month. This will trigger an awareness of thought *frequency* and potentially shift you to a more positive intention through attention.

Another daily strategy comes from Martin Seligman, father of positive psychology and former head of the American Psychological Association. He says the single most effective thing you can do to increase your happiness is to keep a gratitude journal of three things every day in your life that worked.

As TV producer Norman Lear said, "Life is made up of small pleasures. Happiness is made up of those tiny successes. The big ones come too infrequently. And if you don't collect all these tiny successes, the big ones don't really mean anything."

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