

# In search of our smile

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## FIRST OF TWO PARTS - HAPPINESS

Arguments and philosopher bar brawls can break out over the meaning of happiness. John Stuart Mill, Plato and Aristotle define it as a virtuous life well-lived. Psychologists have toyed with the notion that you can be happy about your circumstances without any hint of euphoria. The one that matters is the emotional state of happiness, that indefinable you-know-what-I-mean feeling of contentment and pleasure. -- Randy Shore

Think you know what will make you a happier person? You are probably wrong, according to one of the world's leading happiness researchers.

Not only that, but Harvard scientist Daniel Gilbert says in his book *Stumbling on Happiness* that when you learn the true path, you probably won't follow it.

People consistently overestimate how happy taking a dream vacation, owning a new car or eating a fancy meal will make them. The problem being that the human brain is a terrifically effective imagining machine. So much so that the imagining is almost always better than the reality.

People occasionally hint at this knowledge, Gilbert says in his book. People who are offered that fancy meal with expensive wine either now, tonight or next week almost invariably choose next week, because anticipating and imagining eating that meal is actually better -- and lasts longer -- than the meal itself.

The anticipation is so much better than reality that you should put off achieving your goals forever. But you won't.

Your brain is persuasive and will spend all its waking hours convincing you of how good it will be when you get that house in a beautiful upscale neighbourhood. And you are going to believe your brain. What choice do you have?

University of B.C. psychologist Elizabeth Dunn suggests the transitory nature of happiness is related to the brain's powers of adaptation. Moving to a better neighbourhood and into a fancier house is an attractive goal and may even provide temporary happiness. But once you are moved in, everyone around you has a fancy house in a nice neighbourhood. Once you have adapted to your new neighbours, you find that you are no further ahead.

Dunn's own research centres on what she calls affective forecasting, what people think will make them happy or unhappy and why they get it wrong.

Undergrads asked to predict their satisfaction with being assigned to a beautiful new dormitory or an old prison-like residence overestimate how happy they would be in the good dorms and how miserable they would be in the lousy dorms.

"In particular, they tend to focus on the attractiveness of the building and the location and don't place enough weight on the quality of the social relationships they will have in the dorm," Dunn explained.

Since they knew who their roommate would be no matter what dorm they were assigned to, the students tended to imagine joy or misery based on the unknown factors. Fooled again. Darn brain.

"When we asked them later, the students knew that their relationships with their roommates were important to their happiness, but they were distracted by vivid factors that turned out not to matter," Dunn said.

The most important factor in feelings of happiness -- the one that research shows is incontrovertibly true -- is that social relationships matter, Dunn said.

"You want regular, positive interactions with a set of close others."

Just knowing that human interaction is important isn't enough, she warned.

"Most people embrace that intuitively," Dunn said. "But they fail to apply it in their daily lives. You have to act on it and take time for the people in your life."

Time and dedication may not be enough, though. Because you are constantly adapting to new situations, continuously settling into ruts, you have to keep things novel to keep your relationships strong, particularly in romantic relationships. Dunn suggests trying skydiving together or learning snowboarding, but admits other less dangerous pursuits would also work.

Genes matter, too. Evidence is piling up that people have a happiness set point, a genetically shaped level of happiness that they keep returning to no matter what happens to them, Dunn said. But don't get depressed about it.

"You shouldn't assume that because there is a set point, so there is no way to ever increase happiness," she said.

It's like your weight. Some people tend to be thin and some people tend to be heavy, but you can change your weight. "You just have to work really hard at it."

Emerging research suggests that helping other people, what psychologists dub altruism, leads to measurable increases in happiness. Volunteering, or even "random acts of kindness," will make you happier, according to research that Dunn calls "preliminary, but very exciting."

Oddly, doing the same nice thing over and over may not provide lasting happiness. Novelty is important when performing good deeds.

"Helping an old lady cross the street once will make you feel better, but helping her every day might not be a lasting source of happiness," Dunn said. Like your new home in a better neighbourhood and your love life, you will quickly adapt to your new routine and settle back to your happiness set point.

"Helping the old lady every day might be good karma, but it won't keep you happy forever. Anything you do to increase your happiness, you are battling adaptation."

Despite the premise of Gilbert's persuasive book, thinking positively about the future is not inevitably a source of disappointment -- it can help you survive catastrophic illness, according to Wolfgang Linden, a clinical psychologist at UBC.

Heart-transplant candidates who are on death's doorstep "light up like Christmas trees" when you suggest to them that a new heart would enable them to spend time with their grandchildren, Linden says.

"You can very clearly see [optimism] physiologically," he said.

Linden uses a system called heart-rate variability biofeedback, which he uses to train patients to control their physiological processes to achieve serenity -- like a meditative state.

