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# ETERNITY AND HAPPINESS

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**Happiness often depends on the time frame we adopt. Being able to connect the now and a wider time horizon can lead to a greater sense of happiness or subjective well-being. Many people are caught in either one or the other time, but for a greater experience happiness it is important to connect the two in a personally meaningful way.**

Keywords: happiness

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## Introduction

Living in accordance with one's basic parameters, the own needs, wishes and aspiration, leads to a positive state which could also be described as happiness. Happiness is subjective, resting on the information that is available to the individual and processed by him or her. While an assessment of a person's objective happiness over a period of time can be derived from a dense record of the quality of experience at each point in time (Kahneman, 1999), this does not necessarily determine a person's present happiness. A feeling is derived from the meaningful information that is communicated and processed, and how this information relates to how the person sees himself or herself and the world. Internal and Happiness is often also referred to in the scientific literature as subjective wellbeing (SWB).

## Happiness

Happiness is not merely a positive feeling or a state that leads to inactivity, but an experienced general state of well-being. It does not necessarily require physical or mental health, but they can contribute to and make it easier to feel happy. Feeling happy also implies that one can experience the present positively and not merely the past or the future. Happiness also does not mean the absence of negative emotions. One can feel generally happy, even if one feels sad at times. While happiness is felt in the moment, it is often used to describe a state that lasts over some time.

Satisfaction with the different areas in life plays a large role in happiness. This also means how in tune one's life is with one's basic parameters, such as the own needs, values and aspirations. Most of these do not or only change little over time. This stability is a good thing and helps against anxiety and the fear in the face of uncertainty. Important first steps are to find out what these parameters are. The next steps are then to adjust one's actions and thoughts in new ways. Since one's actions and thoughts determine to a large extent how one feels about oneself and the world, adjustments in behaviours, particularly communication behaviours, and thought patterns can lead to more happiness in life.

## The Benefits of Happiness

Happy people are more likely to evidence greater self-control and self-regulatory and coping abilities (see Aspinwall, 1998; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Keltner & Bonanno, 1997), to have a bolstered immune system (e.g., Dillon, Minchoff, & Baker, 1985; Stone et al., 1994), and even to live a longer life (e.g., Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001; Ostir, Markides, Black, & Goodwin, 2000). The benefits of a feeling can thus be

quite real, even in terms of life-expectancy. Unfortunately, this is often grossly underrated in healthcare and in the various areas of a person's life, such as the workplace.

Individual happiness can also lead to more happiness in other people and society in general. There is empirical evidence that happy individuals tend to be relatively more cooperative, prosocial, charitable, and "other-centered" (e.g., Isen, 1970; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Williams & Shiaw, 1999). Happiness also reduces modes of thinking which impede social co-existence, such as the perception of living in a zero-sum world, where one can only gain if another loses rather than everyone can succeed and prosper, or feelings of envy and general mistrust relative to other people. This does not mean, of course, that a happy person ceases to be achievement oriented or to compete. Instead, greater happiness can increase the chance of success. (Haverkamp, 2013, 2017c)

## Time

Happiness is a subjective feeling of well-being, which means that the quality of actual events in the past matters less than the interpretation of the information about these events in the present. But since this interpretation is largely influenced by emotional signals and feelings in the present, present happiness begets happiness about the past and, as a corollary, present unhappiness begets unhappiness about the past. It is thus important to approach the quest for greater happiness in the current time frame.

However, time also means a certain amount of latitude and freedom it can be filled with. Since happiness can be greater if there is a wider range of freedom in individual choice and a greater latitude in individual adjustment and adaptation, having a more helpful concept of time is very likely to promote happiness. Even further, seeing oneself within the larger time frame of life in general leads to an even larger sense of freedom and latitude, which can lead to greater content and satisfactions.

