Beatitudo Imperfecta

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Abstract

This thesis examines the psychological dimension called happiness from the perspective of philosophy, experimental psychology, psychotherapeutic theory, clinical practice, cognitive neuroscience, and interpersonal neurobiology. The selection of data for review includes major theoretical works accompanied, where findings are relevant to the overall argument of the paper, by empirical data. Major findings are that happiness, while very difficult to operationally define, is distinct from pleasure, satisfaction or conventional success. Rather, happiness is more typically identified with intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that include awareness, deliberate actions toward tranquility and relationships to desire, and a relationship to the external world that includes gratitude, acceptance, and compassion for self and others. Clinical implications include the notion that therapists need to guide their clients toward happiness as a proactive and a process involving diligence and skill.

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This thesis was, without question, a labour of love. Just as love is a beautiful, complicated, messy affair, so too was the creation of this work, and it would not have been possible without the aid, effort, and tireless listening of many wonderful people.

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Dedication

For Stella.

You are my happiness.

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Introduction

Let's start with some bad news. Apart from the fact that you've just sat down to read a thesis.

If you're like most people, you've likely spent your adulthood subscribing to the same script I have. More of an 'if-then' contingency, this script is rooted in the belief that *if* you work hard, *then* you'll be successful, and if you're successful, *then* you'll be happy (Achor, 2010). This assumption is what drives basic human motivation; when you finally land that promotion, get that big house, have the quintessential 2.5 children in a 3000 square foot house with a white picket fence… *then* you'll be happy.

On the surface, it makes sense, and a quick glance at the systems around you will likely confirm the trend.

But is it effective? Like me, you've likely checked a few boxes off the quintessential happiness checklist, but would you say you've 'arrived'? Does the formula have an 'equals' sign – and if so, what does the 'happiness answer' that comes after it look like?

Happy Mania

While great for keeping the wheels of humanity moving, the problem is that this formula is not only flawed but entirely backwards (Achor, 2010). In fact, the fields of positive psychology and neuroscience have, in over a decade of ground-breaking research, proven that happiness is actually the *precursor* to success, not the other way around. (Achor, 2010).

How unsettling. How perplexing, how dismaying!

How can this be?

Welcome to the happiness craze, brought to you by self-appointed 'experts', gurus, pop-culture and 'coaches', all promising blue skies and bright futures. The bandwagon has taken off

full force and everything from proper professionals to purveyors of kitchen-table wisdom have, as Carlin Flora (2009) writes, “strip-mined the science, extracted a lot of fool’s gold, and stormed the marketplace with guarantees to annihilate your worry, stress, anguish, dejection, and even ennui” (Flora, 2009).

The headlines glitter with hope and possibility, and it’s no surprise Western Culture seems to be swimming in Happy Mania.

But the boom isn’t all rainbows and sunshine. While wonderful advancements have been made in fields of research and modalities like mindfulness (Hanson, 2013), a closer examination also reveals alarming statistics of **un**happiness, in forms of depression, anxiety, addiction, and so on. (Harris, 2008) Reports of subjective wellbeing (SWB) are conflicting, and even without these statistics, would the average person identify as ‘happy’? Would you?

‘Maybe’ or ‘sometimes’ might seem like fair answers, but it would be hard to deny the uneasy stirring the question evokes. You might smile and nod through a spirited discussion on the matter, and later find yourself thinking, *I’m happy, right? Of course I am. Surely I am. Undoubtedly! I can be happy. I* ***should*** *be happy. I* ***WILL*** *be happy,* you resolve through now gritted teeth as you white-knuckle the steering wheel.

How did this confusion and unease come to be, and more importantly - what can we do about it?

Guiding Purpose & Research question

This past decade has seen a burgeoning influx of happiness research, and rather than add another of the same to the pile, this thesis serves as a synthesis and analysis of existing literature into a body of work designed to be useful and beneficial to the field of psychotherapy. While still incorporating the traditional structure of the classic five-chapter thesis, this work is presented in

a much more literary style; that is to say, it is meant to be something people in this field can read and process without the standard academic dryness found in typical research. It is my personal (and brutally honest) experience that when something is dry and difficult to read, it is likely to remain unread, or at the very least scanned over for the results, and anything else of worth it may have offered has been overlooked and lost.

While it is simply not the nature of research to be enjoyable to read, if we can grab and sustain a reader's interest and attention, the material will be far simpler to understand and more likely to be retained. Given that the entire premise of our industry is to help people who are suffering, I've taken this risk in varying the style/structure in hopes that the compiled research is not only accessible but actually useful, rather than being another 20,000 words on the Internet.

My research question is thus two-pronged, the first asking: How can all this happiness research be integrated in a way that has literary coherence for psychotherapeutic practice? Next, I ask: How can we learn to dismantle the social constructs we've been fed and sold as 'normal' or ideal happiness, and integrate the strife and suffering that inevitably come with life into the framework that also holds love, joy, and pleasure?

Chapter 1 Introduction

It has oft been said that the only sure thing in life is death (and taxes). In a similar vein, it's arguable that the only sure thing about humanity, regardless of race, religion, language, income, age, size, or gender, is the drive to be happy (Gawdat, 2017). We may look for it in different ways, be it success, love, fame, or fortune, but ultimately whatever we do in life is in attempt to find and keep that glorious feeling (Gawdat, 2017). Why, then, does it seem to be so elusive?

One possibility might be that while philosophers, scholars, theologians, and poets alike have struggled to capture a definition of happiness for centuries, no one can seem to agree on what it is. (McMahon, 2005)

German philosopher Immanuel Kant may have best articulated this ambivalence:

> *"The concept of happiness is such an indeterminate one that even though everyone wishes to attain happiness, yet he can never say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills" (as cited in Pomerleau, 1997)*

Kant's words are over 200 years old; as a field of interest, happiness is not new, and has all but exploded in recent literature. Furthermore, it seems comfort and contentment are not enough—everything and everyone wants you to be absolutely brimming with joy at all times (Cave, 2014).

This is problematic not only for the obvious reason that being 100% happy 100% of the time is simply not possible, but, extending Kant's observation, happiness is heavily subjective

not only on an individual scale, but means different things to different people in different places; it is an evolving concept, and a culturally variable one as well. (Stearns, 2012)

Definitions

What is happiness? This is a question that could launch a thousand debates.

In academia, there exist two types of distinguishable happiness; hedonic happiness, or hedonia, which can be characterized as the experience of positive emotional states and the satisfaction of desires, and eudeamonic happiness, or eudaimonia, which is well described as the presence of meaning in one's life and the development of one's potentials (Disabato, Goodman, Kashdan, Short, & Jarden, 2016).

Ashu et al., (2013) equate happiness to well-being, characterized by a mental state of positive emotions, which can range anywhere from mild contentment to exquisite bliss.

Happiness can be thought of as an umbrella term, housing many synonyms (e.g. cheer, merriment, delight) under its hat. In layman's terms we might see similar definitions such as joy, contentment, euphoria; academia might offer comparisons like general or subjective well-being, which will come with their own definitions requiring consideration.

Kim-prieto, Diener, Tamir, Scollon, and Diener (2005) define subjective well-being (SWB) broadly, claiming it "encompasses a wide range of components, such as happiness, life satisfaction, hedonic balance, fulfillment, and stress, and holds at its core affective and cognitive evaluation of one's life. It also extends from the specific and concrete to the global and abstract: momentary experiences versus people's global judgments about their entire lives."

The Chase

Whatever happiness may or not be, its elusive definition hasn't kept people from chasing it down (McMahon, 2005). In fact, the pursuit appears larger than ever, with the advent of pop-

culture resources such as Daniel Gilbert's *Stumbling on Happiness* (2006)) and Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project* (2009). Magazine covers flaunt large glossy adverts promising quick-fix ways to achieve happiness, and a search for 'happiness' on Oprah Winfrey's website yields 200 results covering everything from financial planning for happiness, to finding happiness in hard times, to creating a personal equation for happiness (Harpo Productions Inc, 2017). One article even promises to teach you how to wake up happy; ***wake up*** happy – imagine that!

The chase isn't confined to pop-culture; the world of business has seen such recent contributions as Shawn Achor's The Happiness Advantage (2010) and Tony Hsieh's *Delivering Happiness* (2010), and the parenting industry has all but imploded with resources on ensuring the happiness of one's child(ren), with such pressure-laden claims as "the purpose of bringing-up in all its phases should be to make the child as happy as possible" (Stearns, 2017, p.167).

The surge of interest in happiness appears to have evolved to become something of an obsession, something people are not only chasing but now expecting (Stearns, 2017). How, and when, did this happen?

The assumption that happiness can and should be not only attainable but an actual way of life is a relatively new phenomenon. Pre-enlightenment eras thought happiness to be obtained in the afterlife, a reward for living a life of goodness and virtue (McMahon, 2005). It is only within the past 150 years that a sense of pursuance, entitlement even, began to take shape. Fast forward to modern day and it's become a near drug-like craze, both unavoidable and unattainable.

Upon examining the history of happiness, the concepts, beliefs, and pursuit, one might say it's fair to then ask what we've learned, where it's gotten us. Are we, in fact, any happier than any generation or era before us?

Modern Statistics

Modern day advertisements, full of smiling, laughing, beautiful actors, will have you believe we are. They might paint the picture that everyone is entirely happy all the time, (thanks to their new vitamin/vehicle/vespa) but a quick glance at current statistics suggest otherwise.

