

# Happiness

2010

Thomas A. Burns, PhD.

Chiloquin, Oregon

Researching happiness has become a hot topic in recent years with some illuminating findings. One of the most important of these is the discovery that material well-being and wealth correlate with happiness only until a slight reserve is in place beyond what is required to support biological needs [food, warmth, shelter, health]. Thereafter increases in wealth and material possession result in only momentary joy. And after moderate levels of wealth are achieved, additional wealth actually correlates with a reduction in happiness. What is going on here?

Clearly there is no simple equation that relates happiness to amount of wealth. Happiness is a much more complicated phenomenon than that. Generally speaking, happiness is a direct consequence of a person's or group's momentary sense of pleasure or overall sense of security; and a concern for security arises throughout the natural world and at all social levels: personal, familial, communal, national, etc. In addition, many factors influence how pleasurable the moment is and how secure a person or group feels in the natural environment and as a member of different social collectives. For the most part, the greater the overall sense of pleasure in the moment and/or ease in the natural and social worlds, the higher the level of happiness.

Of course happiness is a response to a direct sense of pleasure or a perceived situation of ease, not necessarily a truly secure situation. A person or group can be in a state of exhilaration but unaware of a looming threat that is about to overturn that state – the tiger or terrorist in the bushes. So, duration of the happiness state is also an important feature defining happiness; it can be momentary or prolonged, and the more prolonged the expectation of pleasure and/or security is in all respects, the greater the sense of happiness. Uncertainty in any of the realms that influence the sense of pleasure or security reduces the strength of happiness. But, almost paradoxically, it is also the case that happiness does not sustain in a permanent state of secured leisure. We are pleased by secure respite, but to sustain happiness we also need stimulation and action at an acceptable level of risk. Acceptable risk and leisure have to cycle in the right proportion and at the right pace and level of intensity in order to contribute to happiness. And few are happy beyond the moment without this balanced cycle being in place.

But happiness is more than pleasure and security and cycling leisure and stimulating risk taking. It also is a function of success and achievement, and these are culturally determined. Meeting culturally incorporated expectations for success and achievement in all the areas of life affects the level of both individual and group happiness. We may be secure in all other respects, but if we conceive of ourselves as failing to meet expectations, happiness can be hard to find. It follows that all the factors that influence self-esteem are part of the package that determines level of happiness.

So, happiness is a state of mind at the individual level, and the happiness quotient for a group is some composite of this state among the members, allowing for the fact that the sense of ease among some individuals has a greater impact on the group than others. Some may be very happy, others much less so, and it can take the unhappiness of only a few influential people to severely reduce the quotient for other members and the group as a whole.

It turns out that Happiness is both a matter of momentary pleasure as well as a high order, cumulative barometer of the human condition at the individual and all social levels. It is a summation of the overall situation of ease, security, and success of the individual and of the collective at all levels of identity and participation in the natural and social world, and it is enhanced and promoted by the expectation that these conditions will sustain over time.

That sounds right; it covers the biological, physical, natural, social and cultural conditions that determine happiness over time. But since happiness is a state of mind, there is another very significant element that must be included in the happiness envelope. This is the spiritual variable in happiness, and it can render happiness as determined by the other variables almost irrelevant. Some of the highest happiness quotients are reported for monks living as hermits in biological conditions at the edge of survival and isolated from all other humans. How can this be? It turns out that the perceived expectation for a high level of security and ease and of their prolonged presence can be a function of an internal state of mind as much as it is of external circumstances. And sustaining certain states of mind can literally take a person to nirvana [way beyond happiness – all the way to complete fulfillment] almost regardless of external conditions.

So, there is happiness determined by an internal sense of security and ease as discovered through the development and exploration of the intuitive mental faculty, and there is happiness determined by a sense of pleasure, security and ease as created by the condition of all those external biological, physical, natural, social and cultural variables. And one does not necessarily correlate

with the other; indeed the happiness consequences of internal and external variables are often complementary rather than supplementary.