## Eternity

Eternity means time without limitation, which also describes reality as a whole rather than focusing on a part of it. Many people get lost in their limitations rather than focusing on details which can remove them. When one focuses on a task that is enjoyable one gets a sense for limitlessness. When individuals are in a state of 'flow', as formulated by the psychologist Mikhail Csikszentmihalyi, they seem to lose their experience of limitations, both internally and externally. Thus, happiness reduces the preoccupation with unhelpful limitations which can often be an important factor of unhappiness. Happiness so becomes an antidote for unhappiness.

Humans are only allotted a certain interval of time on earth. On one hand, it is important to realise that time is limited, but on the other, one also needs to be aware that one is part of a larger process of life which spans a much larger time horizon. If one can perceive meaning in life in itself, then one's own life and one's own actions, behaviours and interactions with others become even more meaningful.

Having a sense for the wide horizon of time can also put one's significance and responsibility in perspective. This can make it easier to plan and initiate tasks, as well as to reduce fears and anxiety. On the other hand, it can also make accomplishments and achievements in the world more relevant. Having a helpful concept

of time can thus be helpful to reduce mental health symptoms and increase happiness. Often, people suffer because they have an unhelpful perception and working concept of time. Since our perception of time is determined by our perception of internal and external information flows (Haverkamp, 2018c), having an understanding of these information flows can also increase one's experience of time. Communication-focused therapy (CFT) tries to accomplish this through its focus on communication processes, structures and patterns in a therapeutic setting. (Haverkamp, 2010b, 2017a, 2018b)

A differentiated sense of time is thus important to also feel a greater sense of happiness. Viewing past and future from the right angle helps to give them the right amount of influence they hold over the present. It is thus important to also have a good sense of how the time line is constructed in its components.

## Action

Empirical work supports positive effects of prompting people to practice positive psychological "virtues" such as gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), hope (C. R. Snyder, Ilardi, Michael, & Cheavens, 2000), and forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2000) suggest that cognitive activity offers many excellent possibilities for happiness interventions (Fordyce, 1983). However, for true happiness action needs to go beyond checking off formulaic solutions on a check-list. It requires better insight into one's true needs, values and aspirations. The word 'true' merely indicates that often people believe they have a sense of their needs, values and aspirations without having really reflected on them, but, when they do so, they discover that this perception is built on what they think others expect of them. Since humans cannot mind read, they may follow a maladaptive theory about other people, the world and themselves. This does not lead to happiness.

## Determinants of Happiness

Generally, the following three observations have been made repeatedly:

- Happiness is quite stable on the short term, but not in the long run, neither relatively nor absolutely.
- Happiness is not insensitive to fortune or adversity.
- Happiness is not entirely built-in: its genetic basis is at best modest and psychological factors explain only part of its variance.

Several factors play a role in the determination of happiness

- a genetically determined set point for happiness
- psychological factors
- social and environmental factors
- own activities and practices

The genetic factors can be seen as delivering a starting point. However, even a predisposition does not mean that someone will or will not feel happy later in life. Much depends on the communication patterns

with oneself and others a person uses. This in turn can also depend on the choice of environment one makes. Since the interpersonal environment influences how one interacts not only with that environment but also with other people. The choice of friends, workplace and partners can have a significant impact on one's happiness capabilities also outside these defined realms.

Behavioral genetic studies suggest that the stable component of SWB is strongly heritable. One common interpretation of this finding is that changing a person's happiness is nearly impossible. However, Rutter (1997) noted that estimates of heritability "provide no unambiguous implications for theory, policy, or practice" (p. 391). In addition, it is unclear precisely how much of the variability in SWB is completely stable over time. Indeed, it has been difficult to determine the extent to which a stable underlying trait contributes to variance in observed measures because many longitudinal studies have been conducted for short periods of time or have collected only a few waves of data.