"To get [patients] to the last step, we get them to imagine things that they are grateful for and people that they care for," Linden said. By controlling their moods, patients are controlling their arousal levels and striking a balance between the body's arousal and dampening systems.

Once patients learn to control the constellation of physical processes and emotions using the machine, they can return to that place later without the machine.

Linden counsels his cancer and cardiac patients to tell jokes, cruise the Internet for jokes or see funny movies to keep their spirits up.

"You are in control of how much positive emotion you create and most of that stuff comes at no or little cost, so it makes no sense not to do it," he said.

Happiness researcher Mark Holder couldn't resist throwing a little cold water on the idea that happiness is a universally good thing -- it has a dark side. The science of psychology is rife with paradox and the study of happiness is no exception.

"Children who rate highly in cheerfulness die sooner," Holder said. It sounds counterintuitive until you examine why they die.

"Cheerful children are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours," he explained. "They are optimistic so they think they can drink and drive, they can have unprotected sex."

Holder, who is based at UBC's Okanagan campus, studies behavioural neuroscience, specifically happiness in children and the chemicals and hormones associated with happiness.

The news isn't all bad for happy children, though. Happy children do tend to become happy adolescents and happy adults, Holder says. Paradoxically, happiness is no defence against depression.

"Happiness and depression are not negatively correlated like you'd expect," he said.

The biology of the two appear to be completely different. Holder's current line of research is intended to describe the biology of happiness.

Holder's team is examining whether serotonin, which is influenced by mood-elevating drugs like Prozac, or cortisol, a hormone linked to stress, play a role in happiness.

Holder says many commonly held beliefs about happiness do not withstand scientific scrutiny. Winning the lottery increases happiness only temporarily. "After six months, if I measured your happiness, you'd be back to your baseline level," he said.

Children of divorced parents are just as happy as the children of those in stable marriages.

"Many of the external factors just don't seem to matter a lot," he said.

Grandmothers the world over will tell you that the best things in life are free and science would appear to bear that out.

Gilbert suggests a quiz to help decide which things will make you happy, as opposed to things you only think will make you happy.

Gilbert asks: If you had 10 minutes to live, would you tell off your boss, or take a bath wearing a funny hat and eat pistachio macaroons?

Would you drive your new car or go for a bike ride with your kids?

See? It isn't really that hard.

rshore@png.canwest.com

## STEPS TO GREATER HAPPINESS

There isn't much science on the topic of happiness, but psychologist Mark Holder has read most of it. He told reporter Randy Shore what he knows. Here is what science has to say about getting more happiness in your life:

- Nurture social relationships. Family, friends and neighbours are vital to your perception of your own well-being and foster a sense of belonging essential to happiness. Talk to them and listen to them. If you do nothing else on the list, do this.
- Pursue well-being, not being well off. Wealth is only scantily associated with happiness and the cost of achieving it is too high.
- Choose your comparisons wisely. Everyone on TV is likely to be richer, thinner and better looking than you. It's hard to feel good about that. Try comparisons with your neighbours instead of Brad Pitt or Jennifer Garner. Save them for your fantasies.
- Keep a gratitude journal. Write down three things each day that you are thankful for and ask your spouse and children to do the same. If three sounds like a lot, it should. It forces you to really search your day for the good things that happen.
- Get into the flow -- do things you can get passionately involved in. Bike a favourite trail, do yoga, play hockey. Do whatever lets the rest of the world fall away. Watching TV doesn't count. Be an active participant in something that absorbs you.
- Complete tasks. Make a list and check things off as you get them done. Unfinished tasks are a source of stress.
- Develop a hobby. Ideally, it should be physical and social. Walking groups, square dancing, curling and especially gardening are good choices. Pick something that you like and do it with others.

- Volunteer. Doing something for others makes you feel better about yourself, your capabilities and gives rise to feelings of generosity. It enhances your self-esteem and wins you social approval, as well as helping other people.

- Reclaim your spirituality. Jobs, kids and mortgages can put your spiritual needs on a back burner. Go to worship, pray, meditate or watch a sunset. Lie on a blanket in the yard to look at the stars and gaze with awe upon the universe.

- Savour the small moments. If you eat a strawberry, stop and really taste it. Stop and notice when you catch yourself in a moment of pleasure.

- Thank somebody. Don't wait for the wake to say that someone touched your life. Write a letter of thanks to a teacher, a mentor or someone who helped you and then send it. You will feel good and so will they.

- Forgive. Let go of old animosities toward others and let yourself off the hook for your embarrassments and past moments of weakness. Resentment and thoughts of revenge will disappear. You can't be happy and resentful at the same time. You have to choose. It won't be easy, but if you succeed, it will be worth it.

Mark Holder is a professor and researcher at the University of B.C. Okanagan.