

Happiness!

My next newsletters will be a series of articles on the topic of happiness. This could be considered an odd choice when we are surrounded by so much suffering, grief and frustration.

However, the data assembled in the field of psychology in recent decades shed a helpful light on such topics as happiness sustained during a crisis, happiness and economic status and the value of the pursuit of happiness itself. This article is an introduction. Topics covered in subsequent articles will be, among others:

- The relationship between happiness and income;
- The findings of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, tracking adolescent participants from 1938 to today;
- Happiness defined in different ways;
- Happiness and Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

A mentally strong person is not one that relies on happiness to stand up, but one that remains standing even when happiness is nowhere to be found ⁽¹⁾



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FRANK NEWSLETTER JULY

My first interest in the study of happiness

I started my psychology degree at the Royal University in Groningen, the Netherlands in September 1968: one year after the student revolution in Paris and during the time of the Vietnam protests. It was a time of dramatic cultural unrest and change. These changes affected education, especially at universities, and none more so than at my sub-faculty of psychology in Groningen. In an extreme effort of "democratization" (an experiment which lasted one year) in 1969 2nd year students were offered the opportunity to initiate their own study project which was not in the existing traditional curriculum.

I came forward and suggested a project on "Happiness". Four students subscribed and a professor was assigned "to keep an eye on us" and as a possible resource. I became the coordinator of the study group.

Quickly we realized there was very little data or research evidence to find on the subject of happiness.

Psychology and positive psychology

Psychology at that time was very keen to establish itself as a "science", and so rather than the study of the mind (psyche), positioned itself as the study of human behavior which could be measured. This was a very different direction than one of the other psychology pillars: psychoanalysis, founded by Sigmund Freud which delved into the subconscious forces guiding our decisions and choices.

There was, in fact, a third, alternative direction: humanistic psychology which I learned more about later in my studies, where Abraham Maslow ⁽³⁾ had been at the center (I will come back to him in one of my next articles).

But as Maslow did not use the word "happiness" as such (he spoke of self-actualization), the writings of Maslow and others escaped us 2nd year psychology students. As such, we decided to find out more about happiness by interviewing people. I interviewed a friend of our professor. He was a priest. I asked him about a definition of happiness. He described happiness as follows:

"Happiness is when the pianist's left-hand keeps playing even when the right hand temporarily stops..."



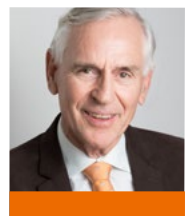
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1) "Happiness is overrated, why trying to be happy is a waste of time", Oliver G. Alvar, 27 August 2019, Lifestyle

2) www.powerwithwords.com

3) "A theory of human motivation" by Abraham H Maslow, Start Publishing LLC 2012

4) www.mastermusicpublications.com



A lot has changed in psychology when it comes to the study of happiness. Not on the curriculum in the faculty of psychology in Groningen in 1969, and I expect at the time in no psychology faculty around the world, today “Happiness” is the most popular curriculum at Harvard University⁽⁵⁾!

Over the last 25 years, happiness has been studied around the world, and data have become available about what happiness is and is not related to.

Interestingly enough as some claim⁽⁶⁾, the scientific studies of the last decades confirm the notions of two philosophers who addressed happiness 2300 years ago: Aristotle and Zhuangzi.

Aristotle stated that **“Happiness is a major goal of human existence”** and Zhuangzi claimed **“Happiness is going with the flow (rather than frantically running around trying to satisfy desires)”⁽⁷⁾**.

Just for the record, the pursuit or possibility of happiness is not necessarily embraced by all.



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Pursuing happiness, with the goal of being happy at all times can be counter-productive, as argued well by Oliver G. Alver: **“Happiness is overrated, there will always be ups and downs in life: the key is finding ways or being able to cope with these”⁽¹⁰⁾**.

Moreover, in the view of, for example, existentialist philosophers⁽¹¹⁾, the individual’s starting point is not the pursuit of happiness but characterized by what has been called “the existential angst”, a dread or a sense of disorientation, confusion and anxiety in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world.

For one of the more well-known existentialist philosophers, Kierkegaard, **the goal of life is not pursuing happiness but finding “authenticity”⁽¹²⁾**.

My writings are not meant to take a stance on any of these notions, as how we view life and our own life is so very personal. What I aim to do is share various perspectives and data from studies. As a starter, I include below happiness quotations⁽¹³⁾ that reveal the wide divergence of opinion on the topic...or perhaps they all contain an element of truth?



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“The Constitution only guarantees you the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself.” Benjamin Franklin

“It was only a sunny smile, and little it cost in the giving, but like morning light it scattered the night and made the day worth living.” F. Scott Fitzgerald

“Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.” George Burns

So we shall let the reader answer this question for himself: who is the happier man, he who has braved the storm of life and lived or he who has stayed securely on shore and merely existed?” Hunter S. Thompson

“I felt once more how simple and frugal a thing is happiness: a glass of wine, a roast chestnut, a wretched little brazier, the sound of the sea. Nothing else.”

Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*

“Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God’s kindness: kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile.” Mother Teresa

“Sanity and happiness are an impossible combination.” Mark Twain

“Happiness is your nature. It is not wrong to desire it. What is wrong is seeking it outside when it is inside.”

Sri Ramana Maharshi

5) “Positive Psychology 1504. Harvard’s Groundbreaking course” by Seph Fontane Penncock, 18/02/2020 www.positivepsychology.com

6) and 7) “The science of Happiness, Theory & Practise” by Dr. Mark K. Setton www.pursuit-of-happiness.org

8) www.unsplash.com, Nick Fewings

9) www.unsplash.com, Mi Pham

10) “Happiness is overrated, why trying to be happy is a waste of time”, Oliver G. Alvar, 27 August 2019, Lifestyle

11) and 12) Wikipedia “Existentialism”

13) www.goodreads.com

14) www.unsplash.com, Louis Hansel