

HAPPINESS, I/WE AND THE OTHER

In my August article on happiness I explored the idea that income relates positively to happiness, albeit up until a certain point. In subsequent articles I have been addressing a further question: what factors other than income contribute to happiness? In my last three articles, I addressed three of these factors: the *value of good relationships*, the *importance of "being true to oneself"* and the *importance of "flow"* (experienced when we challenge our skills). In this article, I will address **the importance of "the other"** to our happiness, be this our spouse, partner, family, friends or simply our fellow human beings.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT

A plentitude of studies show the correlation between social support and well-being (happiness) ⁽¹⁾. The essence is best summarized by Brené Brown, a professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work ⁽²⁾ who states that **"a deep sense of love and belonging is an irresistible need of all beings"** and argues that we are "biologically wired" this way. The latter is also the opinion of Dr. Steve Peters ⁽³⁾ who gained high acclamation for his contributions to top sport cycling in the UK, helping the UK bring home 14 medals in the Beijing Olympic Games of 2008. Peters developed a simplified model of how our brain works: "Chimp Management" and he used the word "troops" to explain the support network we all need.

I ended my last article mentioning Rafa Nadal and his inspiring example to keep learning and testing our capabilities "to experience flow". I will now add that no-one is clearer than Rafa about his need for a support group. In his words ⁽⁴⁾: *"my immediate family, my extended family (all of whom are practically family themselves) stand in three concentric rings around me. Not only do they cocoon me from the dangerously distracting hurly-burly that comes with money and fame, together they create the environment of affection and trust I need to allow my talent to flow"*.



Rafa's "troops" in his player box ⁽⁵⁾

I, WE and an AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE: UBUNTU



An anthropologist proposed a game to African tribe kids. He put a basket full of fruit near a tree and told them that whoever got there first won the sweet fruits. When he told them to run they all took each others hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying their treats. When he asked them why they had run like that as one could have had all the fruits for himself they said: **UBUNTU**, how can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?

UBUNTU in the Xhosa culture means:
"I am because we are"

⁽¹¹⁾

So far, I have been speaking about each one of us, individually, and happiness. For "completion" it is good to note that the "I" focus tends to have more importance in Western cultures than in, for example, Eastern or African cultures where the welfare of "the group", the "we", is given more value ⁽⁶⁾.

Also, several studies undertaken "in the West" ⁽⁷⁾ reveal how too much "self-focus" is associated with negative emotions, especially anxiety, thus being counter-productive to happiness. Note: in these studies "self-focus" was measured by how often people use singular pronouns (that is: "me", "myself" and "I" vs plural pronouns such as "us" and "we").

A different perspective than the "I" focus can be found in "Ubuntu" an African wisdom tradition. It is difficult to define but a good start would be this ⁽⁸⁾: **"A person is a person through other people; striking an affirmation of one's humanity through recognition of an "other" in his or her uniqueness and difference"**.

Ubuntu found its way to the Western World through Nelson Mandela.

Interestingly enough, Ubuntu also found its way to the NBA ⁽⁹⁾. One of the US's legendary basketball coaches, Doc Rivers, when facing the challenge in 2008 of having to coach a Celtic's team full of superstars, turned to the Ubuntu wisdom. He managed the stars with the aim of adjusting their individualistic ways. The Celtics became a true team: a "we". "Ubuntu" became the team's inspirational chant ⁽¹⁰⁾. The Celtics went all the way that year and took the NBA title.

1) "The Relationship between group identification and satisfaction with life in a cross-cultural community" by Juliet Ruth Helen Wakefield and colleagues of Nottingham Trent University, in the Journal of Happiness Studies, 6 May 2016
 2), 6), and 7) "The Happiness Track" by Emma Seppala, PH. D. Piatkus 2016, UK
 3) "The Mind Management Programme for Confidence, Success and Happiness" by Dr Steve Peters, Vermillion London 2011, UK

4) "Rafa My Story", by Rafael Nadal with John Carlin, Sphere 2011, UK
 5) Image from www.Pinterest.com
 8) "Ubuntu Philosophy", Wikipedia, quoting Michael Onyebuchi Eze

9) "The Playbook: why Doc Rivers says Ubuntu led him and the Celtics to the 2008 NBA title" by Maggie Ryan, 22 Sept 2020 Yahoo Life
 10) "The Playbook: Lessons for Life" Doc Rivers, Netflix, November 2020
 11) Image from www.emilysquotes.com

NEXT STEP: FOCUS ON “THE OTHER”!

