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How to Be Happy for a Moment, Day, or Lifetime

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Happiness is a broad word with meanings that can range *from the more even-keeled positive emotions of contentment, peacefulness, and gratitude to the more volcanic experiences of joy, delight, and ecstasy.* In the founding documents of this country, Thomas Jefferson named “Life, liberty, and the *pursuit of Happiness*” as “unalienable Rights.” And many books and articles are written each year about happiness: what it is and how can you get more of it?!

But happiness is only one of the major emotions — sometimes listed as glad, sad, mad, and bad (meaning fear and shame). The 13th-century Sufi mystic poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmi wrote about how these different emotions sweep through our lives in a poem titled “The Guest House”:

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes....

There is wisdom in Rumi's advice: seek to **witness without judgement whatever emotions arise within you, knowing that even the most intense will eventually fade.** As the saying goes, "The only way out is through." At the same time, it is also true that some among us are more naturally optimistic, others are more naturally melancholic, and still others of us have a more natural baseline of equanimity.

Lora shared earlier about some activities that made her happy as a child, some of which continue to be sources of happiness to this day. And **science has shown that activities that are totally immersive — that put us in a state that psychologists call "flow" — are reliable sources of happiness.** But giving yourself permission to be fully absorbed in an activity without any distractions can be elusive in our age of smart phones and other technologies. Think of the differences in immersion between (1) going to the movie theater, turning off your phone, watching a truly excellent and engaging film and (2) watching a TV show, while scrolling through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram on your laptop and replying to periodic texts on your phones. As Jonathan Haidt has detailed in his book [The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom](#) (2006), **some of the many immersive activities that can cultivate flow are:**

- savoring an excellent meal,
- dancing,

- an intense conversation with a friend,
- creating art (painting, sculpting, writing, photography),
- hiking,
- cooking,
- hosting a dinner party,
- gardening,
- singing in a choir,
- reading a great novel. (95)

Your personality and proclivities will determine which of these activities is most absorbing for you.

This insight about the importance of carving out time and space in your life for activities you find fully absorbing doesn't mean you have to spend all your time trying to be "in the zone." Rather, it's an encouragement to discern if there are ways to have more immersive experiences in your life. One of my favorite stories along these lines is about the physicist A. A. Michelson as told by the novelist Norman Maclean in his book Young Men and Fire:

When I was a young teacher and still thought of myself as a billiards player, I had the pleasure of watching Michelson play billiards nearly every noon. He was by then one of our national idols, having been the first American to win the Nobel Prize in science (for the measurement of the speed of light, among other things). To me, he took on added luster because he was the best amateur billiards player I had ever seen. One noon, while he was still shaking his head at himself for missing an easy shot after he had had a run of thirty-five or thirty-six, I said to him, "You are a fine billiards player, Mr. Michelson." He shook his head at himself and said, "No, I am getting old. I can still make the long three-cushion shots, but I'm losing my touch on the short ones. He chalked up, but instead of taking the next shot, he finished what he had to say, "**Billiards, though is a good game, but billiards is not as good a game as chess.**" Still chalking his cue, he said, "Chess, though, is not as good a game as **painting.**" He made it final by saying, "But

painting is not as good a game as **physics.**” **Then he hung up his cue and went home to spend the afternoon painting under the large tree on his front lawn.**¹

For me, the equivalent might be to say that Ultimate Frisbee is a good game. But frisbee is not as good a game as watching and discussing excellent films. And film criticism is not as good a game as preaching sermons, teaching classes, and writing books. Then perhaps I would go home and watch a film (145). What are some parallels in your life?

Many of the approaches we’ve explored so far for the pursuit of happiness are relatively mundane. What about more extreme potential sources of happiness and unhappiness? Consider, for example, scientific studies into the comparative effect on happiness from major, life changing events such as winning the lottery or becoming paralyzed.

Studies show that **humans are terrible at what psychologists call affective forecasting: “predicting how we will feel in the future.”** (Remember that opening line from the Rumi poem: “This being human is a guest house. / Every morning a new arrival.”) Although there are outliers to every trend, in studying the long-term effects of two life changing events — winning the lottery or becoming paralyzed — it turns out that **most of us “grossly overestimate the intensity and the duration of our emotional reactions.”** I have had close friends become paralyzed, so I do not say this lightly. But studies show that **“Within a year, both lottery winners and paraplegics have both (on average) returned most of the way to their baseline levels of happiness”** (Haidt 85).

In that first year after winning a multi-million dollar jackpot, lottery winners often get significant short-term boosts in happiness from the newly-acquired ability to buy a new house, take an exotic vacation, or quit their job. But even within a few months, all those new acquisitions become a new normal. And **after that short-term happiness boost from the change in status fades, lottery winners tend to return to their former level of happiness.** And there is often conflict with family and friends over whether one is willing to share the winnings, conflict that causes unhappiness. As the saying goes, “Wherever you go, there you are”: you are still the same person with all your emotional baggage even if you are \$20 million dollars richer. All that being said, studies also show that, “Nearly all lottery winner are still glad that they won” (85).