Indeed, the existing evidence suggests that the effects of external circumstances on happiness are relatively small. For instance, demographic characteristics and life circumstances do not account for large amounts of variance in well-being (Argyle, 1999). In contrast, stable, genetically-influenced personality characteristics exhibit moderate to strong correlations with well-being constructs (see Lucas, in press, for a review). These findings have led some to suggest that that long-term levels of happiness cannot change and that people can adapt to almost any life circumstance including severe disabilities and economic windfalls.

## Trait versus State

Unlike traits, which are stable characteristics, states are temporary behaviours or feelings that depend on a person's situation and motives at a particular time. The difference between traits and states is analogous to the difference between climate and weather. One of the ideological foundations of the modern welfare states is the belief that people can be made happier by providing them with better living conditions. This belief is challenged by the theory that happiness is a fixed 'trait', rather than a variable 'state'. This theory figures both at the individual level and at the societal level. The individual level variant depicts happiness as an aspect of personal character; rooted in inborn temperament or acquired disposition. The societal variant sees happiness as a matter of national character; embedded in shared values and beliefs. Both variants imply that a better society makes no happier people.

Happiness can be regarded as a trait if it meets three criteria:

- (1) temporal stability
- (2) cross-situational consistency, and
- (3) inner causation.

It is concluded that happiness is no immutable trait. There is thus still sense in striving for greater happiness for a greater number.

In an earlier investigation of this issue, Ehrhardt, Saris, and Veenhoven (2000) analyzed 11 waves of life satisfaction data from the same panel study that Fujita and Diener (2005) examined. Their results showed that 29% of the variance was accounted for by a stable trait, 29% by an autoregressive trait, and 42% by a

combined state/error component. However, like Fujita and Diener, the authors used listwise deletion of participants with missing data. Because considerable attrition occurs in longitudinal studies, this strategy often results in the exclusion of many participants from the analysis. Put simply, listwise deletion can result in biased estimates and is therefore not an optimal strategy for dealing with missing data (Schafer & Graham, 2002).

Second, although 11 years may seem like a long time for a longitudinal study, it is possible that even longer time frames are needed to separate stable trait variance from autoregressive trait variance. Stable trait models imply that correlations will eventually reach some minimum level beyond which they do not drop (i.e., they asymptote), even over increasingly long periods of time. If studies are not conducted for a sufficient period of time this minimum may never be reached (see e.g., Figure 1 in Fraley & Roberts, 2005, p. 61), and a simpler autoregressive model with no stable trait (or a relatively small stable trait) may appear to describe the data as well as more complicated models that incorporate stable trait factors. In the current studies, we attempt to replicate Ehrhardt et al.'s (2000) findings using full information maximum likelihood estimation and 10 additional years of data from the GSOEP.<sup>1</sup> We then replicate these analyses from a separate nationally representative longitudinal study, the British Household Panel Study (BHPS). Together, these studies should provide a much more nuanced understanding of the stability of SWB over time.

## Specific Happiness

People are different. They have different strengths, needs, values and aspirations. (Haverkamp, 2012) A strength does not necessarily mean that one is happy who uses the strength, but if a strength is combined with a basic interest, this can lead to greater happiness.

Positive effects of goal attainment on well-being are moderated by goal–person fit (Brunstein et al., 1998; Diener & Fujita, 1995; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). The particular techniques considered most effective for raising happiness varied greatly from one individual to another and appeared to be determined by each participant's needs and areas of specific weakness (Fordyce, 1977, 1983).

There are also a variety of ways that fit might be operationalized, such as in terms of self-reported fit, in terms of consistency between implicit and explicit measures of activity-relevant motives, or in terms of informant-rated person– activity fit.

## General Happiness

Certain kinds of experiences are likely to be beneficial to anyone, because these experiences reflect universal psychological needs. From this point of view, any activity that provides certain experiences, such as those involving belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), or autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000), might be assumed to “fit” the person, a priori. Since humans and also animals share a large number of basic needs, many activities and situations that are capable of making one happy are common to separate individuals in general.