Depression rates today are 10 times higher than they were just over 50 years ago (Achor, 2010). *Ten times!*

As estimated by the World Health Organization, depression is currently the fourth largest, most costly and debilitating disease in the *world* (as cited in Harris, 2008). One in five people will, at some point in their lifetime, suffer from clinical depression, and scarier still, nearly one in two people will go through a period where they seriously consider suicide (Harris, 2008).

Furthermore, at some stage in life, one in four adults will suffer from drug or alcohol addiction, and there are now over twenty million alcoholics in the United States of America alone (Harris, 2008). In Canada, the year 2016 marked the loss of over 900 lives to unintentional drug overdoses in the very province this thesis is being written, largely due to illegal drugs being mixed with ultrapotent opiods (Thomson, Lampkin, Maynard, Karamouzian, & Jozaghi, 2017). The Fentanyl overdose crisis has been labelled an epidemic, with death tolls marking an 80% increase from the previous year (Thomson et al., 2017).

The modern American divorce rate, while currently lower than its initial spike in the 1970s, (Lehrer & Son, 2017) is still significantly higher than it was mere decades ago.

Furthermore, almost 30% of the adult population will, in any given year, suffer from a psychiatric disorder (Harris, 2008).

For the United States, it can be summed up tidily: “We are the most obese, medicated, addicted, and in-debt Americans EVER” (Brown, 2010, p.36).

This dossier of news is rather sobering, and while likely evoking a sense of dread it most certainly begs the question:

What's *happened* to happiness?

Chapter 2: A Brief History Of Happiness

The literature review for this body of work was comprehensive, beginning first with an extensive review of the history of happiness—its changing definitions, what it's meant, how it's been acquired and achieved. It naturally follows to then review the literature examining what these various attempts at acquiring happiness have resulted in; where are we now, what do the statistics say?

Subsequently, I examine the current literature on a broad range of happiness and wellness studies; subjective well-being, mindfulness, and meaning-making.

Search criteria for all areas were vast and extensive, of near exhaustive scope in efforts to integrate all the varying literature available. Using key words in credible, reputable search platforms such as PsycNet, PsycInfo, ProQuest, and our University's library, I reviewed peer-edited, peer-reviewed, scholarly journals, and published texts from leading professionals in academia. I also reviewed classic works, ancient Stoics, and Freud, for example, in effort to examine how the foundations for the pursuit of happiness were laid. In addition, I reviewed modern and more publicly accessible works such as news and highbrow magazine articles, as they provide insight and understanding of what the common individual is exposed to with regards to happiness studies.

The full literature review is embedded throughout the essay, beginning first with a comprehensive history of the origins of the pursuits, ideas, and studies of happiness.

A Brief History Of Happiness

Learning, understanding, and interpreting the origins of something is crucial if one has any hope of moving forward with or from it.

By looking at the history of happiness as it has unfolded over time, we can glean some understanding of how we've gotten where we are. It is important to note this history has a Western focus, as does the examination of the current happiness complex. Eastern and Western histories and philosophies are very different, and while it would be wonderful to include the full extent of both, I would never finish writing and you would never finish reading. And I'll be so bold to say we could both use some sleep. Alas, as this being written (and likely read) *in* a Western context, so too will it be written *about* one.

The Beginning

The preoccupation with happiness may have exploded in the 21st century, but it is certainly nothing new. The late 19th century poet Alexander Pope may have best captured mankind's continual fixation with the complicated concept of happiness:

"*Oh, happiness, our being's end and aim!*

Good, pleasure, ease, content! Whate'er thy name:

That something still which prompts the eternal sigh,

For which we bear to live, or dare to die."

- Alexander Pope (Pope, 1785, p.285)

Pope took pen to paper with his insightful thoughts in 1891, but the interest in happiness began long before his time. Almost all classical philosophers touched on the topic of happiness, arriving at rather bleak conclusions; the lives of humans during ancient Greek and Roman times were ruled by the gods, governed by the movement of the stars- they were bound to a life pre-destined by fate (McMahon, 2009). 'Happiness', as it were, was entirely out of one's control, left entirely to chance, fate or fortune (McMahon, 2009).

Etymologies

Indeed, the very etymology of the word suggests the same. Going all the way back to Greek, the word for happiness in every Indo-European language is, without exception, analogous to ‘luck’, or ‘chance’, the old Norse and old English ‘hap’ meaning just those very words (McMahon, 2009). Old French translates luck and chance to ‘heur’, giving us ‘bonheur’, (good fortune), or happiness. Both happiness and chance are referred to as Gluck in German, a word used to this very day (McMahon, 2009). For most of history, happiness was quite literally what *happened **to*** you.

Classical philosophers did the only thing they could do with such dismal findings; they concluded that happiness was something to be earned, an end-reward for living a good and virtuous life.

Carrying forward this belief, Aristotle coined the term *eudaimonia* to describe happiness as a moral end from a life lived through virtuous action (Keener, 2013).

Philosophical Virtue

The theme and importance of virtue became so central that it was taken to the extreme; the Roman Stoic Cicero claimed that if a man possessed virtue he could be happy even whilst being tortured (McMahon, 2005). This might seem ludicrous, and perhaps it is, but still the idea of happiness as lifelong pursuit laden with grief and suffering prevailed through to the time of the Christians and Jews. As Jesus promised his disciples in the Bible, “now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22, King James Bible). This theology rested on the belief that true happiness was to be found in Heaven, when one was reunited with God in the afterlife. Believers are ensured that “the pain you have been feeling cannot compare to the joy that is coming” (Romans 8:18, King James

Bible). Here, then, happiness was absolutely attainable and would be nothing short of utopian once acquired; you just had to die to get it.

Some 400 years later, St. Augustine carried on the Christian notion that true happiness was not possible in earthly life, but varied slightly in proposing that our happiness and pleasure be derived from the *anticipation* of the true ecstasy in the afterlife (Pursuit of Happiness Inc, 2016).

The thirteenth century brought about a merging of ancient Greek and Roman thought and Christian faith, with the publication of Thomas Aquinas' *The Summa Theologica*, in which Aquinas cedes Aristotle's claim that perfect happiness is possible only in the afterlife; but he then offers another, new theory, an extension on the former, if you will—that *im*perfect happiness ***is*** possible in life on earth (Pursuit of Happiness Inc, 2016). Translated from *Beatitudo Imperfecta*, Aquinas' conception of imperfect happiness was years ahead of its time and in my humble opinion, didn't receive the focus and analysis it deserved. The notion of 'perfect' happiness was, and is, entirely unattainable, but by allowing one's self to find joy in the every day, in the *im*perfect, we may then be able to enjoy life, or rather, *experience* happiness.

Art & Literature

The attempt to conceptualize happiness wasn't exclusive to philosophy; it permeated the world of art and the minds of artists, and during the Renaissance gave us some of the most beautiful and thought-provoking pieces of art to date. Happiness can be interpreted to the central motif of Leonardo DaVinci's *Mona Lisa* (Leonardo DaVinci Inc, 2017) which is also said to be a visual representation of the *idea* of happiness; indeed, the ambivalent smile in the infamous portrait has been debated since its conception.

As declared by Renaissance art theorist Leon Battista Alberti, “happiness cannot be gained without good works and just and righteous deeds” (as cited in Duignan, 201, p.33)

As happiness continued to stir the minds of great thinkers, theories were drawn, claimed, and passed, and redrawn again. Himself drawing from ancient Stoicism, Shakespeare mused centuries later in the voice of Hamlet, “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (Shakespeare & Hibbard, trans. 2008) Such level-headed stoicism has seen a rebirth of sorts in modern day, in the forms of mindfulness and acceptance, concepts we’ll visit later on.

The Enlightenment

Perhaps the greatest transformation in the approach to, and perception of, happiness, was the Age of Enlightenment. This period experienced tremendous advancements in the technical understanding and mastery of the world, and reoriented the human gaze from the Christian tradition of Original Sin to a more worldly, scientific direction (McMahon, 2005).

In an article entitled *The Quest for Happiness*, Darin McMahon captures perfectly the change of the time:

> To dance, to sing, to enjoy our food, to delight in our bodies and the company of others—in short, to construct happiness in a place of our making –was not to defy God’s will but to live as nature intended. This was our earthly purpose, and in a world understood to be governed by natural laws and liberated from the capricious whims of an angry deity or the chaos of fortune, this purpose was eminently realizable. (McMahon, 2005, p.5)

It was during this time the phrase ‘pursuit of happiness’ came into existence, coined by the English philosopher John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* published in 1681 (Locke, trans. 1870) Like many before him, and many after, Locke distinguished between kinds of happiness, in his case ‘imaginary’ and ‘real’ happiness:

> *"As therefore the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness; so the care of ourselves, that we mistake not imaginary for real happiness, is the necessary foundation of our liberty."* (Locke, trans. 1870)

In claiming the pursuit of happiness the 'necessary foundation of our liberty,' Locke is not only making a rather grandiose statement but highlighting the difference between us and animals; rather than being enslaved to our desires, our higher reasoning enables us to rise above the dictates of instinct, and therefore our pursuit of happiness is also the foundation of morality and civilization (Pursuit of Happiness Inc, 2016).