On the other side of the spectrum are studies of people who become paralyzed and face initial devastation. But just as the lottery winner had an initial surge in happiness that leveled out, people who become paralyzed tend to have an initial surge in depression that levels out over the first year. Our human brains tend to have *both* an incredible short-term sensitivity to changes *and* a tremendous long-term capacity to adapt to whatever the new normal is in ways that are difficult for us to see in advance. As the physicist Stephen Hawkins has said about his motor neuron disease, **“My expectations were reduced to zero when I was twenty-one. Everything since then has been a bonus”** (85).

Lottery winners tend to assume at first that they will never be sad again, and people who are suddenly paralyzed often assume they will never be happy again. Neither of those tend to be true. Relatedly, our human capacity to adjust in a relatively short time to a “new normal” also means, for example, that the warnings about “normalizing” some of President-elect Trump’s erratic behavior are important to heed. History has shown us that **we humans can become adjusted to horrors**. As The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, **“There are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all men of good-will will be maladjusted until the good societies realize.”** But that’s starting us in the direction of another sermon. For now, having considered two more extreme examples of the unexpected roller coasters on which we can find ourselves in this life, I would like to expand our view to three different types of happiness. As historian Jennifer Hecht has written about in her book [The Happiness Myth: An Expose](#), when considering the pursuit of happiness, **one’s response might look very different in regard to pursuing a happy *moment*, a happy *day*, and a happy *life*.**

A euphoric, ecstatic, joyous moment might come from listening to an amazing song (or going to an incredible concert). It could come from seeing a particular beautiful vista, having great sex, or taking drugs — or the exhilaration of engaging in dangerous behavior. These **sources of euphoria are intense, but fleeting — and have diminishing marginal effectiveness over time**. Although there’s a lot to be said about the virtues of pleasurable moments, we need to be honest that they are not building blocks for a happy life and that they sometimes carry the risk of prematurely ending a life (Hecht 314).

Expanding beyond intensely happy moments — which might skyrocket you to peaks of rapture, but then send you plummeting back down — what might contribute to a happy day? In a [sermon back in August](#), I talked about the ways that our brains have evolved to be like “like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive experiences.” **Pausing, even for a few seconds, to savor positive experiences can tip the scales toward having more overall happiness.** Examples might include:

- spending time with friends,
- eating dessert,
- having a leisurely morning,
- reading a good book,
- solving a puzzle,
- playing a sport,
- taking time for a hobby, or
- watching your favorite form of entertainment (Hecht 315).

Any one of these can make the difference in whether a day overall feels like a “Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day” or a “Good Enough, Occasionally Great, Very Good Day.”

Over time, the effect is cumulative. In the words of the writer Annie Dillard, **“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”** There is significant benefit that can come from delayed gratification, but it’s a dangerous game to risk decades of unhappy days for the hope of happiness in some abstract future that you may never reach. Instead, the invitation is to consider how you might carve out some happiness within the life you already have.

Expanding our view one more time, consider this list of **what can contribute toward a happy life over the course of decades:**

- Family
- Friendships
- Celebrations and rituals
- Travel
- Study
- Skills mastered

- Money in the bank
- Community service
- An attractive appearance
- Adventure
- Serving as an inspiration
- **A history of a lot of good days**
- **A history of some euphoria** (Hecht 315)

Which of these do you feel led to cultivate in this season of your life?

For now, I'll conclude with a poem titled "Happiness" by Jane Kenton:

**There's just no accounting for happiness,
or the way it turns up like a prodigal**
who comes back to the dust at your feet
having squandered a fortune far away.

And how can you not forgive?

You make a feast in honor of what
was lost, and take from its place the finest
garment, which you saved for an occasion
you could not imagine, and you weep night and day
to know that you were not abandoned,
that happiness saved its most extreme form
for you alone.

No, happiness is the uncle you never
knew about, who flies a single-engine plane
onto the grassy landing strip, hitchhikes
into town, and inquires at every door
until he finds you asleep midafternoon
as you so often are during the unmerciful

hours of your despair.

It comes to the monk in his cell.

It comes to the woman sweeping the street
with a birch broom, to the child
whose mother has passed out from drink.

It comes to the lover, to the dog chewing
a sock, to the pusher, to the basketmaker,
and to the clerk stacking cans of carrots
in the night....

Whether your dominant emotion right now is joy or sadness, anger or fear, you are invited to bring your whole self to this place each week as we seek to build a beloved community and accompany one another in the roller coaster journey of this life. I'm grateful to be with you on that journey.

¹ James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism*, 223.