## Focus

Focus is an important quality to become an expert at something, to perform well in work or even to focus on oneself in meditation. Conscious thought processes require focus, the selection of information that will be processed. Without this ability to select relevant information, we could not process information in a meaningful way, or even have a single conscious thought. The basic parameter can inform one where to direct one's focus. At the same time, it is important to maintain enough openness to be receptive to information sources one has not identified as relevant before.

We live on an ocean of constant streams of information. Picking out one from this huge space can be a daunting task, but important is to be guided by both, thoughts and feelings, which in themselves are information. The information we carry in us is contained in structures, whether in the patterns of cellular receptors or in base sequences in the DNA. From memory to the physical make-up of a person, all this contains information which forms how receptive we are to external and internal information, and how we process this information. The internal information guides our focus and thus the reception of new information. Fortunately, living organisms are programmed to be open to the reception and processing of new information. They feed on information. Even if only external communication is removed by placing someone in a space without new information, this leads to a highly uncomfortable state. But internal communication flows cannot be removed from a living person, and they often get overlooked when the focus is more on the perceived demands of the external worlds. However, by a greater focus and more awareness on the internal communication flows and the own reactions to the outside world, one can maybe in several instances do more for the world we all share than by merely focusing on it directly. It will also bring greater happiness if the individual communication and behaviour is in sync with the basic parameters of the individual and more in tune with the world around. (Haverkamp, 2010a, 2017b)

## Feelings and the Choice of Focus

Focus, however, can heighten anxiety if it limits one's visual field to something that causes anxiety or even to the anxiety itself. By choosing our focus, we also choose how we feel. The more one engages with anxiety, the more anxious one feels. Panic attacks, for example, mean an almost complete focus on bodily sensations and fear of imminent doom, while the world around gets shut out. On the other hand, the more one is able to take a step back, take in the bigger picture and reflect on the underlying reasons for the anxiety, the less intense the anxious feeling becomes. This is helped by having a helpful understanding and concept of time, since the definition of a focus is linked to the past and the benefit of it to the future, but more importantly how one feels about these choices.

## Choice and Time

Feelings are informed by the information already contained in a person with the addition of new information. Thus, there is a continuity between past and future experiences. Memory plays an important role here, and how one can access it and interpret the data in it plays an important role. The important point here is to address the internal information flows.

Choices depend on the people and the environment one finds oneself in. The choices one perceives determine what one can focus on. Timing is important when making a choice. It can determine the benefit to be derived from a behaviour or activity. It determines the information that can be gained from the environment.

## Focus and the Bigger Picture

We live in a complex world, and while we need the ability to focus, we also need to be able to have a sense of the greater picture to know where to point our focus. If we extend this greater picture, we get a sense for the whole. As long as one does not lose the connectedness with the moment, this can lead to valuable insight. It may sound paradoxical but focus also helps to see more of the whole. The reason is that general laws and patterns are also reflected in the details. Communication patterns in the world in general are also reflected in the detail. Since the fundamental laws underlying these communication patterns does not change over time, happiness can be achieved in working also with which does not change.

## Moving between the Small and the Big

Moving back and forth between the situation of the now and the broader picture helps to get in meaningful contact with one's emotions and helps in identifying one's values and true interests. It is difficult to think about those needs and wants that are relevant in the future if one is fully captured in the moment, without the ability to take a step back from the moment. The present moment without the future may reveal little about one's values and true interests, which usually are linked in some way to having a past and a future. We learn from the past and are motivated by a future, the future and the past make the now special. The more we have a sense for time as being a practically infinite continuum of now's, the easier it is to be in the now and to make it meaningful.

