

The Evolution of Happiness - Some New Answers to Modern Questions About Life in the Fast Lane

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I have always heard that the two happiest days in a boat owner's life are the day they *buy* the boat and the day they *sell* it, or at least that's how the adage goes. Please hold onto this thought for a few minutes – we'll come back to it.

Modern living has produced so many improvements in our quality of life. However, with progress, there are setbacks. It seems that as life progresses, and we all have more than ever before, there is a corresponding regression in our overall level of happiness. This applies to our homes and personal relationships, but also to our work lives.

Tennis legend Jimmy Connors once remarked, "I hate to lose more than I like to win". Is that healthy? What can we do about it?

"I Just Want to be Happy!"

Many years ago, while standing in the kitchen of my home, my wife and I were having an extended conversation. I called out to her through the pass through window into the family room, where she was sitting and asked her what she wanted for her birthday. There came no answer. Puzzled, I went around the corner to where she was sitting, and found her slumped on the couch with her head down. She was crying and shaking. I asked her what was wrong. She looked up at me and said, "You want to know what I want for my birthday? I just want to be happy!" That exchange left me dazed, confused and feeling guilty for something, although I wasn't sure what. (I confess that I often felt that way until the end our marriage). So, I began to do everything I could think of to try and make her feel happy, but of course, nothing I did at that point did any good. Dang. (Maybe a new boat would have done the trick!)

Still, my wife started making changes from that day to make herself feel happier. For example, she began a very strict diet, which evidently worked, because just a few months later, she lost 205 pounds of ball and chain she apparently had been carrying around her neck for almost 18 years! But, I digress.

"I just want to be happy." Those words have stuck with me for years. Of course, we know that **no one** can make you feel happy, except yourself. But when your spouse looks at you and says something like that, most of us begin to panic and look for answers. Then, in 2000, a friend sent a paper to me that may have shed some light on the question *how can we feel more happy, especially if we can't afford a boat?*

That paper my friend sent is called “**The Evolution of Happiness**” by Dr. David M. Buss, of the University of Texas at Austin, Department of Psychology, which appeared in the January, 2000 edition of the **American Psychologist**. Dr. Buss’ contention is that as times have modernized, we are becoming more unhappy and less satisfied than ever before. But why? Shouldn’t we be happier, especially with all we have and to which we have access? Buss believes that he knows the reasons contained in the following areas:

- Discrepancies between modern and ancestral environments. Despite the astonishing level of comfort with which most people live, compared to their ancestors, modern environments have produced a variety of ills. Many are unanticipated and/or are just now being discovered, such as **over consumption** (unique to western culture, and the United States in particular) Others include:
 - Depletion of the ozone layer
 - The complexity and density of urban environment
 - Unreasonable expectations about the quantity and quality of available mates (which also begin to effect our self-image) [no wonder I was in trouble!], and
 - Depression

Additionally, there are things he calls “subjective distress mechanisms” that have evolved in modern life and vary from person to person. They include psychological pain, anxiety, depression, fears and phobias, jealousy and specific forms of anger and upset.

Finally, there is the psychological danger of the effects of competition. Selection operates on differences, so one person’s gain is often another person’s loss. As one expert put it, “the most fundamental, most universal double standard is not male verses female, but each individual human verses everyone else”. As novelist Gore Vidal once noted, “It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail”. (Buss, 2000)

3 Tragedies of Happiness

1. The “hedonic treadmill”

“The more we have, the more we want, and the more we have, the less happy it makes us”. Isn’t this a dangerous thing to our self esteem? Someone once said (and our parents reiterated over and over) that happiness is not in having what you want, but in wanting what you have.

2. Instance failure – unpredictability

“When what usually works doesn’t - people get nervous”, or one bad evaluation and 100 good ones? It’s funny, but very true that, even as long as I’ve been in the teaching business, I still fret over one bad evaluation, even when the rest of them are great. When you have pride in your work, and think that others should care about it as much as you do, this is pretty natural, I guess. Many of my friends and colleagues know this story, which is completely true. Years ago, when I was a young Training Officer at DPS, we had just started teaching First Responder for Law Enforcement, a specialized first aid program for our commissioned officers. We went to the EMS division of the Texas Department of Health and received special permission for this unique certification. We all became EMT’s and crafted our program to blend job-related skills with the State mandates. It was innovative and really great. Our people were required to have eight hours of it, every two years, so it was quite a commitment. Of course, our participants had an evaluation form (back then, at DPS, we called them “critiques”), and we were all anxious to see what they thought about in-service school in general, and First Responder in specific after the first week of the roll out. Under the topic title and my name, one person, with one opinion had written “sucked”.

I mention this for two reasons: one, that happened October of 1985 (and I’ve *almost* forgotten all about it), and two, my therapist thinks that if I keep talking about it, the nightmares and fear of rejection will eventually stop.

