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Truth Among Happiness

Christian Lopez · Monday, April 17th, 2023

Happiness has often been described in a seemingly infinite amount of ways, though through one particular instance in the form of Charlie Chaplin's 1940 film *The Great Dictator*, the actor, writer, and director bravely cries, "you the people... have the power to create happiness." Happiness is a ubiquitous and wholly universal element of life — while its presence may roost and fleet time and again, its unprecedented power echoes throughout one's life endlessly. As commonplace as happiness is, the method with which it is achieved has often been a great point of discussion among psychologists and researchers alike. Whether happiness can be more easily attained naturally through one's own genes or by a more intimate, conscious effort is made apparent by Elizabeth Landau and Suzanne Degges-White, respectively. Landau notes how "there seems to be a certain level of happiness that individuals have generally, to which they usually gravitate" (para. 14) whereas Degges-White notes "being able to offer a sunny disposition to the world, regardless of your inner state, actually encourages you to physically feel better" (para. 18) emphasizes how there are differing ways to achieving happiness — an emotion wholly necessary to living the best, truest life possible.

When it comes to the reaching a state of happiness, Landau notes the immense role genetics may play in our emotional well-being, acknowledging how some individuals may already be at a disadvantage, before taking into consideration the daily stressors and unexpected tragedies that inevitably occur. Her reasoning for this is largely due in part to parents and the environment in which they raise their children; "if you have happy parents and happy children... people usually assume it's because the children are modeling the parents. But that's not really so. You need to make the point that parents pass on both genes and the environment" (para. 14). Landau further elaborates how no two individuals can reach the same level of happiness — it may take more effort for a person whose baseline mood is low compared to a person who is able to reach the same state of contentment without less of a genetic disadvantage.



Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*

Landau further notes the importance of money, or rather, the negative impact it may have upon the individual if the income isn't enough — “more money does not necessarily buy more happiness, but less money is associated with emotional pain” (para. 21). While a less than desirable income may be detrimental to one's enthusiasm, some materialistic possessions can induce a sense of happiness, albeit for a moment. While the purchase of a new car may promote happiness, the sensation will likely fade as time passes — instead, an object carrying sentimental value possesses the ability to instill fond memories, where happiness can derive from. In the end, Landau notes how happiness can be tilled from a comfortable flow of income and some materialistic items — depending on the individual's genetic baseline for happiness.

While Landau bases how happiness can be achieved through genetics, steady income, and sentimental items, Degges-White notes otherwise. She offers a more intrapersonal and intrinsic approach on the subject. Happiness, especially in an era where we rely heavily on instant gratification catalyzed by technology and materialism, is a state of being and not a misguided sense of pride over possessions — “down-sizing, right-sizing, or de-cluttering all reflect the same realization that is gaining momentum — possessions simply won't bring lasting happiness to our lives” (para. 6). Degges-White suggests practicing the “Big Four,” ideals which generates happiness. Friendliness, cheerfulness, compassion, and gratitude are attitudes one should be conscious of in order to better hone their personal development, which is crucial to contentment.

Friendliness, according to Degges-White, is defined as “offering warmth and good humor to those around you” (para. 11) — showing an openness to the world complemented with an inviting temperament, regardless of how low one may feel. Exuding compassion, such as taking notice of someone's humanity despite their flaws, also promotes a positive influence upon the giver.

Offering gratitude unto the universe or acknowledging gratitude for yourself, such as persisting a difficult task rather than giving in, is the final practice of the “Big Four.” Ultimately, these four factors of happiness instill greater well-being unto the individual by providing less stress and more happiness, which in turn invites protection against chronic illnesses, thus breathing more years into one’s life.

Landau and Degges-White offer different approaches on how happiness is achieved, though cross paths when they discuss the lasting benefits of the emotion. Landau expresses genetics, steady income, and sentimental items as contributing factors to promoting happiness; genetics can be used to identify what an individual’s baseline mood is, which gauges how far off they generally are from reaching a state of happiness. In addition to receiving a steady income, sentimental items can positively affect mood by reducing stress and promoting a sense of security, in turn generating a sense of happiness. Degges-White counters Landau by deviating away from genes, monetary, and materialistic value by offering a more social, humanistic method; by utilizing friendliness, cheerfulness, compassion, and gratitude on a daily basis, satisfaction will find its way within the individual’s life. Both authors note a common principle of happiness: the value of experience over materialism. Possessions are variables, whereas experiences are constant – sharing intimate moments with others preserves greater happiness through life over the ownership of something, which is bound to lose its luster with repeated exposure. Ultimately, keeping one’s attention honed in on the now diminishes stress and increases emotional well-being, encouraging the individual to persist in maintaining this mindset and substantially increasing both their happiness and physical health.

Happiness is a precious element of life, both easy and rare to find, valuable yet impossible to determine its value. Authors Elizabeth Landau and Suzanne Degges-White both note the different roads one could take to achieving happiness – through genetics, financial security, friendliness, cheerfulness, compassion, and gratitude — yet find common ground in the principle that happiness is critical to living a prosperous life. Happiness cannot be measured in the traditional sense, though it can be identified through life experiences and the relationships formed with those around the individual. To wear your heart on your sleeve is to be daring, inviting, and warm all the same; being selfless to make others happy will in turn make the individual bloom freely beyond compare. To spread happiness is to further contribute to a cycle of recycled compassion — a world of shared humanity and happiness, where nothing matters except life and the love you make.

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