## Stability of Happiness

Individual basic traits that are largely determined by genetic factors are not going to change quickly over time, if at all. As pointed out above, there is a crucial importance in the stability of such traits as in the basic parameters of needs, values and aspirations in general. There are thus some people who are more predisposed to experience happiness than others. However, a predisposition or a tendency thus not determine in the individual case how happy one will actually be. Lykken and Tellegen (1996) estimated the 10-year stability of a well-being measure to be about .50 in their sample. Schimmack and Oishi (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of stability estimates from life satisfaction scales, and they showed that the average 10-year stability is approximately .35. Fujita and Diener (2005) used data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (GSOEP), an ongoing, nationally representative panel study of people living in Germany, to estimate the 10-year stability of a single-item life satisfaction measure at around .35. Schimmack and Oishi (2005) and Fujita and Diener (2005) found evidence that stable trait variance plays some role in the stability of life satisfaction measures.

That happiness can be relatively stable over time has several other explanations beyond genetics. The openness and receptiveness to particular meaningfulness can for example affect one's state of self-being and happiness as information is used to bring about adaptive change. Thus, the stability of individual communication patterns, both internally and internally, probably contribute to the stability of individual happiness and self-being over time. Communication-focused therapy (CFT), for example, aims to increase individual well-being through awareness and working with internal and external communication patterns. (Haverkamp, 2010b, 2017a)

## Change

Although it is widely known that the various components of subjective well-being are heritable, Lykken and Tellegen extended the standard twin design by assessing twins' SWB at two time points separated by approximately 10 years. Consistent with previous studies, they found that the heritability at the initial assessment was approximately 50% and that about 80% of the long-term stable variance was heritable. These results suggest that external factors may play a role in short-term fluctuations, while genetics play a dominant role in long-term levels.

Research shows that widows and widowers experience strong reactions to the loss of a spouse, but that this reaction subsides over time (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). Such significant life events apparently can lead to short-term instability that decreases over time as people adapt. It is also important to note that these external events that can affect happiness are often interpersonal in nature, such as a loss of a relationship or the gaining of a new one.

## Meaningfulness

Meaningfulness is if something resonates with one's internal values and true wants and needs. In our everyday lives, we tend to forget what is truly valuable and important to us. And if we do, it becomes difficult to see meaning in the world, even in one's own work or relationship. This is why it is important to reflect on one's value, want and needs at least once in a while. Having a sense for the bigger picture helps.

Seeing meaning in oneself and the world is an important key to happiness, because it also makes anything that helps change ourselves and the world meaningful. Subjective or felt meaning is an important component of happiness, and to experience this sense of meaning it is important to experience the connectedness in oneself and with the world.

## Information Processing

How we process information is determined by our biology, which is unique, and the information we received from our environment, the relationship experiences we have with others and everything we have been and are learning about the world. Information is the basic ingredient of the self-regulatory processes

and helps to keep us in balance with ourselves and the world around. Openness to new information and the flexibility for change makes the world more stable and helps avert chaos. Happiness means one is able to experience stability but also openness and flexibility to actively partake in the dynamics and changes in the world. All this requires us to process information, whether it comes from the outside or the inside.

And time plays a role in both, the stability and the change. Since there is a long time axis, information could lead to other information and so on, resulting in meta-information or condensed information which helps us understand the basic rules of life and rely on the experiences and the knowledge of others so that we can align our actions and behaviours better with our needs, values and aspirations, thus increasing our levels of happiness in life. Selecting for and using meaningful information effectively is, however, a skill which has to be learned. The basic starting point and the intentions and fundamental tools to learn it are already present at birth, but it is the constant exposure to diverse flows of information, internally and externally, which lead to the ability to form and work with communication patterns and distil the meaning which supports a fulfilling life. (Haverkamp, 2017a)

## Letting Go of the Irrelevant

As a human being, focusing on a longer time span means also letting go of what is irrelevant by focusing not on a temporary need but on the values and interests that feel relevant. Often one has a 'gut sense' of what is relevant and what is not. This gut instinct is actually a feeling, which is based on enormous amounts of information we continuously process on a subconscious level. We may not be aware of all the information that are channelled into one's gut instinct, but it is based on all our experiences, memories, values, interests and aspirations. Of course, it may give a 'wrong' answer, but this is often due to one of two errors: the first one is focusing on the irrelevant because of fears, anxiety or other emotions that are reactivated remnants of past experiences; the second is being disconnected from one's gut instinct because of the same negative emotions from the past. For many people, it requires a learning process to reconnect with one's gut instinct, feel the fears and anxiety, but to do so anyway. This is connecting the now and the sense of eternity.

