THE QUEST FOR HAPPINESS

INSIGHTS FROM SCIENTISTS, PREACHERS AND INSPIRATIONAL INDIVIDUALS ON HOW TO FIND YOUR BLISS AND SHARE IT
The Science of Happiness

Four experts outline the psychological and physiological dimensions of the happy state of being

**Q. How would you define happiness?**

**DR NIMESH DESAI**

Happiness is often seen as a state of mind without worries or negative emotions. Strictly speaking, it is one of the many emotional states of mind, that include sadness, anxiety, fear, etc. Over time, with the increasing occurrence of negative states of mind such as sadness and distress, the use of the term happiness, in public discourse, has become broad-based and all-encompassing to denote an overall positive state of mind. However, it is important to understand the contextualisation of the use of the term happiness to avoid the error of seeing it literally. It would be fairly abnormal for anyone to be constantly happy, specially without basis. The desirable goal should be to achieve a state of mind with more positive than negative elements. There are historical and cultural aspects to this evolving concept of happiness. For example, in the western world, individuals are encouraged to aspire for and work towards being happy. However, there are concerns whether people who were well provided for are happy. Conversely, many eastern cultures encourage persons towards satisfaction or contentment, with usefulness or meaningfulness in existence.

**PROF. KAMLESH SINGH**

Till date, we do not have a universal definition of happiness. Theoretically, there are different explanations. The hedonic and eudemonic perspectives, for instance, offer one way of conceptualising it. In the hedonic perspective, happiness is equated with pleasure, comfort, enjoyment, etc. The eudemonic perspective equates happiness with a meaningful life; it is a theory of self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations, environmental mastery and autonomy. In some eastern models, happiness/well-being is associated with peace of mind and inner harmony. Similarly, we also have Indian perspectives on happiness such as sat-chit-anand (truth-consciousness-bliss) which lead to anandmay—a state of mind. Besides theoretical perspectives, another way of conceptualising it is to understand the views of the general public. Our research shows that there are different components to people’s view of happiness, be it positive emotions (joy, inner peace etc.), life satisfaction, healthy family ties, work and accomplishment, or leisure engagement.

**DR SHYAM BHAT**

Happiness is a general term for a wide range of psychological phenomena. It is, in part, the experience of pleasant feelings such as joy. It is not solely, feelings, however. Happiness also includes a favorable outlook (optimism) and a sense that life is going relatively well (satisfaction). People from various cultures place differing weights on one or another aspect of happiness. Some cultures prize feelings of peace, while others might prize exuberance or enthusiasm. It is not that one group has a monopoly on the truth, there are benefits to each distinct cultural leaning.

**ROBERT BISWAS-DIENER**

Happiness is often confused with pleasure, especially without basis. The goal must be to achieve a state of mind with more positive than negative elements.

**One cannot be constantly happy, especially without basis. The goal must be to achieve a state of mind with more positive than negative elements.**

**DR NIMESH DESAI**

There is no universal definition for happiness, but one can think of it as an emotional state most people desire, a state where they feel positive and relaxed. Western culture, particularly American culture, sees the pursuit of happiness as the most important goal of life; in the east, including in ancient Indian culture, the goal was not happiness but Moksha, a state where the cycle of suffering stops. As the philosopher John Stuart Mill observed, “Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so.” Ironically, as societies embrace the American ideal and start to pursue individual happiness, the rates of depression, anxiety and suicide increase. The consumerist culture is fuelled by the quest for happiness. Happiness is often confused with pleasure, which, from an evolutionary and biological perspective, is felt when an activity or substance causes the brain to release neurochemicals such as dopamine. But science and lived experience tell us that pleasure doesn’t last. The novelty wears off, the brain does not tell us that pleasure doesn’t last. The novelty wears off, the brain does not
The first fundamental factor is about a few basic needs being met, as essential for being happy in life or satisfied with life, for individuals or groups or communities. The fact that a few persons or groups of communities may have the ability to achieve happiness or contentment, even in adverse situations, or despite circumstances of gross deprivation, cannot take away from this truism. It is necessary for this to be realised and accepted at all levels that happiness can be based only on the plank of basic comforts. Further, the absence of any significant health or social problem can help in achieving happiness. Positive developments in any area of life can lead to the same result. Hence, it is important to maintain a positive state of mind so as to find appropriate solutions, individuals also differ in their resilience. In addition to resilience, the other factors that contribute to degrees of happiness in life or satisfaction with life are basic attitude, the synchrony between aspirations and reality, self-awareness, social and family support systems, and emotional connect with relevant groups and persons, besides the absence of mental health problems. The contribution of diagnosable mental illnesses like depression, anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorders and substance use disorders like alcohol dependence, which are by now known to be genetic and biological in origin, is often unrecognised and definitely underestimated. Further, individual and interpersonal behaviour problems also cause significant distress and become impediments in the pursuit of happiness. The political and economic situation also plays a very important part as do religious and spiritual practices.

Firstly, I would say our thoughts are extremely important—they shape our subjective world and can trigger negative and positive emotional reactions as per their nature. Secondly, our actions are equally important. For instance, gratitude expression, forgiveness and helping others may make you feel happy. So, our thoughts, emotions and actions are important, as are external factors, like work or study pressure, injustice, unhealthy relations or other happenings around us. Thus, self-related factors as well as external factors play a role in happiness.