Locke suggests happiness as a subjective proposition, and likens our different tastes in pleasantries to our different tastes in food:

> the mind has a different relish, as well as the palate… For as pleasant tastes depend not on the things themselves but their agreeableness to this or that particular palate; wherein there is great variety; So the greatest happiness consists, in the having those things, which produce the greatest pleasure; and in the absence of those, which cause any disturbance, any pain. Now these, to different men, are very different things. (Locke, 1870, p.173)

Locke is quite sensibly concluding that there are as many paths to happiness as there are palates.

Happiness in Politics

Across the Atlantic, Thomas Jefferson took such a liking to Locke's now famous 'pursuit of happiness' phrase that he incorporated it into the *Declaration of Independence*, in his own famous claim of a peoples' inalienable right to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'. The happiness thread caught, and popped up in the preamble of the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (a pledge to work for the 'happiness of everyone'), and the French Encyclopedie, the 'Bible of the European Enlightenment' (McMahon, 2009), which

makes the claim that everyone has a right to be happy. Indeed, from then on, happiness became a constitutional theme, right through to modern day.

Happiness in Economics

Happiness in politics reached new heights with the advent of Communism, increasing the growing separation from God and religion. In his infamous statement claiming religion as the 'opium of the people', oft referenced now as 'the opiate of the masses,' (Boesche, 1996) Marx criticises the religious for looking to God for their happiness. When he declared, "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people, is the demand for their real happiness" (as cited in Boesche, 1996, p.242) whilst never revealing what 'real' happiness might entail, he is nevertheless insisting that we can attain it on our own, "in the space once occupied by God" (McMahon, 2005 p. 3).

Marx's ideas echo that of his Russian counterpart Mikhail Bakunin, principle founder of social anarchism: "People go to church for the same reasons they go to a tavern: to stupefy themselves, to forget their misery, to imagine themselves, for a few minutes anyway, free and happy" (as cited in Saraglou, 2014, p.46)

While Communism was misguided and rather disastrous in it's attempts at using 'real' happiness (whatever it was meant to be) to solve any political, economic, or social problems, Capitalism emerged and flipped the script with a focus on personal agency and a free market economy, one's entire life aspirations were bound by neither religion nor government; they were instead at the tips of their own fingers. The promise was grand and the dream attainable, and as such the social system spread to reach nearly every country in the world. As much as it glittered with possibility, Capitalism too fell short of solving the puzzle of happiness. As far back as early nineteenth century, the French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville astutely perceived the

overarching themes of commercialism and consumerism in American Capitalism in particular, remarking that Americans "clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight" (as cited in Mitchell, 1999, p.80). It appears money cannot, in fact, buy happiness, and indeed, our nation has been getting steadily wealthier but our happiness gauge has failed to accompany the climb; in fact it hasn't budged since around 1950 (Cave, 2014).

Post-18th-century reality was a grave disappointment for the many who subscribed to the Enlightenment notion that one way or another, by virtue of being human, we simply 'ought' to be happy. As life doles out its share of adversity, which it invariably will, the assumption of simply 'deserving' happiness, be it at the hands of one's government, economy, or even oneself, just doesn't hold up.

Happiness in Psychology

In understanding the fruitlessness of this belief, Freud concluded "One feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be 'happy' is not included in the plan of 'Creation'" (as cited in Hudson, 1996, p.53). While pondering the purpose of life in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) Freud declared that "The answer to this can hardly be in doubt. They strive for happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so" (Freud, 1930, p.11). Yet, with the same conviction he then stresses that "there is no possibility at all of its being carried through; all the regulations of the universe run counter to it" (Freud, 1930, p.76)

In what he deems 'the program of the pleasure principle,' Freud likens happiness to a sudden satisfaction of needs possible only as an 'episodic phenomenon,' and the prolonging of such producing only 'mild contentment' (Freud, 1930). As such, our possibilities of happiness are already restricted by our constitution (Freud, 1930). Wise foreshadowing for what we were to become.

As he details all the forms of suffering man is threatened with, (our bodies, the external world, and finally, and most painfully, he astutely points out—our relations to other men) “it is no wonder if, under the pressure of these possibilities of suffering, men are accustomed to moderate their claims to happiness… a man thinks himself happy merely to have escaped unhappiness or to have survived his suffering” (Freud, 1930, p.77).

Generally known for his works concerning psychoanalysis and psychosexual development, and in particular his egregious ideas around penis envy and the Oedipus complex, Freud’s work can often be discredited. However, his insights into recognizing that surface pleasures are fleeting, and that suffering comes in many forms and is natural to human existence, are both wise and noteworthy in their relevance to the concept of happiness to this day.

This field also brought us the inception of humanistic and existential psychology, which “emphasized the importance of reaching one’s innate potential and creating meaning in one’s life, respectively” (McAndrew, 2016). Making a personal contribution to the field, Carl Jung established his five Key Elements to Happiness (Jung, 1989). When he was interviewed in 1960 and was asked, “What do you consider to be more or less basic factors making for happiness in the human mind?” (McGuire & Hull, 1993) he answered:

1. *Good physical and mental health.*
2. *Good personal and intimate relationships, such as those of marriage, the family, and friendships.*
3. *The faculty for perceiving beauty in art and nature.*
4. *Reasonable standards of living and satisfactory work.*
5. *A philosophic or religious point of view capable of coping successfully with the vicissitudes of life.*

Sound advice on living a well and happy life if ever there was any. Well-intentioned as he may have been, these five elements may do more to produce anxiety in an individual seeking happiness than it does encourage them. The specified elements are simply not at the whim of any individual to simply create; they are indeed absolutely ideal circumstances. One's health for example, both physical and mental, is often out of one's control, as are work and living conditions. Without these key elements, then, is one destined to a life of unhappiness?

Jung did wisely add in: "All factors which are generally assumed to make for happiness can, under certain circumstances, produce the contrary. No matter how ideal your situation may be, it does not necessarily guarantee happiness" and "The more you deliberately seek happiness the more sure you are not to find it" (as cited in McGuire & Hull, 1993)

Happiness in the Home

While many minds and schools of thought vied for authority on the subject, happiness was slowly but surely working its way into the fabric of 20th century culture. The tragedies of two world wars and a great depression left a gaping hole in American morale, primed to be filled by every and any resource promising cheer.

In the 1950s, bringing happiness to the home and family became the primary goal for housewives. Homemaking was very much a woman's career during that time, seen as a woman's highest calling (Welch, 2005). Magazine articles dedicated countless inches to how a woman could and should embark on this endeavour, of which ensuring the comfort and happiness of one's husband and family played a central role. While these types of articles might seem mysogonistic today, the responsibility then to ensure a happy husband (and thus prevent divorce) was taken seriously.

In a 1955 article titled *The Good Wife's Guide*, (Homemaking Monthly, 1955) of the many bullet points included are tips concerning the creation of happiness as:

-Be a little gay and a little more interesting for him. His boring day may need a lift and one of your duties is to provide it.

-Be happy to see him.

-Greet him with a warm smile and show sincerity in your desire to please him.

This notion, of being or even emulating happiness for the sake of keeping one's family intact can be said to mark the beginning of the **pressure** of happiness. In the case of a 1950s housewife, losing one's husband meant more than a broken heart; it meant the loss of security and stability not only for herself but her children, to say nothing of the ensuing social persecution.

In some cases, 'pressure' might be too light a word to describe the way ensuring happiness was imposed upon a wife; in his 1951 book, *Sex Satisfaction and Happy Marriage,* Reverend Alfred Henry Tyrer offers these words of warning:

I verily believe that the happiness of homes is destroyed more frequently by the habit of nagging than by any other one. A man may stand that sort of thing (nagging) for a long time, but the chances are against his standing it permanently. If he needs peace to make life bearable, he will have to look for it elsewhere than in his own house. And it is quite likely that he will look.

Now, interpretation is always subjective, and far be it from me to attribute tone to someone else's writing, but I can't help but feel there's a rather ominous, threatening undertone to the dear Reverend's words.

He goes on to stress the fundamental importance of cooking and cleaning in keeping a happy home as well:

> Housekeeping accomplishments and cooking ability are, of course, positive essentials in any true home, and every wife should take a reasonable pride in her skill. Happiness does not flourish in an atmosphere of dyspepsia. (Tyrer, 1970)

Nobody likes indigestion, it's hard to argue with that—so wives, get your apron on and your cookbook out because the entire happiness of the home depends on your making a proper pot roast.

Happiness in Pop Culture

While wives had their hands full on the homemaking front, happiness was seeping into society in other manners.

The song 'Happy Birthday' arrived in America somewhere near the turn of the 19th century, "becoming a family staple by the late 1930s – despite, or perhaps because of, the gloom of the Great Depression" (Stearns, 2017, para15).

The former corporate motto and to-date primary goal of all Disney staff is to 'create happiness' (Disney, 2017) The official tagline for Disneyland was, and still is, 'The happiest place on earth' (Disney, 2017) assuring people they will experience happiness *just by being* in a Disney setting (Stearns, 2017). Disney is also noteworthy here in being so bold as to delineate happiness as a place; they've taken the entire experience of happiness and given it an actual location, a physical address (Sunny California being a helpful factor; mightn't have worked so well had it been in Saskatchewan).

In case you somehow forgot to be happy, the 1950 invention of the laugh track reminded you to become so even when comedy fell short (Stearns, 2017).

