



GRESHAM COLLEGE
Founded 1597

The Pursuit of Happiness Transcript

Date: Tuesday, 1 November 2011 - 6:00PM

Location: Museum of London



1 November 2011

The pursuit of happiness

Professor Glenn Wilson

Do you seriously want to be happy? Of course you do. The US *Declaration of Independence* recognises the pursuit of happiness as a legitimate goal and the importance of monitoring feelings of well-being (an idea originating in the Kingdom of Bhutan) has been recognised by David Cameron in his "UK happiness index".

What does it take to be happy? After spending much of its history looking at pathology, psychology is now applying scientific methods to understanding the nature and origins of happiness

We should not assume that other people are responsible for our happiness or lack of it. People say to themselves "if only my partner would treat me better, be more attentive, loving, generous or whatever, then I would be happy". This is unlikely to be true. You might feel better for a short time but you would soon find some other external circumstance to attribute your misery to. Your job would be boring or stressful, or your boss unappreciative of your efforts, for example.

The reason is that to a considerable extent, happiness is a constitutional trait. Comparisons of the degree of similarity between identical and fraternal twins enable us to calculate that around 50-60% of variation in self-rated happiness is down to genes (Lykken, 1999). Of course, there is no single gene that determines happiness but a great multiplicity, and they overlap with the genes that determine personality. People who are emotionally stable, sociable and conscientious tend to be happier (Weiss et al, 2008).

One particular gene that has recently been tied to life satisfaction is the serotonin transporter 5-HTT (De Neve, 2011). In a representative sample of 2574 Americans, those with two copies of the "long" version were almost twice as likely to report being happy as those with two "short" versions. Those with one of each were intermediate. This ties in with the fact that serotonin levels are what anti-depressant drugs are designed to boost.

It is widely believed that money makes us happy. However, there is no simple relationship between wealth and happiness. Once out of poverty, increases in wealth do not reliably translate into increases in happiness. Winning the lottery may bring an immediate rush of euphoria but it does not ensure long-term contentment. In fact, lottery winners take less pleasure in everyday events following their win (Brickman et al, 1978). Apparently, they soon habituate to their new-found wealth, while in the meantime it has disrupted their identity by detachment from the earlier job, friends and life-style.

Nor does a slow increase in income make for greater happiness. The more we have the more we seem to want, hence we are stuck at the same level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction (Easterlin, 2001). The perception of wealth is a relative thing. We are discontented when those that we compare ourselves with are better off than ourselves. This explains why, in most Western countries, average incomes have increased considerably without any change in average levels of happiness (Foley, 2011).

Cross-national differences in happiness have been documented. Generally speaking the wealth of a nation is related to happiness, but other factors such as life expectancy, inequality and democracy appear to mediate this relationship. The poor African countries are lowest in happiness, while affluent Western European countries are highest. Latin American countries are happier than expected on the basis of wealth, while the former communist Eastern European countries are less so (Veenhoven, 2009).

If wealth does not bring happiness, how about *spending* it? Shopping gives enjoyment to many women and raises serotonin. However, the buzz is again usually short-lived and it seems slightly desperate in that it is related to emotional instability (neuroticism). Impulsive shopping occurs more in the pre-menstrual phase (Pine & Fletcher, 2011) and is often regretted later on. The only sort of shopping that might provide longer term happiness is buying things for other people (for reasons described later).

Happiness relates to age and sex in complex ways. People seem happiest when young and again when older, with those in middle age (around 50) being less so. The reasons for this U-shaped curve are not clear but it does confirm the popular concept of the "mid-life crisis". Women report being slightly happier than men (especially when young) but they also suffer more from depression, which fits with the idea that women are generally more emotionally reactive.

Interestingly, Western women are no happier today than they were before most of the anti-sex discrimination laws were enacted; if anything, their happiness has declined relative to men. Blacks tend to be less happy than Whites in the U.S., but the difference has diminished sharply over recent decades, perhaps because of a drop in racism (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Stone et al, 2010, Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008).

There are subtle differences between men and women in the perceived sources of happiness. Men rank "sexual activity", "sports" and "being liked" significantly higher than women, while women attach more importance to "helping others", "close family" and "being loved by loved ones" (Crossley & Langdrige, 2005). However, this should not blind us to the fact that much the same things make both genders happy (freedom from stress,

family support, personal relationships etc.)