When we appreciate the real complexity of what makes for human happiness, it is all the more astonishing that our western culture can continue to recognize only three sources for “approved” happiness: sex, wealth and religion, and one non-approved source: drugs. With regard to two of these external variables, we know from experience that sex and drugs are momentary sources of pleasure and happiness. And from research we know that the third external variable, wealth, is a rapidly diminishing source of happiness after rather minimal needs are met. So, none of these variables, alone or in combination, goes very far to promote a prolonged sense of happiness. What about religion?

Religion is the system of beliefs that we substitute for the internal spiritual source of happiness in the complex above, trying to convince ourselves that this substitution is one of equivalency. Although religion in all of its literalistic and dogmatic forms is an apparent fix, it is in fact not an adequate substitute for the spiritual source of internal happiness. Religion externalizes the spiritual in gods and saints and priests and saviors and allows for an internal source of happiness only secondarily – through faith and belief in these external agencies. Religion is an easy, quick fix – relying on other entities to do the work for us as a consequence of our acts of supplication and appeasement. By contrast, in spirituality, the sacred is within us as well as a principle throughout existence, and we take personal and individual responsibility for discovering, developing and exploring its significance – with appropriate guidance from others. This is the spiritual search or quest, and it is very challenging and it demands far more from us at the personal and social levels than does religion, but the rewards of the spiritual pursuit are great and the implications for relations with others are far less problematic. By externalizing the spiritual in religious beings, by identifying the actions [rituals] that are required to interact productively with them, and by housing absolute TRUTH in these beings and actions – with as many different beings and actions as there are religions, we create gods and rituals to argue and fight over. In this way, religion converts internal spirituality into another source of external conflict, terror, and inhumanity. Religion is an easy fix – just get saved or born again, and again, and again; and for religion’s select believers it seems to provide an avenue to the internal source of happiness, but it is a partial and a dangerous fix. And besides its terrible role in promoting massive human conflict, religion is like a drug, an external source of apparent internal self-confirmation [happiness] that can be addictive and detrimental to the development of real internal happiness.

So, we westerners have latched on to four sources for happiness in sex, wealth, drugs and religion that even in combination drastically reduce and misrepresent the happiness complex. Particularly interesting in this reductive happiness schema is the absence of all the social and communal variables that support happiness – quality relationships at all levels. Why are we dwelling in this reductive delusion? I suggest that a key element in explaining this seeming absurdity lies in the matter of Uncertainty. Prolonged uncertainty [and its companion, anxiety] concerning any one or combination of the variables affecting happiness can greatly reduce the happiness quotient for any individual or group. And the wider the societal spread of this prolonged uncertainty, the greater the reduction in happiness across greater stretches of humanity.

An argument can be made in this regard that since modern information and communication can report natural and human events planet-wide and almost instantaneously to most modern human groups, and since somewhere there are always very negative natural and social events to report with a full array of graphics to bring the message “home,” more and more humans live in what they perceive to be an ever more uncertain natural and social condition. Uncertainty on any variable at any level is the enemy of happiness, and modern humans are daily exposed to the evidence for uncertainty on multiple variables [engendering at least low level anxiety or fear]. With so few who achieve happiness by discovering internal, spiritual enlightenment, it is no wonder that we moderns are tempted to grasp at what is in fact a nonsensical proposition that sex and wealth and drugs and religion will somehow provide happiness. Seeking immediate physical gratification, escaping into drug induced euphoria, pursuing material acquisition, and looking for a quick fix for internal happiness in religion are four things we can DO individually to stave off the constant barrage of uncertainty and seemingly provide internal and external satisfaction and security for ourselves. We cannot control the social and natural domains, so “doing” there does not bear immediate happiness fruit. Our reductive strategy does not work, but we keep trying and continuing to operate under the same simplistic happiness banner.

The solution is apparent: stop unnecessarily bombarding ourselves with sources of uncertainty, recognize and redefine ourselves in terms of the full happiness variable complex – especially those in the social and natural domains, address the conditions that promote the escape in drugs, and release the false substitution of religion for spirituality.