

Mindfulness: “What’s Happiness Got to Do With It?”

By Diane Handlin, PhD



Happiness does not come automatically. It is not a gift that good fortune bestows upon us and a reversal of fortune takes back. It depends on us alone. One does not become happy overnight, but with patient labor, day after day. Happiness is constructed and that requires effort and time. In order to become happy, we have to learn how to change ourselves.

~ Luca and Francesco Cavalli-Sporza, *La Science du Bonheur* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1998)

The study of happiness has a long history and many nuances. Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence declares one of our inalienable rights to be, “the pursuit of happiness.” “Pursuit” may sound like a road trip (the main motif of many American movies) at the end of which something called happiness is obtained. Recent scientific research on happiness suggests the utility of separating the oftentimes ephemeral state of happiness (that can turn into its opposite very easily) from what scientists are describing as a potentially more enduring trait or way of being. The ancient Greek dramatist, Sophocles, describes true happiness not as a destination, but as the product of a life well lived. One example of this is a life wherein the protagonist (that’s you as Joseph Campbell describes the archetypal human life in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) must successfully pass through *catharsis*, a potentially transformative response to inevitable *stress* in order to experience a genuine transformation. This takes the form of an inner journey resulting in direct *insight*, often into the complexity of reality, self, and other, resulting in the development of a kind of humility and acceptance. In some instances, what is achieved is a state of being that the Greeks named *eudamonia*, *well-spiritedness* or *well-being* and Aristotle called, “the goal of goals.”

The ancient Greeks put a great deal of attention on how to live a successful life. Sophocles also believed that a human being “must suffer to be wise;” that we develop wisdom through suffering. One definition of *suffer* is, “to allow,” and the implication is that it is through a psychological process of *allowing* that wisdom or deep equanimity may occur. Although it may seem paradoxical, this is not a passive experience in which an event simply changes you, any more than it is an object that is arrived at or obtained once and for all. Socrates taught that in order to live a truly successful (*well-lived*) life, we must “know ourselves” and that the “unexamined life is not worth living.” Part of this knowing ourselves is learning what tends to cause us to close off to life, or what helps us to be more open, receptive, and less blindly reactive to life. This requires an interest in and understanding of our inner life.

The latest research on happiness reveals that what we think may make us happy is not necessarily so. For example, having a great deal of money does not make people happier than having an adequate amount of money. Having youth, in itself, doesn't make us happy and aging doesn't necessarily lead to unhappiness. Research on happiness has also found that each person may have a set point for happiness. It has been pointed out that when a person has an extreme event occurring such as winning the lottery or becoming a quadriplegic, within a year that individual tends to be right back at the level of happiness or unhappiness at which they lived before the event occurred. This research dramatically contradicts the conventional belief that happiness is a result of an external event that *happens to you*. This has led to additional research on the question of whether a person's set point can be changed and an interest in whether there is something tangible, e.g., a skill that can be learned—that can contribute to the rewiring of the way we react to external events, allowing us to *respond* rather than *react* (which is a pretty good definition of mindfulness—“*paying attention on purpose moment by moment by moment non-judgmentally, and with affection*” JKZ).

There is a saying in psychology that one third of suffering is unavoidable, but two thirds of suffering is created by the attempt to avoid the first third. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who has dedicated his life to identifying the causes of, as well as means for, alleviating pain and stress puts it this way, “Pain is inevitable, but *suffering*, or the stories we tell ourselves about our pain, is not.” We live in an age of connectivity, but many people feel that their being overly connected electronically has prevented them from being in touch with themselves—their own body, their breath, and their loved ones. Susan Stone has called our way of living, one of “continual partial attention.” This prevents our experiencing the phenomenon of “flow” which Csikszentmihalyi describes as one of the most deeply satisfying human states of being. People sometimes describe this as “being in the zone.” Practices like mindfulness-based stress reduction (www.mindfulnessnj.com) have been developed as an antidote for living cut off from ourselves and others. The universal human tendency to live in the future or the past rather than the too often hidden dimension of the present is a challenge to experiencing deep and enduring well-being.

There do seem to be some consistent paths that people have found that seem to have led them toward more enduring well-being or happiness. They are all based on connectivity to self and other. Some examples include: developing an appreciation for the inevitability of impermanence and the consequent preciousness of each moment; developing an ability not to rush from one thing to another; cultivating savoring and that deep engagement that results in flow; developing gratitude; and living a life that includes some sort of meaningful service to others. These all optimally share a reliance on a dual generosity to self and others; they are not based on obtaining something material and fixed, and are not dependent on changing fashions or life circumstances.

For a more extensive article, “It Takes Work To Be Happy,” see my most recent MBSR newsletter: <http://conta.cc/2eMmHn6>.

For a sampling of other contemporary takes, read Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, or the classic *Full Catastrophe Living*, rev. 2013, Dan Harris' *10% Happier, How I Tamed The Voice in My Head, Reduced Stress without*

Losing my Edge, and Found Self-Help that Actually Works, Williams', Teasdale's, Segal's and Kabat-Zinn's *The Mindful Way Through Depression*, or Saki Santorelli's *Heal Thyself: Lessons on Mindfulness in Medicine*, or check out the Readings page at www.mindfulnessnj.com

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