

Happiness and Altruism

Institute on College Student Values

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The background of the slide is a solid blue color. In the lower right quadrant, there are several sets of concentric circles, resembling ripples in water, rendered in a lighter shade of blue. These circles are of varying sizes and are positioned in a way that suggests movement or a series of events.

Gratitude Exercise

- Take a minute to think about someone who has been important in supporting you and shaping who you are today. Find a partner sitting near you and tell them about this person and what s/he has done for you.

Happiness: The Basics

- Happiness as “eudaimonia” – Flourishing.
 - Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics; Keys & Haidt, 2003
- Happiness is a combination of pleasure (present benefit) and meaning (future benefit)
 - Tal Ben-shahar, 2007
- Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.
 - Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics
- Happiness is the “ultimate currency.”
 - Tal Ben-shahar, 2007

Are we doomed to a inherited level of happiness?

➤ Happiness Equation:

$$H = S \text{ (Set Point)} + C \text{ (Circumstances)} + V \text{ (Voluntary Activities)}$$

➤ $S = 50\%$

➤ $C = 10\%$

➤ $V = 40\%$

Some Characteristics and Activities Related to Happiness

- Altruistic actions
- Optimistic thinking
- Living in a wealthy democracy
- Pursuit of self-concordant (intrinsic) goals
- Exercising Strengths
- Being religious
- Close interpersonal connections/Friends
- In committed intimate relationship, having regular sex

Baker & Stauth, 2003; Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2000

Altruism

- Unselfish concern for the welfare of others; selflessness.
- Think of a time you did something especially helpful for someone else – Looking back, what do you remember about how you felt? Discuss with your partner.

Eating Ice Cream versus Performing Good Work

- Seligman has his classes conduct two types of activities (one pleasurable and one altruistic) and they compare the result.
- How would you describe the relative benefit of eating your favorite ice cream versus performing an altruistic act?

A Little Perspective

- “\$500,000 a year. This is draconian!”
 - Business executive reacting to the Obama administration’s policy to limit executive pay for companies accepting government bail out money (MSNBC, 2/4/09).

Amazon book subject search found:

- 711,587 hits on “money”
- 318,931 hits on “happiness”

Mean Genes

- If we're capable of greater happiness, why don't we consistently make the choices that lead to our happiness?
- We're sometimes drawn to the easy (pleasures) above the challenging (gratifications) – Happiness Traps
- Evolutionary Psychology
- The Elephant (Haidt, 2006)
- Negative emotions were important to our survival but can be employed anachronistically.
- Negative emotions (fear, guilt) narrow our mental repertoire



Happiness: Just Being Yourself

- When exercising negative emotions in the extreme we feel like we're "not being ourselves."
- Negative emotions are directed at specific people or events
- Altruism and compassion are more fundamental and can endure independent of specific stimuli

Why altruism works for us

- It connects us to our true selves
- It connects us with other people
- It gives us a sense of meaning, which is an essential aspect of eudaimonia

Ricard, 2006

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Performing Kindness

Rules of Thumb

- Timing is important
 - Plan: For example, choose a day each week to perform one large or 3 to 5 small acts of kindness
- Vary your acts
- Perform at least one act each week about which you don't tell anyone
- There is such a thing as too much, when it comes to your happiness

Chicken and Egg: Happiness and Altruism

- Do positive feelings foster altruistic behavior or does altruistic behavior foster positive feelings?
- Students who had boosted their happiness in lab interventions were more likely to assist someone in trouble (Seligman, 2002)
- Increased volunteerism and acts of kindness boost happiness **and longevity!**

Implications

- What implications do you see for your practice?
 - Tools for working with college students
 - Encourage students to reflect on their experiences holistically: “How do/did you feel?” as well as “What did you think?”
 - Social justice implications

Self-Sacrifice & Happiness

- Altruism is sometimes framed as “self-sacrifice.”
- Discussion: Social Justice – Do acts of addressing issues of social injustice emerge from obligations growing out of privilege (and guilt) or are they natural acts of kindness emerging from one’s innate desire to do good and live a full life?

Self Interest and Benevolence

- Ben-shahar (2007) believes there should be a synthesis between our ultimate self-interests and our altruism.

“For those who subscribe to the morality of duty, finding meaning—leading a moral life—necessitates sacrifice. Sacrifice, by definition, is not pleasurable (if it were, it would no longer be sacrifice). The morality of duty, therefore, pits meaning and pleasure against each other.”

Self-interest Continued

“The idea that our actions should be guided by self-interest, by our own happiness, can make some people uneasy. The source of their unease is a belief—explicit or implicit—in the morality of duty.”

- Ben-shahar, 2007

Bringing Your Self to the World

- “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. Then, go out and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”
 - Harold Whitman, cited in Ben-shahar (2007)

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 - Focusing on possibilities over problems
 - Applying these principles in your own life can flow into your effectiveness with students

Happiness and the Academy

- An American friend of mine, a successful photography editor, once told me about a conversation she'd had with a group of friends after they'd finished their final college exams and were wondering what to do with their lives. When she'd said, "I want to be happy," there was an embarrassed silence, and then one of her friends had asked: "How could someone as smart as you want nothing more than to be happy?" (Ricard, 2003, p. 17)

Final Note to Self

- “Quit reading self help books and start helping others”

