

Guest Post From The Examining Room of Dr. Charles: What Makes Us Happy?



Image via Wikipedia

Note: I am very pleased to welcome the eloquent Dr. Charles of Examining Room fame to Manage My Practice. On his website, Dr. Charles tells us " I am a family medicine physician" and says "Home-grown tomatoes have a special place in my heart."

What Makes Us Happy

by Dr. Charles

The bilious oil hemorrhaging from the bowels of the Earth, coupled with the usual stressors of life, makes me feel sad and pessimistic of late. And while I'm still pretty sure that ignorance, intolerance, and our polluting routines will be our ruin, I also search for ways to retain optimism and hope. Amid the constant erosion there are basic roots that hold life together. If you share the belief that life is fundamentally absurd, then life is truly what you make it. Are there small steps proven to make us happier?

Psychology often concerns itself with helping ailing people get back to a neutral ground, but the field of positive psychology aims to do more. University of Pennsylvania psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman, positive psychology's most renowned proponent, once said: "I realized that my profession was half-baked. It wasn't enough for us to nullify disabling

conditions and get to zero. We needed to ask, "What are the enabling conditions that make human beings flourish?"

To that end, research on happiness, optimism, positive emotions and healthy character traits has been increasing in psychology. Some surprising results challenge our assumptions, such as the fact that once basic needs are met, money does not increase happiness. Neither do high education or high IQ. Older people tend to be happier than young. The sunny weather in California and Florida does not make people happier than those living in colder and cloudier climates.

The trait most shared by happy people seems to be close connections with family and friends, bolstered by a commitment to spending time with them.

Other factors that are associated with happiness include contributing to the lives of others, a good relationship with a spouse, control over one's life and decisions, time for leisure, spirituality or religion, and the holiday periods. The following graphic comes from a Time Magazine article on positive psychology:



The daily activities of life versus the overall experience also effects our opinions of what makes us happy. For example, parents typically consider their children the greatest source of happiness in their lives, but when asked about the day-to-day activities of caring for children, most considered it less than inspiring. One study of 900 women in Texas found that "caring for children" ranked well below sex, socializing, relaxing, praying or meditating, exercising, and watching TV. In fact, taking care of children ranked below cooking and only slightly above housework. Yet when asked what one thing has brought people the most happiness, children and grandchildren are most frequently cited. There is a difference between the "experiencing self" and the "remembering self."

In addition to the big things in life, are there small steps we can take on a daily basis to improve our sense of happiness? According to positive psychology the answer is yes. Research supports the following measures that increase engagement, pleasure, and meaning:

1) Count your blessings. “At the University of California at Riverside, psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky is using grant money from the NIH to study different kinds of happiness boosters. One is the gratitude journal ”“ a diary in which subjects write down things for which they are thankful. She has found that taking the time to conscientiously count their blessings once a week significantly increased subjects’ overall satisfaction with life over a period of six weeks, whereas a control group that did not keep journals had no such gain.”□

Instead of only complaining at the dinner table of the things that went wrong at work, recounting three positives each day will produce more happiness in your life. Gratitude exercises also help physical health and may alleviate the distress of chronic pain and illness to some degree.

2) Practice altruism. Volunteering at a hospital, cooking a meal for a friend, letting a stressed mother cut in front of you in the grocery line, mowing a neighbor’s lawn, sending a care package to a grandparent ”“ all these examples of kindness create connections between people, increase your sense of capability, generosity, and perhaps open the door to reciprocal acts that foster community and friendship. Altruism is a fine way of pleasing yourself and others at the same time.

3) Take time to delight in the world. Did you really taste that bowl of coffee ice cream? Did you pause to wonder at the crescent moon and the stars beyond? Did you revel in the moment you pulled up the cotton sheets and felt luxurious in your safe bed before sleep? Living in the moment ”“ sensually, intellectually, creatively, wondrously ”“helps to ward off

despair.

4) Thanking a mentor in your life is important, and actually benefits you, too. One study showed that writing a letter to someone to whom you owe a debt of gratitude produced positive effects on the writer that were significant for over a month. Of course the recipient of such a letter is thrilled.

5) Forgive others. Writing a letter of forgiveness, whether delivered or not, helps purge negative emotions and desires for revenge. It the first and most important step in moving on.

6) Devote time and energy to relationships. Ties with family and friends are the most consistently cited predictors of happiness. Although the deserted island in the middle of the tropics sounds great, in reality we are fulfilled by the webs we weave and the connections we make throughout life.

7) Use your body. Stretch. Exercise. Laugh. Walk. These things reduce anxiety and improve mood.

8) Develop effective coping mechanisms. Hardship, adversity, and tragedy will always be a part of life. Cultivating faith, whether religious or secular, has been shown to help people cope. Even believing a simple dictum like "This too shall pass" relieves the stress of the moment.

A perpetual state of happiness is not possible. As I write this I finish a fairly crappy day, and I just learned that Medicare (thanks to Senate Republicans) is cutting its payments to physicians by 20%. This will be disastrous for doctors, medical practices, and ultimately patients. But I went for a run today. I ate tasty fish cooked with garlic and tomatoes. I saw a beautiful sky at dusk and basked in a breezy, humidity-free day. I am thankful that I am not in pain, and that I was able to help some people through my work.

Flourishing isn't easy, and positive psychology sounds like

fluff when you are in the dumps, but it's worth a Sisyphean try to be happy.

You can visit Dr. Charles on his website **The Examining Room of Dr. Charles**, and you can follow him on **Twitter here** or check out his **Facebook page here**.

