

KEYS TO HAPPINESS by Walter L. Williams

About half of happiness seems to be related to genetics. Some people seem inherently oriented toward being happy, and other people seem equally oriented toward being unhappy. Of course, what happens in a person's life affects that, but even with similar situations some people react in pleasant ways while others react to the same exact situation in the opposite way. This is part of our highly individual nature as a species.

This individual variation has been a great advantage to our species, as we have expanded to many different environments as we spread around the world. Arriving in unfamiliar conditions, it helps to have some people who are optimistic, and they will jump at the chance for new experiences. They will eat the strange berries, drink the local water, and sleep soundly under the stars. Sometimes, though, that optimism might be dangerous, as the optimists waded into a river that is infested with deadly snakes. So it helps to have some people who are pessimists, because they will be more cautious, and persuade others to hold back, to worry about the dangers. So, for early humans, they needed both personality types to maximize survival. In some situations, the optimists are careless, and they get killed. In other situations, the pessimists miss new opportunities, and they starve to death. Since both situations happen, it is hard to know which approach works best, so whichever approach happens to occur, the unlucky ones die, while the survivors regroup and carry on. Depressing, but realistic.

So, if maybe half of happiness is due to genetics, how can we put our life in a happier state of mind? Good health is a major factor. If you are in pain, that changes every other aspect. Do whatever you can to help your health improve, and avoid doing those things which negatively impact your health.

Meeting a basic level of physical security is also important, so it is true that people who are in dire poverty are less happy. If you are worried about having a secure place to live, or where your next meal is coming from, it is not surprising that you will be less satisfied with your life. However, once you have your basic needs met, just increasing your income does not have much relationship to happiness levels. Some rich people have miserable lives.

To help their clients, therapists try to cultivate "positive thinking," by encouraging them to notice and write about each day's small pleasures as they occur. Making lists of things for which you can feel grateful in your life also are important to write down periodically. Reread and expand those written lists periodically. Invest time and energy into cultivating friendships and family relationships, practice random acts of kindness, and forgive those who have harmed you in some way, are also routes to a happier life.

It requires some effort to achieve a happy outlook on life, and most people who feel unhappy may not make this effort to change. Research shows that people who are grateful, optimistic, and forgiving have better experiences in their own life, have stronger friendships, happier marriages and relationships, and cope better with difficulties.

One characteristic of people who feel happier in their life is if they can achieve what psychologists call “flow,” an engrossing state of mind that results when someone is involved in creative or playful activity. Athletes, musicians, writers, gardeners, computer programmers, and artists achieve this while doing activities they enjoy. It depends not on the specific activity as much as how much you can get engrossed in doing it. Therefore, having engrossing interests is a good route to happiness. People without interests are bored, and boring.

SOURCE:

Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse* (New York: Random House, 2004).

Robin Lloyd, “The Keys to Happiness,” LiveScience.com accessed 28 February 2006.