3. Affective experiences following comparable gains and losses.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, Tennis great Jimmy Connors once said that with the stress and pressure he worked under, tournament after tournament, it got to the point where “I hate to lose more than I like to win”. Isn’t *that* sad? Shouldn’t winning make us feel better than losing makes us feel bad?

Improving Human Happiness

Fear not. Now that we’ve pointed out some of the problems, the rest of this paper will be devoted to strategies for improving our feeling of overall happiness. Dr. Buss has these suggestions:

- Close the gap between modern and ancestral conditions. Live more simply.
- Increase closeness of extended kin. Value age and experience.
- Develop deep friendships – be there in good times and bad.

The *psychology of cooperation* can lead to an improved quality of life for all cooperators by living and teaching the following behaviors:

- Manage competitive mechanisms.
- Teach reciprocity
- Develop a reputation as a reciprocator.
- Enlarge the shadow of the future.
- Insist on no more than equity in relationships.

Promoting Cooperation and “Shared Fate”

The Three Musketeers had a famous saying of “one for all, and all for one”, and that’s a pretty good example of the *we’re all in this together* kind of thinking that can rally one’s sense of commitment and loyalty. Those values are not natural, especially in a work setting. As employees get younger and younger (which *can’t* be because I’m getting older and older), they must be taught by elders how and why commitment and loyalty are so important to a company’s health and future. Sharing and cooperating are uniquely *adult* behaviors. But, back to psychology, today...

Buss writes that the concept of **shared fate** means:

“Evolutionists have identified one of the key conditions that promote cooperation – shared fate – occurs with individuals living in some kinds of groups. When the fate of individuals within the group is shared – for example when the success of a hunt depends on the coordination of all the members of the hunting party, or when defense against attack is made successful by the cooperation of a group’s members - then cooperation is enhanced”. (Buss, 2000)

Buss says some interesting things about reciprocation, and developing a reputation as a reciprocator: “Promoting reciprocity not only helps people by making others more cooperative, it also makes it more difficult for exploitive strategies to thrive”. In other words, we eventually reap what we sow, even in a modern world. “People live in a social world where the beliefs others hold about them – their reputations – determine whether others will befriend or avoid them. [Because reputations are established through people’s actions], and word about their actions spreads, cultivating a reputation as a reciprocator will make others seek them out for mutual gain”. (Buss, 2000)

Positive and Negative Conflict Behaviors

This wonderful material is from my friend Lewis Griggs (www.griggs.com), President and CEO of Griggs Productions of San Francisco. My association with

Lewis' work began in 1989, when I was one of the Training Staff responsible for implementing a Cultural Diversity program for all commissioned officers at Texas DPS. Then, when that training became mandatory in 1991, we were already two years ahead, thanks to the acceptance of our program which featured Lewis' work.

My friendship started in 2000, when, as a real highlight in my teaching career, Lewis came to the DPS Academy and presented a diversity program to the Department's upper echelon. (Thanks, Lewis, for your vision and teaching us to see the picture in a new way).

Let's talk about conflict. The term is defined as “**an emotional state characterized by indecision, restlessness, uncertainty and tension resulting from incompatible inner needs or drives of comparable intensity.** Wow, that definition sounds like my dating history. Note that this defines negative conflict. However, in relationship, there is positive *and* negative conflict and behaviors which help create or enable both types. Based on this definition then, consider what positive conflict is (from the behaviors above), how it pulls relationship closer and how it is created. Creating positive conflict involves willingness to take an intelligent risk. For example, no one will trust us, unless we first demonstrate that we are willing to trust others. We willfully give something away, knowing that it might not come back. That's the risk.

Enhancing Relationship Behaviors

- Commitment
- Participation/Co-creation
- Trust
- Consciousness/Awareness
- Facilitative
- Personal Responsibility
- Empathy
- Openness
- Effective Communication
- Being Present
- Honesty/Congruence
- Understanding

These behaviors have been used in countless presentations and references since we purchased the three-part video program by Griggs Productions, “Valuing Relationship” which was produced in 1993 and revised in 1994.

Remember the definition of conflict noted earlier? The list of behaviors below enables negative conflict, which create misery and survivalists before eventually grinding relationship to a halt.

Depleting Relationship Behaviors

- Lying
- Narcissism
- Withholding/Withdrawing
- Facilitative
- Blaming/Doubting
- Judging/Righteousness
- Sabotage others/self
- Manipulation
- Prejudice/Discrimination
- Acceptance
- Sexual Harassment
- Victim/Martyr (Griggs, 1997)

Seven Blunders

There are many dynamics that contribute to one's feeling of unhappiness, but here is another specific example that could have devastating effect on relationship. Shortly before his assassination in 1948, Mohandas Gandhi (Gandhi is commonly known and spoken of worldwide as Mahatma Gandhi *Mahatma: Great Soul* and as *Bapu* (in Gujarati, *Father*)) gave his grandson, Arun, a talisman upon which were engraved "Seven Blunders." Gandhi believed that it is out of these blunders that violence emerges and infects the world. The blunders are:

- wealth without work
- pleasure without conscience
- knowledge without character
- commerce without morality
- science without humanity
- worship without sacrifice
- politics without principles

Gandhi called these imbalances "passive violence." He maintained that passive violence feeds the active violence which is rampant in our world. Violent acts of war, crime and rebellion sprout from the roots of passive violence. He also believed that efforts to achieve peace would be fruitless as long as we ignore the passive violence in our midst. (Gilligan, 1997)

And now, it's your turn to exercise...