As the surge of happiness continued, particularly in American culture, the 1963 creation of the yellow smiley face by commercial artist Harvey Ball was born, which became an instant and lasting international icon of happiness to this very day. (Noel, 2008)

In the late 1970s, McDonalds promised happiness for families by introducing a meal for children known as the 'happy meal' (McDonalds Corp. 2017), a marketing triumph that also thrives to this day. Whether the idea is to make the child happy with a toy, or a parent happy by enjoying the quiet that comes with having their child's mouth full of food, one can only surmise.

Bobby McFerrin brought us the catchy tune *Don't Worry Be Happy* in 1988, with such wise lyrics as, *'In every life we have some trouble/when you worry you make it double.'* (Genius Media Group Inc, 2017) It's hard to argue with the wisdom of those words, he is absolutely right. He doesn't finish without a small dose of the aforementioned pressure of happiness, however: *When you worry your face will frown/and that will bring everybody down.* In effect; don't be a downer, nobody likes that guy.

Happiness in Modern Psychology

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions to the happiness imperative was the founding of Positive Psychology by Martin Seligman in the 1990s. Continuing the trend of the aforementioned humanistic and existential psychologies from the 1960s, Seligman points out that psychology "has become a science largely about healing," "repairing damage within a disease model," paying "almost exclusive attention to pathology" while neglecting "the fulfilled individual and the thriving community" (Seligman, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). The field astutely points out that "psychology has become increasingly focused on mental illness and, as a result, has developed a distorted view of what normal – and exceptional – human experience is like." (Seligman et al, 2000 p.10)

This progressive understanding highlights an excellent, if alarming, point; we've been so focused on everything that's wrong, (i.e., misery and UNhappiness) how can we even begin to know what's right (what makes us happy)?

Happiness in the Media

Two fields have rushed forth over the past two decades to answer this question. The first is the immense world of advertising, which has worked aggressively hard to instil the belief the happiness can and should be bought. We are inundated with advertising everywhere we go; it permeates each and every sphere of life, telling us happiness can be found with the purchase of anything and everything from a new car to a sugary beverage. Indeed, automotive company Buick recently launched a '24 hours of happiness' test drive campaign, (General Motors, 2017) essentially claiming that you can experience happiness just from having a Buick for 24 hours… cleverly leaving out the obvious conclusion that once that 24 hours is up, your life will go back to being whatever version of *un*happy it was beforehand - unless you buy a Buick.

Similarly, Coca-Cola's 2009 slogan was 'Open Happiness', (Coca-cola Company, 2017) cleverly playing on the refreshing 'tssstt' sound that comes from opening a carbonated beverage, thereby applying a physical property to an otherwise intangible concept. (One can only imagine what would happen if a person were to open a Coke *whilst* driving a Buick – pure ecstasy no doubt!)

One could spend eons discussing the use of happiness in different ad campaigns, and despite the seeming success generated from these well-planned operations, it remains that whatever happiness a person garners from succumbing to consumerism is limited; in her unbiased critique of the fluid relationship between happiness and advertising, (Ganguly, 2015) Srinjoy Ganguly sagely observes:

> the effect of luxury consumption on one's level of happiness is short-lived, i.e. the benefits derived from such profligate consumption cannot mediate the relationship between materialism and positive affect beyond a fixed horizon. (Ganguly, 2015)

The second and one of the most recent constructs designed to bring happiness, is often one that ends up hampering it. Omnipresent and infinite in its reach, social media allows one to share their moments of joy with their entire network of 'friends' as they happen, in real time. While this development is incredibly beneficial on multiple levels, there is a dark side to all this insta-sharing.

Any time a person logs in they are instantly subjected to a continual stream of information, which may be viewed as a 'highlight reel' of their friends' lives (Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014). Social media posts are generally positive because people want to share things they're proud of (Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014). Scrolling a newsfeed of the happy, positive moments everyone else is having can evoke the ugly beast of envy, or, in the case of someone having a bad day, make her or him feel their life is even worse.

The detriments of social media have been studied and documented; indeed, a 2012 study found that individuals who'd maintained a Facebook account for a significant amount of time (i.e., several years) were likely to perceive others as happier, and life as unfair (Chou & Edge, 2012). Moreover, increased time spent on the site led users to believe that others had better lives than they did.

In a study by Jordan et al. (2011), "those afflicted with emotional difficulties may fail to recognize others' internal struggles, which may compound feelings of loneliness and isolation. The researchers reasoned that this occurs because people publicly portray themselves as being happier than they actually are" (as cited by Steers, Wickham and Acitelli, 2014).

Indeed, ‘Facebook Depression’ is a very real thing; in a recent (2016) study on the association between social media use and depression among U.S. young adults, social media use was significantly associated with increased depression (Lin et al, 2016).

It appears for all the joy social media brings, it doesn’t come without its cautionary tales.

As long as we’ve been able to record it, humankind has been on a quest for happiness. (McMahon, 2009) Down through the ages, philosophers, stoics, poets, and theologians have argued over the definition, meaning, and method for happiness. The notion has infused every facet of our existence, from art and literature, to economics and politics, to home life and pop culture. Happiness has become not only a goal but a pressure, placed on everyone from deities to artists to housewives. Through the fields of advertising and social media, we’ve been sold an unattainable ideal to strive for, and despite the drawbacks the chase shows no sign of slowing down. After looking back, it’s fair to fear that we’re never going to find what we’re looking for, in large part because, as history has shown, we don’t even know what it is.

Considering this—where has this incredible quest brought us to?

Chapter 3 Methodology

The methodology for this thesis was a mixed-methods approach involving a synthesis and analysis of collected research. By presenting research questions and findings in a literary, rather than a quantitative graph or data format, readers have an opportunity to integrate the information for practical application with their clients (or themselves!). The participants of most studies (that I've read) generally come from a particular subgroup; middle-class college students, Iranian immigrants, white men over 50 with hypertension and diabetes, pregnant teens living in low-income housing. Etc. This is likely in attempt to control for as many variables as possible, which is fantastic for yielding valid and reliable results. Because this research has such a large range—Western society—the participants are you and me. And our neighbours and friends and employers and insurance representatives. Having such a broad scope allows this material to be applicable across scores of subgroups, relevant to anyone interested in the subject matter, regardless of their race, religion, age, gender, or socioeconomic status.

It's wonderful to be able to control for multiple variables for particular studies because certain studies (particularly of the medical variety) require that kind of specificity to be reliable. Fortunately, this kind of mental health and wellness research can be generalized and applied to almost anyone (baring perhaps those afflicted with psychosis or serious psychiatric disorders).

Having now examined the roots and origins of happiness, it follows to then scrutinize the results of these foundations.

All this history begs the question—after over two thousand years of the query, analysis, and pursuit of happiness—are we any happier for it?

Where are we now?

Sadly, all signs point to no. Major Depressive Disorder remains the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for ages 15-44, affecting more than 15 million adults in a given year (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2016). Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting 40 million adults over the age of 18 (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2016). Globally, an estimated five percent of adults – 240 million people – suffer from alcohol abuse. (Gowling et al, 2015)

Tragically, suicide is a leading cause of death in the U.S., claiming more than 44,000 lives in 2015 (National Institute of Mental Health, 2017).

We may be many more things than we've been in past times, but happy doesn't appear to be one of them.

It's worth examining why this is so, given the advances in everything from medicine to housing to education. In fact, as Russ Harris points out in his book *The Happiness Trap,* (2008)

> in the western world we now have a higher standard of living than humans have ever known before. We have better medical treatment, more and better food, better housing conditions, better sanitation, more money, more welfare services and more access to education, justice, travel, entertainment and career opportunities. Indeed, today's middle class lives better than did the royalty of not so long ago. (Harris, 2008, p.11)

And yet human misery is everywhere. How is this possible?

Can't Buy Me Love (or Happiness)

The old adage that money can't buy happiness appears to true; while it unquestionably affects well-being by providing basic necessities, the trend appears to be that once those needs are met, more money does *not* equate more happiness (Barker & Martin, 2012). This is also true

in large-scale population; entire countries grow wealthier, but its people remain status quo satisfied.

Interestingly, some poorer countries demonstrate higher levels of happiness than their richer counterparts, (Barker & Martin, 2012) which leads one to further question the role of wealth and money in general in well-being. Cultural differences make comparing happiness levels between countries problematic, but the differences in income make them noteworthy never the less.

Addressing this enigma in the early 1970s, economist Richard Easterlin introduced the happiness-income paradox, (Siegel, 2015) and confirmed through his research that over the long term, happiness does not increase proportionately with a country's income (Siegel, 2015).

Wealth and statistics accounted for, the overall message remains that self-reported measures of happiness (Smith, Son & Schapiro, 2015) have stayed idle for over forty years.

The Explosion of the Happiness Arena

It appears modern society has an awareness of its fixation with, and the elusiveness of, happiness. The self-help arena has all but exploded in size; while a mere 50 books concerning happiness were released in 2000 that number hit 4000 by 2008 (Flora, 2009). Titles range in focus and audience, from the personal to professional, from gender and religion. Sports, marriage, parenting, sexuality—no arena is left untouched.

Courses can also now be taken on the topic; NYU School of Medicine offers a Science of Happiness course, and the most popular course at Harvard University is about positive psychology (Flora, 2009). Even Wikipedia has an answer for 'how to be happy', and in case you worried you weren't smart enough to be happy, the 'dummies' franchise offers a 'happiness for dummies' book (Gentry, 2011).