Happiness does not come in bottles or capsules. A couple of drinks on a social occasion may be good for us medically and mentally but alcohol dependence destroys careers and relationships. Drugs like cocaine and ecstasy give brief bursts of euphoria but there is pay-back later on. Prozac was at one time vaunted as the "happy pill" but at best blunts depression (Knutson et al, 1998). Drugs short-circuit brain mechanisms that were intended to reward behaviour of survival value but, in so doing, they impede our ability to learn proper coping strategies.

What can we do to improve our sense of well-being? First, we need to realise that we are not passive victims of other people and events. We can and should exert control over our life so as to make it more rewarding and satisfying. This means adopting a positive attitude, overcoming feelings of worthlessness and building confidence and self-esteem.

Destructive self-talk may be part of the problem. Many people judge themselves too sternly, applying standards to themselves that are more exacting and punishing than those they would apply to others. They tell themselves that one little mistake makes them a total and utter failure, that other people are only being polite when they pass a compliment and don't really mean it. They punish themselves for some real or imagined guilty deed from the past that should be treated as water under the bridge and focus on their regrets rather than their achievements. Destructive thought patterns need to be identified and replaced by others that are more positive. This is the rationale of *cognitive behaviour therapy* but it can be undertaken on a self-help basis.

Ridding ourselves of the baggage of unnecessary worry is helpful. The subtitle of the film *Dr Strangelove* was "How I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb". This makes sense. Nuclear weapons may deter war but, if not, there is no point in worrying - annihilation will be sudden and complete. Of course, if there is something that can be done about a problem it is best to get on and do it immediately, then you can stop worrying.

It helps to keep a sense of proportion. Is what you are worrying about really that important? Will it matter in 10 years time? It may help to recall the plight of a certain Philip Wakeham who in 1926 was helping to rig a target boat for Royal Navy target practice when he got accidentally left behind by his mates. He spent a horrific night listening to shells hit the water all around him wondering when the direct hit was going to come. The RN must have needed the target practice because he survived to tell the tale. Compared with Mr Wakeham's experience our own worries should fade to insignificance. If not, then sharing them with someone else might help put them in proportion.

A sense of humour is a good buffer against being damaged by adversity and an antidote to depression. Loss of the ability to laugh is one of the most consistent and striking symptoms of depression. Of course, there are different types of humour ranging from the hostile and embittered (John Cleese and Jo Brand) to the silly and jolly (Tommy Cooper and Ken Dodd) and they may not be equivalent in their effect on mental health. As suggested by the archetype of the "tragic clown", comedians themselves are not immune to depression; their suicide rate may even be enhanced (Wilson, 2002).

Most happy people have a sense of meaning or purpose in life. Rather than drift along from day to day, they have a set of organised values and goals they are trying to achieve. Religion can provide such a structure (Helliwell, 2006), so can humanitarian and family values, artistic or scientific aspirations, and career ambitions. Such things provide a sense of identity as well as something to work towards or look forward to.

It has been suggested that religious believers are generally happier than the non-religious. However, it has recently been found that this applies only within groups and nations that where life conditions are difficult (e.g. high levels of starvation and poverty). Such nations are inclined to be more religious and religion is associated with greater social support and meaning in life. In more affluent areas religiosity is less prevalent and non-religious individuals are equally happy (Diener et al, 2011).

Happiness is often by-product of keeping active; something that happens while we are busy tackling life's challenges (Nettle, 2005). But merely keeping busy is not enough. We need to be doing things that raise self-esteem and bring us satisfaction. Most people have demands placed upon them by other people that may be irrelevant to their values and simply add stress to their lives. Controlling one's timetable involves taking a firm hand in deciding priorities and saying "no" from time to time. That does not mean being selfish - your major goals may well be altruistic, e.g., working for a charity, helping your daughter raise a young family. Community involvement and volunteering raises happiness, especially for older people (Dolan et al, 2008).

Not surprisingly, unemployment makes people less happy (reducing scores by 5-15%) than those in work, even after loss of income is controlled for. Self-employment tends to make us happier than working for others - presumably because we feel more control and are likely to be doing something we enjoy (Blanchflower & Oswald, 1998). Commuting lowers life satisfaction but not sufficiently to offset the value of having a job (Stutzer & Frey, 2005).