In the live version of this class, I try and challenge participants by asking them to work together to develop a strategy for their job and office relationships to work happier. What can each of us do to enhance cooperation among the group's members? It's more than just "everybody just get along". And, even though there are issues at the root of discord, a strategy is not far away as long as we make an effort to practice a sense of "intensive *altruism*" which is an attitude or behavior marked by unselfish concern for the welfare of others, and a belief that acting for the benefit of others is right and good. In short, *learn to serve and practice serving others*. So, to help participants see how to practice intensive altruism a little each day, I ask them to consider:

- Is there an example that you've always tried to follow and live by?
- What are you doing at work to contribute to a happier place?
- What enhancing and depleting behaviors are present at home? At work? And, what are you doing to help minimize or eliminate any depleting behaviors? I ask the classes to work individually, then collaborate as a group and create a "best practice".

As I mentioned earlier, the psychology of cooperation can lead to an improved quality of life for all cooperators. Specifically:

- Manage competitive mechanisms.
- Teach reciprocity
- Develop a reputation as a reciprocator.
- Enlarge the shadow of the future.
- Insist on no more than equity.

Think about it individually – relate a personal philosophy or strategy for successful passage along the "pathway to happiness".

Then, discuss with your group and develop your own pathway to happiness in your team or workgroup worthy of publication or posting on the walls of your office.

Therefore, if someone came to your office, would they learn a lot about how you operate by reading the writing on the wall?

"Stay hungry, Stay foolish"

In June of 2005, Steve Jobs, he founder of Apple Computer and now CEO of Pixar Animation, delivered the commencement address at Stanford University. It's comprised of "three stories from my life. That's it. No big deal. Just three stories."

However, in these three stories, I found some of the most beautiful and inspiring messages I have ever read. It's his formula for happiness and his wish for all the new, fresh minds he was addressing. It's a great formula for happiness for all of us. Here is an excerpt from the last story, which is about death:

“About a year ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. I had a scan at 7:30 in the morning, and it clearly showed a tumor on my pancreas. I didn't even know what a pancreas was. The doctors told me this was almost certainly a type of cancer that is incurable, and that I should expect to live no longer than three to six months. My doctor advised me to go home and get my affairs in order, which is doctor's code for 'Prepare to die'. It means to try to tell your kids in just a few months everything you thought you'd have the next ten years to tell them. It means to make sure that everything is buttoned up so that it will as easy as possible for your family. It means to say your goodbyes.

I lived with that diagnosis all day. Later that evening, I had a biopsy, in which they stuck an endoscope down my throat, through my stomach and into my intestines, put a needle into my pancreas and got a few cells from the tumor. I was sedated, but my wife, who was there, said that when they viewed the cells under a microscope, the doctors started crying, because it turned out to be a very rare form of pancreatic cancer that is curable with surgery. I had the surgery and I'm fine now.

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.

When I was young, there was an amazing publication called *The Whole Earth Catalog*, which was one of the bibles of my generation. It was created by a fellow named Stewart Brand not far from here, in Menlo Park, and he brought it to life with his poetic touch. This was in the late 1960's, before personal computers and desktop publishing, so it was all made with typewriters, scissors and Polaroid cameras. It was sort of like Google in paperback form, 35 years before Google came along: It was idealistic, and overflowing with neat tools and great notions. Stewart and his team put out several issues of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, and then, when it had run its course, they put out a final issue. It was the mid-1970's, and I was your age. On the back cover of their final issue of an early morning country road, the kind you might find yourself hitchhiking on if you were so adventurous. Beneath it were the words: 'Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish.' It was their farewell message as they signed off. Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish. And I have always wished that for myself. And now, as you graduate and begin anew, I wish that for you. Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish.

Thank you all very much.” (Jobs, 2005)

Please – work every day to practice happiness, my friends.

References and Bibliography

1. “The Evolution of Happiness” by Dr. David M. Buss, University of Texas at Austin, Department of Psychology, which appeared in the January, 2000 edition of the *American Psychologist*.
2. “*Valuing Relationship*”, a three-part video based program produced by Griggs Productions, San Francisco, 1994. www.griggs.com
3. **The Courage to Love (1997)**, by Stephen Gilligan