At this point, one has to wonder: if humanity has been chasing the notion of happiness and devising countless plans and ploys over hundreds of years in hopes of locking it down, only to discover we're actually no closer to it … what has all this led to instead?

The Loss of Sadness

Perhaps most notably and certainly critically, the loss and disallowance of negative emotion (Cornell, 2009). A culture saturated with happiness makes it difficult if not impossible to cope with any kind of *un*happiness (Stearns, 2017).

Furthermore, we need to consider what this explosion of happiness has done to normal human experiences of sadness. The goal shouldn't be to eradicate any and every feeling that falls on the negative side of the emotional spectrum, yet that seems to be exactly the goal. (Stearns, 2017)

Superficial quick fixes abound, from fatty foods to luxurious indulgences to extravagant purchases, but while these hasty remedies provide a brief burst of joy, it is just that: brief. Unfortunately, they leave us "poorer, physically unhealthy, and generally more miserable in the long run – and lacking in the real skills to get us out of our rut." (Flora, 2009, para.7)

Russ Harris, (2008) calls common perceptions and expectations of happiness dangerous because they don't acknowledge that real life is full of disappointments, losses, and setbacks, and ignorance of these inevitabilities set people up for a "struggle against reality" (Harris, 2008, p.150)

And that seems to be where we remain; struggling against reality. To quote the common teenager, 'the struggle is real' and the statistics prove it.

As a result, we've pathologized normal sadness and sorrow (Cornell, 2009). In a review of *The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow in Depressive Disorder*,

Cornell astutely concludes “experiences of loss and sadness are inevitable, essential, and enlivening aspects of lives fully lived,” and, citing the book’s authors, "In attempting to characterize the kinds of symptoms in depressive disorders without reference to the context in which symptoms occur, contemporary psychiatry has also inadvertently characterized intense normal suffering as disease" (pp. 9-10). (Horowitz & Wakefield, as cited in Cornell, 2009)

This is a terrifying thought, when put into context. ‘Intense normal suffering’ comes from great losses, some of which most people will inevitably experience, like the death of a loved one. Imagine being considered diseased, for grieving?

Furthermore, research shows that looking on the bright side or adopting a sunny disposition simply isn’t available for some people, and is even counterproductive; citing the ‘tyranny of the positive attitude’ (2009) Carla Flora notes that pressuring people whose coping styles don’t fit the positivity model is not only ineffective, but “makes them feel like a failure on top of already feeling bad” (Flora, 2009, para.26).

We are inundated with messages of positivity, and while some are rather benign*: Choose Happiness! Do what makes you happy!* Others are more... cautionary, ominous almost. *Make Today Ridiculously Amazing,* or *Be Bold, Be Kind, but above all, Be Happy* (Pinterest, 2017)

It’s quite daunting to be tasked with making today ‘ridiculously amazing’ – what does that even mean? And the message to be, above all, happy – how is one meant to do that? Even if these questions are rhetorical, the underlying message remains – at all costs, be positive.

While well-meaning, these messages are pressure-laden and could evoke stress and anxiety in an individual who may be having an altogether ***un***amazing day, or worse, someone experiencing real sadness or major depression.

Big Pharma

An alarming result of these types of these quasi-diagnoses is the answer we've come up with to cope with them: medicalization, and much of it. We've developed a pill for every ill (Ericson, 2014), in effect disallowing ourselves the right and necessity of processing grief and sorrow.

Moreover, if we're going so far as to pathologize general malaise, what would we say of someone who's experienced some kind of terrible trauma? Are they then forever ill, never to recover? To add further thought, what does this culture say of someone who's suffered trauma and *has* been able to find joy in happiness in life again?

Necessary Negatives

Happiness is a wonderful feeling, and the craze to capture it is not surprising. But something of value may be getting lost or forgotten in this fixation. How are we able to appreciate our happiness if we have nothing to weigh it against, if we don't allow ourselves to fully experience states of *un*happiness? Furthermore, we shouldn't assume happiness is simply achievable, without a certain degree of effort or possibly even pain (McMahon, 2009).

Adding to this thought, Russ Harris, author of *The Happiness Trap* (2008) reminds us that nothing good comes without negatives. As he says, "the things we generally value most in life bring with them a whole range of feelings, both pleasant and unpleasant" and "The same holds true for just about every meaningful project we embark on. Although they often bring feelings of excitement and enthusiasm, they also generally bring stress, fear and anxiety." (Harris, 2008, pp.21)

To put it metaphorically, without darkness, we cannot see stars.

Chapter 4 Results

Typically, the results section of a paper demonstrates the data yielded from a study. Rather than numbers, graphs or charts, this research has been compiled into a readable body of work designed to attract and engage the reader. Having examined the crises Western society is experiencing with the relentless pursuit of happiness, the results section of this type of research would include an understanding of how and what has happened, and, to take a step further, what might be done about it.

Understanding history is imperative if we hope not to repeat it. Having examined the theoretical, political, economic, and psycho-social aspects of happiness in history, it's also worth examining the history of the evolution of the human brain; to ask how and why have we evolved the way we have, why we don't ever seem to be happy with what we have or the way things are.

Evolutionary Psycholory

Excellent insight into this field comes from Rick Hanson, neuropsychologist, author and therapist. In his book *Hardwiring Happiness: the new brain science of contentment, calm, and confidence,* (2012) he explains how the brain evolved a negativity bias, which is essentially its proclivity to overlook pleasant experiences and hone in on and highlight unpleasant ones.

For our ancestors, the continuation of our species was dependent on our accurate interpretation of our environment, i.e., the threats around us. Paying attention to the pleasures of life was nice, but not necessary for survival, whereas not paying attention to threats meant imminent death.

Fear played a powerful role in the negativity bias, as our ancestors could make one of two mistakes: (1) thinking there was danger round the corner when there wasn't, and (2) thinking there wasn't danger round the corner when there actually was. "The cost of the first mistake was

needless anxiety, while the cost of the second one was death. Consequently, we evolved to make the first mistake a thousand times to avoid making the second mistake even once." (Hanson, 2012, p.23)

As such, our brains evolved to pay extra attention to and amplify potential threats; even when happy and relaxed, it continues to scan for potential dangers, negative outcomes, or interpersonal issues (Hanson, 2012). This explains the human tendency to over-analyze things other people say to us. If you've ever found yourself thinking*, 'What did that person really mean when they said that?'* It is a perfect example of your evolutionary-adapted brain.

Daniel Gilbert adds to this idea by explaining that the brain evolved to decide first what should be done about something (i.e., whether it's a threat that requires running from) and *then* what it actually is. (Gilbert, 2006) Fleeing fast from predators was so vital to the survival and continuation of terrestrial mammals that evolution no chances in prioritizing. "As it turns out," Gilbert mirthfully concludes, "running with great haste from rabid wolverines is much more important than knowing what they are" (Gilbert, 2006, p.62).

This prioritization meant that parts of the brain responsible for survival (ones controlling critical functions like breathing) evolved first and are down at the base, and less critical parts evolved as the millennia passed and sit atop them (Gilbert, 2006). This makes perfect sense from a survival perspective, but from a social-communication perspective, we might prefer to first conclude what or who something is, *before* deciding what to do about it.

Russ Harris, the previously mentioned psychotherapist, medical practitioner and bestselling author of *The Happiness Trap, stop struggling start living*, (2008) refers to our primitive mind as a 'Don't Get Killed' device, and while it proved enormously useful in continuing the human race by anticipating and avoiding danger over thousands of years of

evolution, the result is that we're now left with a brain that spends a significant amount of time stressing over things that, more often than not, never happen. (Harris, 2008)

Returning to the negativity bias, Hanson also asserts that because we tend to learn faster from painful experiences than pleasant ones, (Hanson, 2012) the bias is simultaneously geared *towards* our survival and *against* fulfilling relationships, quality of life, and stable mental and physical health. The result of this 'Stone Age' brain that now rests between our ears is that it now defaults to *over*estimate threats, and *under*estimate both opportunities and resources for coping with said threats. (Hanson, 2012)

This is all rather unhappy news, isn't it?

At first glance, yes. But all is not lost. Understanding this negativity bias exists is half the battle to overcoming it. While it's there, in the background, looking for a reason to make you feel bad when you're alright and worse when you're low, there are ways of overcoming it.

Understanding the Negativity Bias

The bias presents two obstacles; it *increases* the negative, while *decreasing* the positive. It actively draws your attention to what is or could be bad, not only causing you to overreact to it, but also storing this experience in implicit (procedural) memory. Concurrently, good things happening to or around you slid right past your attention, and even when you do notice them they slip through your brain like water through a sieve (Hanson, 2012).

However, distressing as it may sound, this mountain, if you will, is not insurmountable. Hanson talks of 'taking in the good', actively staying with our good experiences as they happen, allowing ourselves to *install* them into our neural structure. Quoting neuroscience, Hanson reminds us: "*Neurons that fire together wire together.* Mental states become neural traits. Day after day, your mind is building your brain" (Hanson, 2012, p.10). Put this way, we see the

possibility in being an active part of changing our brain for the better; of creating our own happiness.

What's Getting in the Way?

Understanding the neuroscience behind the way we think and behave can be incredibly helpful. Our brains naturally evolved this way; we can stop beating ourselves up for our struggle for happiness, we came by it honestly!