Health is clearly related to happiness but people adapt to their disability (much as lottery winners adapt to being rich). The majority of those with "locked-in syndrome" (paralysed and able to communicate only by eye movements) claim some quality of life and have no desire for euthanasia (Bruno et al, 2010). The longer one has

suffered the disability the less its negative impact. Stephen Hawking claims to be happier now than he was when able-bodied (*NY Times* interview, 2011), but adaptation is seldom complete because it is always possible to compare oneself with others more fortunate (Oswald & Powdthavee, 2006).

Controlling for income, people living in the country seem more satisfied with life than those living in urbanised city areas (Dolan et al, 2008). This may be due to congestion, pollution or other forms of stress in city life (Lederbogen et al, 2011). Regardless of where one lives, communing with nature (trees, flowers, water, open sky, etc) also improves feelings of well-being (Welsch, 2006) and there seems to be special value in *green exercise* – gardening, golf, cycling, horse-riding, etc. (Pretty et al, 2007). It seems likely that we are evolved to feel best in the surroundings for which we are adapted and which favour our survival, (somewhere between jungle and savannah, like a golf course perhaps).

Climate effects are moderated by adaptation. Although people in rainy locales feel better when the sun comes out and the sky is blue, those who live in perpetually warm, sunny places are not necessarily any happier overall than those living in Arctic climates (Rehdanz & Maddison, 2005).

Does it help to have a holiday? The anticipation is often better than the eventuality. Dutch sociologists Nawijn et al (2010) measured happiness in a sample of people, some of whom were going on holiday and others not. Those looking forward to a holiday rated themselves as happier than those who were not but after returning most vacationers were no happier than controls. A small number who had particularly relaxing holidays were happier for a while but this effect had faded within 8 weeks. The authors suggest we are better to take a series of short breaks rather than one long holiday because the benefits are short-lived.

Good relationships with other people are a major source of happiness, e.g. being in a long-term stable relationship, married or not, having close friends and being on good terms with relatives, neighbours and workmates (Pichler, 2006). It seems to be important to have a small number of intimate relationships – people you can turn to for support in difficult times, rather than large number of casual friends. Being popular and having lots of friends on *Facebook* count for little. Having children or a pet that depends upon you is also good because it fulfils a need to be needed.

We should not think of ourselves as a passive recipients of other people's love. Special relationships need to be nurtured with skill. Most important is to recognise that love has to be earned, not demanded as a right. If you go around moaning that other people aren't showing you sufficient affection you will only drive them further away. In love, as in other areas, you have to give to get. To modify a Kennedy quote: "ask not what other people can do for you; ask what you can do for others."

One of the difficulties in researching the origins of happiness is that cause and effect is seldom clear. While it is usually assumed that education, occupational status, money, being employed, healthy and loved by friends and family will promote happiness, it is likely that happiness also *causes* these things. Happy, optimistic people tend to attract more friends and retain their partners. Employers tend to favour them so they are more likely to get jobs and become wealthy. They are also more proactive in looking after their health. At the very least, there are constitutional factors, like personality and intelligence, which can mediate all of these outcomes, hence leading to positive associations among them. Genes not only influence happiness directly, but also via the environments that people organise for themselves (Schnittker, 2008).

It may be that happiness is too broad and unclear as a concept and should be split into various types, like joy, inner peace, life satisfaction, global well-being and self-worth. Haller & Hedler (2006) found that having children had no effect on "happiness" but significantly enhanced "life satisfaction". Another study found that high income improved "life evaluation" but not "emotional well-being". The meaning of happiness shifts with age: young people tend to define it in terms of excitement; older people think of it as contentment (Mogliner et al, 2011). Happiness is clearly an elusive and multifaceted phenomenon and how we ask the questions can have a big effect on results.

Should happiness be pursued? The happiest people are not usually those who directly seek it. In fact, the "pursuit of happiness" may be counterproductive. To a large extent, happiness emerges as a by-product of who we are and whether we are doing the "right" thing in relation to our values. People who focus on trying to make others happy usually make themselves happy in the process. As Ralph Emerson said, "Happiness is a perfume you cannot pour on others without getting a few drops on yourself".