Taking this one step further, it is perhaps also interesting to explore what happens to happiness when we drop “self-focus” and let the welfare of **the other** be our interest. The concepts of **compassion, giving** and **altruism** are meaty topics; the coverage they deserve is well beyond the scope of my articles. They are new areas of research in psychology and so the findings (that there is a positive correlation) deserve attention. For the record, in sharing these findings I am not taking the position that we are either innately altruistic or selfish. My own view is that both inclinations are in each one of us.

Compassion

Emma Seppala, Science Director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University, in her book “The Happiness Track”⁽¹²⁾ quotes numerous studies which show a positive correlation between compassion and happiness. She defines compassion as **“the feeling that prompts us to say: I feel your pain”**. According to Seppala compassion is the best kept secret to happiness and health.

Seppala also shares how invariably people, when receiving a phone call out-of-the blue from a friend or family member needing help, report that their day “turned for the better”; that of all a sudden they felt “energized, alive and happy, being able to provide comfort”⁽¹³⁾.



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Giving

One piece of evidence that there is a positive correlation between giving and happiness is shown by a Gallup study conducted in 2006⁽¹⁵⁾. This study found that in 120 out of 136 countries people who had donated to charity in the past month reported greater satisfaction with life.

There are of course the daily life examples of “giving” we are all familiar with: the joy in giving a well-chosen present to a loved one or friend being one of them. Indeed, the concept of the “joy in giving” is supported by research⁽¹⁶⁾. Studies⁽¹⁷⁾, again and again, have shown that **spending money on others produces more pleasure than spending money on ourselves**. Note: apparently this is especially so when the choice to give is free!

Altruism

The American psychologist Daniel Batson made altruism his area of research⁽¹⁸⁾. He defined altruism as **“a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare”**. Well aware of the counter arguments that “ultimately” altruism finds its foundation in self-interest, he managed to construct experimental situations where all possible “self-interest factors” were controlled and then tested the correlation between acts of altruism and happiness.

He found that the correlation is indeed positive. His findings have been supported by research undertaken by fellow psychologists such as Martin Seligman⁽¹⁹⁾.

SUMMARY

Research findings shared in this article invite us to consider the importance of social support when pursuing our goals. The findings invite us to consider that feeling part of a “we” can contribute to our sense of well-being. And lastly, they invite us to be open to the lasting positive effects of compassion and giving to our own sense of happiness.

MORE AND MORE, RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT PRACTICING ALTRUISM ENHANCES OUR PERSONAL WELL-BEING



Altruism makes us happy

Giving to others makes people feel happier than spending money on themselves.



Altruism is good for our health

People who volunteer tend to experience fewer aches and pains, and less depression.



Altruism is good for our love lives

Kindness is the single universal requirement for a mate across all cultures. Altruists also have more sex.



Altruism fights addiction

Addicts who help others, even in small ways, can improve their chances of staying sober and avoiding relapse.



Altruism promotes social connections

When we give to others, they feel closer to us, and we also feel closer to them.



Altruism is contagious

When we give, we also spur a ripple effect of generosity through our community.

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12) and 16) “The Happiness Track” by Emma Seppala, PH. D. Piatkus 2016, UK

13) “The Happiness Track”, page 150, by Emma Seppala, PH. D. Piatkus 2016, UK

14) Image from www.mindfulnessnorthwest.com

15) and 17) “How to Make Giving Feel Good” by Elizabeth W. Dunn and Michael I. Norton, June 18 2013

18) C. Daniel Batson: “A scientific search for altruism”, Oxford University Press, 2019, UK

19) Martin Seligman: Authentic Happiness, Nicholas Brealy Publishing, 2017, UK

20) Image from Greater Good Magazine, Berkeley University, USA



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