So too is understanding that it's when we stop living in the moment and look around to evaluate things, that they suddenly seem lacking in some way. This analysis, this stopping to take stock and inventory, has become an enormous roadblock to well being since happiness has hit the social stratosphere. The late philosopher John Stuart Mill may have said it best: "Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be so" (Mill, trans. 1957).

Rather than feeling bad or guilty or like something is wrong with us for not embodying a perfect state of happiness, better to examine how the relentless pursuit might actually be impeding our path to happiness. With all these books and guidelines and indexes out there, all the 'science of happiness' research and expert resources… why *doesn't* it seem to be working? What's getting in the way?

Asking this question opens the door to discomfort; forces us to take a hard look at our selves and our lives. Because having an appreciation and understanding of the brain's evolution does not give us a get-out-of-jail-free card; we do not get to throw our hands in the air and let go of all responsibility. We must be willing to do the difficult work, to talk about the uncomfortable things. As Brene Brown, a prominent researcher on shame, fear, and vulnerability puts it, "If we really want to live a joyful, connected, and meaningful life, we *must* talk about things that get in the way" (Brown, 2010, p.35).

These ‘things’ in the way would be heavily individualistic, of course, but there some societal patterns, or constructs, worth examining that may help peel back our personal layers.

Hedonic Adaptation

Offering great insight into this cycle of unhappiness is the concept of hedonic adaptation. (Armenta et al., 2014) Also referred to as the ‘hedonic treadmill’, (Siegel, 2015) it refers to the human tendency to maintain a relatively stable level of happiness, a baseline we return to in spite of any major positive or negative events. We work very hard to achieve or acquire something, and while we may experience a brief period of elation when and if that happens, we inevitably slide back to our baseline. The alarming outcome of running on this treadmill is that as we achieve more and more, the set point shifts proportionately; what were once fortuitous frills become baseline expectations (Armenta et al., 2014) It’s a never-ending chase.

Subjectivity & Measurability

John Stuart Mill’s insightful observation above can, at least partly, be attributed to the subjective nature of concepts like happiness. As Daniel Gilbert points out, “happiness is a subjective experience that is difficult to describe to ourselves and to others, thus evaluating people’s claims about their own happiness is an exceptionally thorny business” (Gilbert, 2006, p. 59), and “what we mean by words such as *happiness*, we still can’t be sure that two people who claim to be happy are having the same experience, or that our current experience of happiness is really different from our experience of happiness, or that we *having* an experience of happiness at all.” (Gilbert, 2006, p. 70) Furthermore, Gilbert notes that anything claiming to studied ***scientifically*** must also be measurable; otherwise, it can only be studied. Given the subjective experiential nature of happiness, there will never be a *happyometer* – a “perfectly reliable instrument that allows an observer to measure with complete accuracy the characteristics of

another person's subjective experience so that the measurement can be taken, recorded, and compared with another" (Gilbert, 2006, p. 71).

Moreover, even if such a measurement tool did exist, it would be reasonable to argue it would yield different results during different stages of life. Times of loss, grief, and phases of transition, (adolescence, marriage, children leaving the home) may influence conceptions of well-being. (Bojanowska & Zalewska, 2016) Studies also show fundamental differences in values and goals between younger and older adults, suggesting assessments of one's own subjective well being may differ greatly with age (Bojanowska & Zalewska, 2016)

At this point, it may be safe to say that if one wasn't confused *before* setting out to solve the happiness puzzle… they certainly would be now.

Skewed Values

Perhaps one of the single greatest impediments to finding happiness in Western society, is the core value system Western society has come to embrace. We applaud and reward ambition, determination, success; and we measure those attributes in comparative and competitive terms (Gawdat, 2017). We strive for bigger, better, faster, farther, and we teach our children to measure their worth not by how much they achieve, but that they achieve more than their peers. (Gawdat, 2017) It's not enough to do well, to have an enjoyable life; you should do better than and have a more enjoyable life than your neighbour. This, sadly, is what we've come to call success. (Gawdat, 2017)

Much like our tendency to overestimate threats, this propensity for constant comparing can also be traced back to evolution. Harris talks about the importance of belonging to a group in early human survival. "If your clan boots you out," he says with unembellished fact, "it won't be long before the wolves find you" (Harris, 2007, p.13). As our brains naturally evolved to protect

us from rejection, it has left us with a continual stream of doubtful and worrisome thoughts: Am I fitting in? Am I doing the right thing? Do they like me?

The obvious problem with all this obsessive comparing is that it sets us up for constant and continual disappointment. There will always be someone doing better, on some scale, than we are.

This problem extends beyond the self. Divorce rates are no surprise, given the constant comparing of not only one's self and one's spouse, but the state of the relationship. While once the ebb and flow of happy and unhappy times was understood, this is no longer acceptable. We see commercials and picture frames of beautiful, smiling couples and families, seeming to embody happiness, and we think that's the norm. That's what we should be.

But we're not. In what was perhaps the single greatest disservice to the institute of marriage was the coining of the phrase 'Happily Ever After', which set people up with incredibly unrealistic expectations for married life. Anyone that's been married more than five minutes will likely contend that 'happily' is not a 24/7 term, neither a fair nor accurate representation of the 'ever-after' they've experienced, no matter how short or long the marriage.

Would you dare to disagree?

The Rush to Remedy

Another contribution to the problem is what a great professor of mine has termed 'The Rush to Remedy' (Kinman, 2017). Ours is a society, he states, that finds first a problem, and then a remedy for it. The problem is not something inherently problematic; it is created, it is given such a label if it stands in the way of what particular powers that be desire. To cite one my professor's examples, Indigenous people were not in and of themselves a 'problem'; they only became so when they stood in the way of settlers wanting to develop their land. Then they

became the ‘Indian problem’ and a quick ‘remedy’ was put together henceforth, which resulted in the near mass genocide of Indigenous people. (Kinman, 2017)

While a large-scale and rather morbid example, this notion of ‘rushing to remedy’ also explains why quick-fixes promising to alleviate pain and suffering often fall short. The fervent attempt to ‘fix’ or ‘remedy’ our negative feelings in effect *creates* the problem of them. As Neil Pasricha writes in his book *The Happiness Equation: want nothing + do anything = have everything*, “The problem isn’t that we have negative thoughts in our brain. The problem is that we think we *shouldn’t* have negative thoughts.” (Pasricha, p.7, 2016)

The Good News

The good news is that it ***is*** possible to undo the subconscious habit to create and remedy problems with our thoughts and feelings, it ***is*** possible to turn trauma and tragedy into triumph, and it ***is*** possible to find a sense of general well-being (dare I say happiness?) in the midst of all the strife and suffering life inevitably throws at us.

Neuroplasticity

As we explored the evolution of the brain, we discovered how it learns from and is shaped by experience. (Graham, 2016) While much of these discoveries have been unfortunately learned through studies of trauma, it’s encouraging to know that positive experiences have the same impact. In fact, in her article *Neuroplasticity: The Game-Changer for Stress, Shame, and Trauma*, (2016) Linda Graham declares that “25 years of modern behavioural science research and 25 years of modern neuroscience research are dovetailing to demonstrate that these positive experiences also change brain circuitry and functioning. (para.6)

Neuroplasticity is a wonderful concept and tool, one that can help us literally reverse the impact of stress and trauma (Graham, 2016).

The human brain was previously believed to be rather ‘set’ by adulthood, but science has discovered the adult brain to be much more changeable and modifiable that we knew (Healing Trauma Center, 2017) There now exists a large amount of evidence proving that damaged neural circuitry can be corrected; we can literally reshape our brains, and consequently our behaviours (Healing Trauma Center, 2017)

You’ve likely heard the phrase ‘neurons that fire together wire together’, which essentially means that neurons that repeatedly fire at the same time will wire together through chemical changes that occur in both, which creates a bond that makes them connect more strongly; also known as a neural pathway (Healing Trauma Center, 2017). This is the essence of neuroplasticity; what you are thinking about, paying attention to, resting your mind on, is the primary shaper of your brain (Hanson, 2013).

Science of any kind often comes with a complicated language, and neuroscience is no different. It can be difficult to convey the life-changing benefits of neuroplasticity to someone who may feel intimated by the intellectual nature of the science; they may even resist the concept entirely. Fortunately, Rick Hanson has done a fantastic job of translating all the complicated science-speak into layman’s language in *Hardwiring Happiness*. He talks of ‘taking in the good’, revelling in pleasant and positive moments, and taking the extra few seconds (that’s all it takes!) to *install* them into the brain. (Hanson, 2013) He asserts that “every time you take in the sense of feeling safe, satisfied, or connected, you stimulate responsive circuits in your brain. When you stimulate a neural circuit, you strengthen it” (Hanson, 2013, p.54)

In *Neuroplasticity*, Graham furthers expresses the benefits of helping her clients learn how to help themselves through neuroplasticity, claiming they love learning how their brain works and how to rewire it. (Graham, 2016) “Learning how to shift out of the negativity bias of

the brain and out of the contractions of the lower brain's automatic survival responses into the openness and flexibility of a more plastic brain gives them a sense of mastery, competence, agency, and efficacy, and their progress in therapy reflects that." (Graham, para.7)

Hanson offers many tools for implementing self-directed neuroplasticity, while taking care to continually reassert the amount of self-discipline required. "Given the negativity bias of the brain, it takes an *active* effort to internalize positive experiences and heal negative ones" (Hanson, 2013, p.54).