©Professor Glenn Wilson, Gresham College 2011

References

- Blanchflower, D.G. & Oswald, A.J. (1998) What makes an entrepreneur? *Journal of Labour Economics*, 16, 393-415.
- Blanchflower, D.G. & Oswald, A.J. (2004) Well-being over time in Britain and the USA. *Journal of Public Economics*, 88, 1359-1386.
- Brickman, P., Coates, D. & Janoff-Bulman, R. (1978) Lottery winners and accident victims: Is happiness relative?

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 36, 917-927.

Bruno, M. et al (2010) A survey on self-assessed well-being in a cohort of chronic locked-in syndrome patients: happy majority, miserable minority. *BMJ Open*, doi 10, 1136, 000039.

Cross, A. & Langdridge, D. (2005) Perceived sources of happiness: a network analysis, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6, 107-135.

De Neve, J. (2011) Functional polymorphism (5-HTTLPR) in the serotonin transporter gene is associated with subjective well-being: evidence from a US nationally representative sample. *Journal of Human Genetics*, 56, 456-459.

Diener, et al (2011) The religion paradox: If religion makes people happy, why are so many dropping out? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, doi: 10.1037/a0024402.

Dolan, P., Peasgood, T. & White, M. (2008) Do we really know what makes us happy? A review of the economic literature on the factors associated with subjective well-being. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 29, 94-122.

Easterlin, R.A. (2001) Income and happiness: Toward a unified theory. *The Economic Journal*, 111, 465-484.

Foley, M. (2011) *The Age of Absurdity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Haller, M. & Hadler, M. (2006) How social relations and structures can produce happiness and unhappiness: An international comparative analysis. *Social Indicators Research*, 75, 169-216.

Helliwell, J.F. (2006) Well-being, social capital and public policy: What's new? *Economic Journal*, 116, 34-45.

Kahneman, D. & Deaton, A. (2010) High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107, 16489-16493.

Knutson, B. et al (1998) Selective alteration of personality and social behaviour by serotonergic intervention. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 155, 373-379.

Lederbogen, F. et al (2011) City living and urban upbringing affect neural social stress processing in humans. *Nature*, 474, 498-501.

Lykken, D.T. (1999) *Happiness: What studies on twins tell us about nature, nurture and the happiness set-point*. New York: Golden Books.

Mogliner, C. et al (2011) The shifting meaning of happiness. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2, 395-402.

Nawijn, J. et al (2010) Vacationers happier, but most not happier after a holiday. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 35-47. (Published on line, February 10).

Nettle, D. (2005) *Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile*. Oxford University Press.

Oswald, A. & Powdthavee, N. (2006) *Does happiness adapt? A longitudinal study of disability with implications for economists and judges*. Institute for the Study of Labour, IZA DP, No.2208.

Pine, K.J. & Fletcher, B.C. (2011) Women's spending behaviour is menstrual-cycle sensitive. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 50, 74-78.

Pichler, F. (2006) Subjective quality of life of young Europeans: Feeling happy but who knows why? *Social Indicators Research*, 75, 419-444.

Pretty, J. et al (2007) Green exercise in the UK countryside: effects on health and psychological well-being and implications for policy and planning. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 50, 211-231.

Rehdanz, K. & Maddison, D. (2005) Climate and happiness. *Ecological Economics*, 52, 111-125.

Schnittker, J. (2008) Happiness and success: Genes, families and the psychological effects of socioeconomic position and social support. *American Journal of Sociology*, 114, 233-259.

Stevenson, B. & Wolfers, J. (2008) Happiness and inequality in the United States. NBER Working Paper, August 18.

Stone, A.A., Schwartz, J.E., Broderick, J.E. & Deaton, A. (2010) A snapshot of the age distribution of psychological well-being in the United States. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107, 16489-16493.

Stutzer, A. & Frey, B.S. (2005) *Stress that doesn't pay: The commuting paradox*. University of Zurich.

Veenhoven, R. (2009) Life is getting better: Social evolution and fit with human nature. *Social Indicators Research*, 105-122.

Weiss, A., Bates, T.C. & Luciano, M. (2008) Happiness is personality thing: The genetics of personality and well-being in a representative sample. *Psychological Science*, 19, 205-210.

Welsch, H. (2006) Environment and happiness: evaluation of air pollution using life satisfaction data. *Ecological Economics*, 58, 801-813.

Wilson, G.D. (2002) *Psychology for Performing Artists (Second Edition)*, London: John Wiley.