

WHAT'S HAPPINESS GOT TO DO WITH IT?

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I used to be part of a clinical staff at a community mental-health center. After meeting with a client to perform an assessment, each counselor at the clinic presented the case to the other counselors. The purpose of this staff review was quality assurance, ensuring that the client's diagnosis was accurate and providing assistance with treatment planning.

One day, while a counselor was presenting her case, she mentioned that the client wanted to use therapy to work toward "being happy." After the counselor said this, she rolled her eyes and chuckled, as if the client was making a silly request. She received a few chuckles from some of the other counselors. I was shocked and saddened. If I recall correctly, I muttered, "That sounds like a good goal to *me!*" There was no follow-up conversation about it.

On the one hand, I instinctively understood what the counselor meant: that "feeling joyful emotion" is the result of life circumstances that do not happen every day. She was concerned that, if she supported her client in wanting to "be happy," then she would be setting up the client for failure. After all, it is important to be accepting of all of life's emotions, including negative emotions (such as sorrow or fear).

On the other hand, every client with whom I've worked has voiced one of these desires: 1) I want to get or keep a happy relationship with my spouse, and 2) I want to be *happy with my life*. This is true of the schizophrenic person who, fifty years ago, would probably have been living in what we used to call an asylum, and this is true for the professional, highly skilled client, as well. This is true for men and for women. This is true for teenagers and the elderly. The specific goals often vary, but these two states are consistently in demand.

Further discussion of this odd split between what clients want and how mental-health clinicians see things can be found in a terrific series of articles on the mind-body connection, published in the January 20, 2003 issue of *Time* magazine. Lo and behold, they included one article entitled, "Is there a Formula for Joy?" This article stated that a recent research review found 54,000 studies on depression and 415 (less than 1%) on happiness. Their conclusion: that the medical establishment is more interested in cataloguing mental illness, than it is in thoroughly understanding health and happiness.

The article also contains some wonderful quotes and observations by a few people researching happiness, including Martin Seligman, a psychologist and director of the Positive Psychology Network, and author of *Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. Seligman outlines his take on various categories of happiness, what they mean to people, and what can be done to achieve them.

One of the most interesting observations by Seligman is that the following factors do *not* appear to have a serious impact on making people more or less happy: having more money, living in a nicer geographical location, having cancer (or any single catastrophic event), and more. Seligman states that the two characteristics most strongly correlated with a person reporting that they are happy are: 1) being married, and 2) having strong religious beliefs.

So, what does it really mean when people report that they are happy? I interpret their statement as meaning this: I want to feel deeply content with my place in this world, I want to feel peaceful, and I want to feel confident that "things will be okay." And, do I think that cognitive-behavioral, mental-health counseling can greatly assist a client in achieving this emotional state? Absolutely!

In my experience, here are the pieces necessary to feel deeply content, peaceful, and confident in life:

- Knowing thoroughly who you are, your likes, your dislikes, your beliefs and values, your talents, your shortcomings, and what activities and types of people invigorate and inspire you.
- Knowing where you are going in life, what you are trying to build, and what you are trying to achieve.

Although the possibilities for this list are endless, I think that Freud had it right when he summarized it by saying, “the freedom to work and to love.” Most achievements fall into the categories of family, work, and social contribution. I also highly recommend having a spiritual component to what you are trying to achieve in life.

Also, in my experience, many people know where they would like to go with their lives, but situations interfere with their ability to stay “on track” toward accomplishing their goals. Some situations include losing motivation, being overly influenced by others, not being able to say no, conflicting goals, inability to solve problems, and so on. For this reason, it can be very helpful to work with a counselor who can strategically coach and assist you in staying on the path toward reaching your goals.

- Learning the process of solving problems, so that you can feel confident that you can overcome obstacles that may temporarily block you from your goals.

Basic problem solving skills include identifying the problem, analyzing it, developing several potential solutions, test the most desirable solution, and repeat testing until you find a solution that solves the problem or that allows you to work around it.

- Consistently dedicating time and energy to learning new skills,” so that you can feel confident that, if you can’t accomplish a goal today, you can learn how to do it tomorrow.

To begin, be sure to build skills in these basic, broadly applicable areas: interpersonal communication, listening, negotiating, basic socializing, and managing emotions.

When you are confident about who you are, where you are going, and how to get there, you tend to report feeling *happy with your life*; which is different than feeling joy every minute of every day. If you are happy with your life, then you can withstand brief periods of sadness, anger, or fear. During those times, there is an underlying sense that, whatever is causing the current upset is very temporary and will not prevent you from achieving your goals. In other words, despite some temporary negative emotions, *everything is going to be okay*.

In my experience, people reporting that they are happy with their lives tend *not* to report symptoms of clinical depression and anxiety. I can’t help but wonder: if we coach people to become more strategic and knowledgeable about attaining this kind of happiness, might that be more effective in the long term than simply prescribing Prozac or delivering traditional psychoanalysis for their mental illness? Is mental illness the problem, or is it not understanding how to be strategic about building their own mental health?