## Protection from the Past

Having a sense of those things which do not change, such as one's values and basic interests and aspirations, protects from unresolved emotions of the past which can interfere with one's life and decision-making processes. To find this piece of lasting stability in oneself means being honest and open with oneself. The work with a therapist can be helpful at this point. Exploring new insight can be easier with support. However, this work also requires thinking beyond the immediate limitations of time. One reason is that one needs to see that basic needs, values and aspirations are often shared by people over time, while we all also have individually relevant needs, values and aspirations and individual life experiences which are important to identify and value.

The time frame one uses can put the past into perspective. If one sees an individual decision or event within a larger time frame it becomes relatively smaller. Since humans are not only affected by their own individual experiences but also by the experiences of other people via interpersonal communication,

widening the horizon within one looks at a decision or event makes it less significant for oneself and the world. Happiness does requires the ability to focus on the present while being cognisant of a very wide time frame at the same time.

## Action

Action in the here and now leads to greater long-term happiness. Changes in oneself and in the world can lead to greater happiness because it puts ourselves more in sync with the world. What is being changed are internal and external communication patterns, because it is through changes in communication that our link with the world is changed. Communication-focused therapy (CFT) as a therapeutic approach, for example, focuses on awareness for, reflection on and modification of the communication patterns to bring about changes in the exchange of meaningful information with oneself and others that leads to real change in oneself and in the world. (Haverkamp, 2010b, 2018a, 2018d) Action that leads to greater happiness does begins with awareness for communication with oneself and others.

However, even if something seems to correspond with our needs, values and aspirations, the basic parameters, we may not muster the willpower to initiate the activity or undertaking. One reason may be that the activity after all does not align as well with our inner basic parameters as we thought. Additional efforts at insight into what made one happy in the past and where one felt positive and content can provide helpful information in this regard, but this also requires a good connectivity with oneself. (Haverkamp, 2012) Work on internal and external communication patterns facilitates such a greater internal connectedness. (Haverkamp, 2017a) Even if a task is self-related, it may include caring for other people or changing the world for the better. But it has to start with the feeling in oneself that this has relevance and is important to oneself in order to see it through and be successful at it.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Joiner, & Williams, 2003) posits that the crucial factor in such cases is whether the person has internalized the nonenjoyable activity, that is, whether he or she is able to find meaning and value expression in it, even if it is not pleasant to perform. The question of when and how to sacrifice short-term happiness in exchange for longer term happiness is an important one, as is the question of how to promote internalization of important happiness-relevant activities that are not intrinsically enjoyable.

In a larger time frame, one cannot only be more relaxed about decisions but also more flexible in trying out different actions and behaviours. To see life as a learning experience, and to benefit from it, it helps to see the individual life as a part of life overall. The more one can integrate into a larger concept of life and interconnect with other people, the more meaningful information can be learned, which leads to better decisions and more fulfilment in life.

## From Past and Future to the Now

The important step is not only to separate the presence from the time around it, but to actually see the now as part of the eternal, and vice versa. Happiness means one does not regret of being in the present now but see eternity as a practically endless chain of nows. One now is not more or less important than another now. A day always lasts twentyfour hours, and each day should be filled with the same amount of happiness. Being unhappy for a day now and happy for a day in a year still leaves less happiness on average than being at least somewhat happy today and somewhat in a year. Often, we act as if eternity has not started yet and there is just the anxiety in the now, or if there is only a never-ending eternity and today is of no value. Both perspectives are neither real nor helpful.



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