Dr Shyam Bhat

Happiness cannot be acquired directly. Neither is happiness the absence of sadness or pain, since, inevitably, life will have its share of sorrow. Rather, happiness is the full blossoming and freedom of an individual, who, having shed anxieties and unnecessary fears, lives with a sense of purpose, committed to a goal larger than oneself, feeling a sense of purpose, meaning and connection, with moments of joy and awe.

Robert Biswas-Diener

Some people say that “happiness is a state of mind”! This may be an over-simplification because favourable life circumstances are helpful for happiness. Even in the face of tough life conditions, however, people can be happy, their own effort is encouraging. Any sense of helplessness would be inappropriate because while happiness (or as I prefer to see it, satisfaction with life) is contingent upon the MACRO environment of the economic milieu and socio-technological development, as well as the MICRO situation of personal or social success and material luxuries, besides the crucial MICRO element of individual adaptation.

Kamlesh Singh

Although the term “mind game” may have a different connotation, the role of the mind and brain in our state of mental wellness or psychological well-being is certainly critical, not only in terms of the fundamental propensity of different individuals to be prone to various mood states, but also in as much as persons can surely improve upon their natural tendencies and proclivities. The fact that all psychological and mental processes, including emotional wellness, operate through brain mechanisms and that these can be modulated through one’s own effort is encouraging. Any sense of helplessness would be inappropriate because while happiness (or as I prefer to see it, satisfaction with life) is contingent upon the MACRO environment of the economic milieu and socio-technological development, as well as the MICRO situation of personal or social success and material luxuries, besides the crucial MICRO element of individual adaptation.

Kamlesh Singh

Over the years, we have seen that happiness interventions do indeed increase our levels of happiness. Such studies show that it is possible to increase your happiness level. So, I will say, yes, to a certain extent, we can train our brain to be happy.

Robert Biswas-Diener

If there is a single “secret” of happiness, it is to be found in social relationships. Regardless of where in the world people live, their relationships are one of the most robust influences on their happiness. Enjoying time together, receiving support, and making a social contribution are all important predictors of well-being.

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What role do work and money play in attaining happiness?

NIMESH DESAI

Since the issues of money and work are intertwined for many populations, the common misconception is about work-related success being an integral part of being happy. Indeed, the importance of work-related success for being happy or satisfied with life has been acknowledged. This dichotomy, led to the oft repeated emphasis on work-related success being an integral part of being happy. Indeed, the role of work in achieving happiness is irrefutable, not only for the money that is often earned through work and the success it brings, but also for the less tangible benefits of how work provides a purpose in life and also keeps the mind meaningfully occupied. The reference to work here is not only in relation to a job or profession but all kinds of work and at all levels, including being a home-maker or a care-giver to those in need.

On the other hand, the role of money as an isolated concept, and whether that is essential for basic needs and optimal material comforts, can also be debated, but in the current human condition, this would be by and large generally agreed upon. The debate or the point at issue is if money should be considered as central or essential to happiness, and to what extent? Individuals, families and communities decide for themselves how far money is permitted to become the centre point for happiness.

What five happiness mantras/tips would you give, and why?

KAMLESH SINGH

Firstly, learn to be mindful of your thoughts. Generally your thoughts trigger your emotions, i.e., happy thoughts—happy emotions. Most of us have to encounter stressors on a daily basis. We need to have some time to be away from such environment to get a relaxed mind. We should spend some time daily to engage in activities that help us experience positive emotions. It could be reading, yoga, sports, exercise, dancing, singing, painting or gardening. Globally, research has shown the importance of positive relations for our happiness. Hence, my next happiness tip would be to stay in touch with friends and family who make you happy, and to nurture these relations. ‘Counting someone at the time of adversity’ leads to happiness. Try to keep the key of your happiness with you and make conscious efforts every day to make yourself happy—remember, even small measures matter, and a little effort is better than none at all. Identifying your character strengths and using them in a better manner also promote happiness. And don’t forget to count your blessings. A popular technique of doing so is to maintain a gratitude journal and write down three things you are grateful for every night before going to sleep.

ROBERT BISWAS-DIENER

It is natural and acceptable to occasionally feel down or negative. Work on appreciating what you have. Invest in other people. Take some time to enjoy life. Find something at which you can improve and work at it.

Take life in your stride. The ability to make the best of what life has to offer helps build the characteristic of resilience

NIMESH DESAI

Some people may be uncomfortable with the idea that money does, indeed, buy some happiness. Money is simply a means of exchange. Having it allows people to do more things they value; contribute to others, pursue an education, take a holiday or enjoy a meal. Placing too much emphasis on money, though, is associated with lower levels of happiness. It’s helpful to remember that it’s not the money itself but the ends it’s used for that’s important.

DR SHYAM BHAT

Work can be a vital ingredient of a happy life, especially if it is meaningful and reasonably challenging. Poverty causes stress and there decreases happiness. In a sense, money does boost happiness, but only up to a certain point, beyond which additional wealth does not affect the level of happiness.

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DR SHYAM BHAT

First, cultivate gratitude and contentment. The world we live in amplifies dissatisfaction; many people compare their lives with their friends or people on social media, leading to a constant feeling that life could be better. Being thankful and happy with what one has counteracts this. Second, ensure good physical health to have good mental health. Stay physically healthy and the mind will be happier. Third, stay connected with others. The pandemic has increased the isolation of modern life.

Connecting with others in an authentic way increases happiness. Fourth, do something for others. Focusing on helping others makes life more meaningful and happier. Finally, manage your mind. Learn meditation to do so. Staying in the present rather than worrying about the future or regretting the past boosts happiness.