Hanson uses terms like 'taking in the good' and 'pulling weeds and planting flowers' (in the garden of the mind) to replace the negative with the positive, and, because he concurs with Graham in believing people love to know the whys and hows of their brain, explains that you can turn "a passing mental state into lasting neural structure" (Hanson, 2013).

Graham was spot on in using the word 'game-changer' in the title of her article; neuroplasticity absolutely is a game-changer, an incredible, wonderful gift and tool, if we can commit to the effort of employing it.

Psychotherapy

In the face of what feels like so much against us, it can be difficult to fathom overcoming all our stresses and obstacles to find true happiness in one's life.

Perhaps the best news of all is that whether we decide to challenge our preconceived notions or examine our own bad habits or attempt change through neuroplasticity, we don't have to embark on these journeys alone. The wonderful fields of psychotherapy and counselling mean we can access a caring, helpful, nonjudgmental individual to guide and accompany us on our path.

Still, with so many therapeutic modalities being offered, many with great claims of success, it's difficult to know what might be the best fit. Fortunately, a modality that can be practiced alongside, within, or independently of other techniques that has consistently and conclusively proven effective, is one known as Mindfulness.

Mindfulness

Much like happiness, the word 'mindfulness' has caught fire and is being thrown around like confetti. It's cited repeatedly as an effective treatment for everything from depression to anxiety to addiction, (Bellin, 2015) it's penetrated the worlds of education and parenting, (Seigel, 2013) and the word even graces the cover of Time magazine's 2017 spring cover.

But what *is* it, really?

Definitions abound, and we'll get to them; but first, as the word (and very concept) has become so mainstream, I feel an ethical responsibility to dig further into the roots of what Mindfulness really is, where it came from, what it was originally about.

Origins

While seemingly 'new' to Western culture, mindfulness is merely a new name for an old concept born from Eastern traditions, specifically Buddhism (Akin & Akin, 2015).

The origin of mindfulness and meditation, particularly within the expansive Indian field of psychology, delineates three major assumptions about human nature that differ from Western ideals (Singla, 2011):

1. The monoism between body and mind in contrast to the dualism between body and mind in mainstream Western psychology
2. The centrality of consciousness rather than a strengthening of the Western conceptualisation of 'ego'

3. Focus on meditation as a part of daily conduct, rather, than as a means of just attaining a very limited goal.

Critics of the modern-day mindfulness movement also argue that mindfulness was developed not for weight loss or stress reduction or any other area of daily concern, but to "facilitate a path associated with renunciation and a stringent ethical code of right living" (Harrington & Dunne, 2015, para.3) While the authors are not so bold as to delineate what an 'ethical code of right living' entails, (nor am I) it would be fair to say mindfulness in it's true form is being defined here as more of a holistic living practice; not something you sit down and do for five minutes to cure a headache.

While such critics refrain from challenging the efficacy of mindfulness, they tend to worry instead about "the degree to which the mindfulness therapy movement has dissociated a practice from the ethical framework for which it was originally developed." (Harrington & Dunne, 2015, para.3)

The authors further admonish that "simply teaching "bare attention" without attending to the cultivation of wisdom and discernment risks making mindfulness training hostage to values that are tangential or even anathema to the traditions from which the practice arose." (Harrington & Dunne, 2015, para.3)

These might seem like powerful, ominous words, but in the case of Mindfulness' booming popularity and shiny promises, it's imperative to keep in mind that no one word, no one practice, can ever 'fix' the human condition.

Modern definitions

Now that we've had a healthy dose of realism, or perhaps pessimism, let us examine more modern definitions of what mindfulness is.

> Choi et al. define the practice of mindfulness comprehensively, as:
>
> A psychological quality that involves bringing one's complete attention tohe present experience on a moment-to-moment basis, paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non judgmentally, a kind of present-centered, non elaborative, nonjudgmental awareness in which each feeling, sensation, or thought that arises in the attention field is acknowledged and accepted as it is, is known as mindfulness. To look at experiences without judgment is the central principle of mindfulness. (as cited in Ashu et al., 2013)

Daniel Siegel cites an oft-referenced definition of mindfulness as "a way of intentionally paying attention to the present moment without being swept up by judgments" (Siegel, 2011, p.83) and then his own, slightly more scientific definition as "a form of mental activity that trains the mind to become aware of awareness itself and to pay attention to one's own intention". (Siegel, 2011 p.86)

Positive Psychology refers to it as "the nonjudgmental observation of your own thoughts, feelings, and actions, without trying to suppress or deny them", (Siegel, p.16, 2015) and furthers with "When you look in the mirror and don't like what you see, accept the bad with the good with a compassionate attitude." (p.16)

Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius go into a detailed account of the neurobiology behind mindfulness in their *book Buddha's Brain, the practical neuroscience of happiness, love, & wisdom* (2009), yet boil the term down to say "Mindfulness just means being fully aware of something, in the moment with it, and not judging or resisting it. Be attentive to physical sensations; that's all there is to it" (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 83).

The central themes of mindfulness (by account of these definitions) appear to be attentiveness and non-judgmental awareness. The concept seems rather straightforward, simple almost; but as anyone who's ever tried it knows, it's not as easy as it sounds. Our brains simply aren't wired for it; evolution designed the brain to *respond* to limbic signals, (Hanson, & Mendius, 2009) not to simply let them come and go without judgment. Indeed, after publishing several books on and around the topic, Daniel Siegel himself states: "Nearly everyone who tries meditation discovers that thoughts and feelings keep interrupting our attempts at focus, even after years of practice". (Siegel, 2009, p.94)

What does the research say?

It takes considerable effort and practice to train oneself to engage in such a state, and as such the quality of mindfulness meditation training and research has made considerable gains over the past decade. (Bellin, 2015) The links between physical and mental health and mindfulness are irrefutable, and as a result, mainstream health care settings are now integrating mindfulness-based techniques into their repertoire. (Bellin, 2015)

A growing amount of research on mindfulness had scientifically demonstrated it to be a key element in happiness, (Siegel, 2015) as well as shown the potential for positive psychological, social, and cognitive effects on people's daily life (Akin & Akin, 2015).

A study in Harvard Health Publication (2013) titled *Positive Psychology: Harnessing the power of happiness, mindfulness, and inner strength*, boasts great claims for the power and benefits of mindfulness, including the alleviation of stress, sleep problems, chronic pain, and even high blood pressure and gastrointestinal difficulties. If the physical health benefits weren't enough incentive, the psychological advantages are immense: "By focusing on the here and now, many people who practice mindfulness find that they are less likely to get caught up in worries

about the future or regrets over the past, are less preoccupied with concerns about success and self-esteem, and are better able to form deep connections with others" (Siegel, 2015, p.14)

Moreover, in a study examining the 'happy face' of mindfulness (Choi et al., 2012) Ashu et al. (2013) boldly interpreted results to suggest that "persons practicing mindfulness meditation are happier than who are not practicing it." (p.424)

How & Why

It's fair to question just how and why Mindfulness is so effective. What is happening in modern Western Culture that the metaphorical stopping to smell the flowers is able to bring about such dramatic, positive change in our lives?

Ashu, Singh, and Devender (2013) cite a lack of time as the main reason for all the stress in people's life. The busyness and competitive pace of modern life is hectic, they argue, and doesn't allow for time to stop and truly pay attention to what we are doing or thinking. (Ashu, Singh, & Devender, 2013) In their investigation studying hope and mindfulness as correlates of happiness, (2013) they sought to prove that by learning to focus one's attention, and become more conscious and mindful of our thoughts and doings, we can thus find more joy – happiness - in them.

Their results were overwhelmingly positive. Not only were happiness and mindfulness positively correlated, happiness was found to increase with the increase of mindful practice and vice versa. In effect, mindfulness enhances happiness. (Ashu et al., 2013)

Research on mindfulness and subjective happiness by Akin and Akin (2015) asserts that by facilitating emotional regulation, the practice of mindful meditation "reduces suffering and improves positive qualities such as well-being, openness, insight, wisdom, equanimity and compassion" (p.359). They further cite mindfulness as allowing people to fully experience

emotions without acting on them, instead recognizing them as transient phenomena. (Akin & Akin, 2015)

While this might all seem like reason enough to subscribe, another, profoundly valuable effect of mindfulness is the resulting compassion—for both one's self and for others—that arises from the practice. (Bellin, 2015) Staying mindful may open an individual's awareness to their own shortcomings, how they've been locked into patterns of behaviour that have caused them shame or negative outcomes. Realizing that no matter how hard they might struggle against these parts of themselves, they are impossible to overcome (Bellin, 2015). They see that it will take a tremendous amount of time and an enormous amount of effort and practice to change certain behaviours. As they shift their gaze outward, compassion arises as they come to see that this is true for everyone around them as well (Bellin, 2015). We see that the inner life of almost anyone is sure to be fraught with affliction.

Recognizing this sameness, this commonality of the human condition, allows us to bridge the gap that drives so much of humanity's selfishness, cruelty and violence; something Hanson and Mendius discuss in *Buddha's Brain* (2009), the human tendency to categorize people into 'us' and 'them' (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). While we have a natural drive for loyalty and protection towards those who fall inside our circle of 'us', when we deem someone 'different from me' in any sense, "the mind/brain automatically begins to devalue that person and justify poor treatment of him" (Hanson & Mendius, p.132).

The compassion derived from practicing mindfulness can help to counter this natural human tendency, resulting in the possibility of greater understanding and caring (Bellin, 2015).

Implementation

While countless studies and sources are quick to cite the correlation of mindfulness to happiness and well-being, and the seemingly infinite benefits its practice brings, it's considerably more difficult to find out just *how* mindfulness is being employed. Indeed, the renowned psychologist William James observed, "It is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about" (James, 1981, p.401)

Is this because the concept is so subjective? Or because there's only so many ways you can tell someone to 'be present', 'live in the moment', stay in the 'here and now'? Whatever that answer may be, helpful guidelines can be found.

Meditation is likely the most obvious choice, but it may be tough for some people to dive right into. Yoga, tai chi, walking meditation or other forms of mindful focus might be a more comfortable start for some (Siegel, 2011).

If meditation and breathing exercises are within reach, Daniel Siegel offers the fundamental building blocks on how to begin. The first step, he says is to simply become aware of your awareness, to observe how you focus your attention (Siegel, 2011). Becoming repeatedly distracted and lost in your thoughts, feelings or memories does not mean you're doing it 'wrong'. "The point of the exercise is to notice these distractions – and then to refocus on the target over and over again" (Siegel, 2011, p.94). He equates exercising attention to developing a muscle; just as you might flex and relax your bicep, you then focus and refocus your attention when it wanders (Siegel, 2011).

Ever the neuroscientist, Rick Hanson suggests using the power of the prefrontal cortex to set deliberate intentions to be more mindful, such as before beginning an activity that requires focus (Hanson & Mendius, 2009).

Humour is something that's always been effective for me personally, so I had particular appreciation for the amusing exercise Mo Gawdat offers in his book, *Solve for Happy: Engineer your path to joy* (2017). He suggests taking a minute to jot down everything you can think of to do to be more mindful, promising to reveal his own answers on the next page. If done sincerely, one could come up with any variety of possible answers, which is his point; when you do turn the page, he's filled it with the same words over and over, in different sizes and script: Do nothing.

The point Gawdat illustrates is that while we've somehow come to believe we need to check off a complicated list of requirements before we can be more mindful, we have everything we need right within us. We don't have to 'do' anything.

Meaning-making

While bountiful in its benefits, mindfulness might at first not be available to everyone. In addition to sceptics, some people just might not be open to it. Some people seem predisposed to a more negative outlook, and they may feel they need more than a simple meditation to heal the trauma or tragedy they've endured.

In such cases, it is helpful to consider the work of Viktor Frankl, (1984) the infamous psychiatrist and Jew who survived years in a concentration camp during WWII.

Having penned an account of his experience, he attests that finding meaning is the primary drive and motivation in life. (Frankl, 1984) Often considered the father of the modern-day meaning movement (Bellin, 2015), Frankl contends that there is not any one-size-fits-all meaning of life, but that everyone has their own individual mission to fulfill; that, rather than asking what the meaning of our life is, we should instead recognize that it is *life* who is asking of *us* (Frankl, 1984).

This sense of responsibility infuses a person with power and personal agency over their own life, and is what sustained Frankl during the immense suffering of Auschwitz. (Frankl, 1984) Meaning-making, according to Frankl, is experienced through our creations, experiences, and attitudes; the Nazis may have robbed him of his ability to garner meaning through creative and experiential processes, but they couldn't stop him from gleaning meaning in his life by choosing his *attitude* toward his suffering (Frankl, 1984).

Like mindfulness, meaning in life has been associated with a host of happiness-related benefits, such as superior self-reported health, higher levels of self-reported quality of life, lower incidence of suicidal ideation, and slower age-related cognitive decline and decreased risk for Alzheimer's disease. (Bellin, 2015) Recent research that analyzed several studies of the correlation between meaning and happiness (Yelcin & Malcok, 2015) demonstrated an overwhelmingly significant relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being. Two separate studies yielded similar, complimentary results, indicating that *presence* of meaning in life was positively associated with subjective well-being, and *search* for meaning corresponded negatively (Dogan & Sapmaz, 2012; Cohen & Cairns, 2012).

While perhaps less ambiguous than mindfulness or happiness, it is nevertheless necessary to define just what 'meaning' is; however, like mindfulness and happiness, definitions vary through the field.

Whether it involves the pursuit of meaningful goals, (Klinger, 1977) the importance of everyday decisions and behaviour, (Maddi, 1970) or self-transcendence, (Seligman, 2002) meaning in life is uniformly regarded as crucial. (Steger, 2006)

Despite the varying definitions, Steger (2006) delineates a comprehensive explanation that manages to capture an individual focus while still maintaining a universal perspective, and describes meaning in life as:

> the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years. (Steger, p. 165, 2006)

If we follow Frankl's (1984) theory that meaning in life is different for everyone, it can then follow that each individual must create meaning in their own life (Battista & Almond, 1973). Of particular relevance, importance, and difficulty, is the notion of finding meaning in suffering.

Meaning in Suffering

Like happiness, suffering is an existential and individualistic experience, (Hemberg, 2017) and because of its deep dimensions cannot be understood merely through theoretical descriptions, but must instead be considered through the lens of individual human experience.

An individual's values and inner life are profoundly and irrevocably affected by the experience of suffering (Arman, 2002; Eriksson, 1994). The direction and impact of this affect will, again, depend on one's own personality, background, and surrounding environment (Hemberg, 2017).

Post-Traumatic Growth

The potential exists for suffering to evoke profoundly destructive effects in it's implication of worthlessness, (Erikson, 1994) but can also provide a person with newfound meaning and gratitude for life (Hemberg, 2017). While Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

is a well-known result of trauma and/or suffering, Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) may also occur, even after a person has experienced PTSD. (Seligman, 2011)

When Positive Psychologist Martin Seligman and his colleagues conducted a study of the fifteen worst things that can happen in a person's life (torture, rape, imprisonment, death of a child, and so on) their results of 1,700 people indicated that experiencing a traumatizing event had more intense strengths (and thus greater well-being) than people who had not (Seligman, 2011). Furthermore, the trend continued; the more trauma a person experienced, the stronger they were.

Trauma is serious, and without appearing flippant or diminishing the severity of its effects, it can still be said that this kind of suffering often sets the stage for growth (Seligman, 2011).

In this light, Nietzsche's words ring true: What does not kill me makes me stronger (Nietzsche, 1909).

In and of itself, suffering is meaningless (Hemberg, 2017). However, "bound to something else, suffering may be of existential importance for the human being and may be alleviated since health and suffering are integrated with each other in a constantly present movement" (Hemberg, 2017, para.5). This essentially means that if an individual is able to ascribe a meaning to their suffering, the suffering itself may be mitigated by a new passion for life. (Erikson, 1994)

In fact, in a hermeneutical study examining ten adults who had lived through suffering, results indicated the experience promoted greater gratitude, wisdom, and meaning in life, as well increased empathy and acceptance of others (Hemberg, 2017). As the understanding of life's fragility and finiteness evolves, so too does the importance of living in the present moment.

Moreover, many adults profess that their suffering lent them such unexpected awareness to deeper dimensions of meaning in life it made them 'whole', and as such they would not want to be without the experience. (Barron, 2000; Bussing, 2014)

Cases of extreme suffering, such as those that threaten one's life, are an assault on the whole person, meaning that suffering affects a person physically, socially and spiritually (Fernandes, Papaikonomou & Nieuwoudt, 2006; Mount et al., 2007). In *Man's Search for Meaning* (1986) Viktor Frankl speaks of this kind of circumferential suffering and offers a crowning experience as a result; the wonderful feeling in knowing that after all one has suffered, there is nothing left to fear anymore (Frankl, 1986).

Frankl also addresses meaning in suffering directly in saying "For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation—we are challenged to change ourselves" (Frankl, 1986, p.112). He further postulates that in some ways, the moment it finds a meaning, suffering ceases to be suffering.

While it is happening to us, suffering can feel unfair and meaningless. Through a deep, deliberate and holistic examination, we have the potential to grow and gain deeper gratitude, wisdom, and meaning in our lives.

Part of the challenge of this growth can be attributed to our Western mindset and culture. Suffering, and negative emotions in general, are not and have not been encouraged—instead, we are constantly trying to minimize, reduce, or cover them up with positive emotions (McMahon, 2009). We have no place for suffering in Western culture; it is an unwelcome visitor that must be vanquished immediately.

In contrast, Eastern cultures have long known and understood that suffering is part of life; indeed, according to Buddha's Four Noble Truths, "all this life is suffering" (as cited in Menahem & Love, 2013). Eastern philosophies accept and understand that clinging to past transgressions and feelings of hatred only compound the pain, that we can only achieve spiritual release by pursuing a life of compassion and kindness toward self and others. (Walpola Sri Rahula, 1974)

These philosophies embody a less individualistic worldview, believing that "the material self is an illusion, or "annata", and believing that one's body and one's experiences in this world represent anything permanent or true will lead to suffering" (Menahem & Love, 2013, p.829). Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, this focus on the whole, or the community, rather than the self, appears to be much more beneficial to individual wellness, and we would be remiss not to take note of it.

Gratitude

Like meaning-making, gratitude is an essential companion to mindfulness in the generation of well-being. (Gruszecka, 2015) Since the turn of the 21st century, the concept of gratitude has become the focus of much systematic research. (Gruszecka, 2015) This isn't surprising, given the advent of Positive Psychology, which explores valued subjective experiences, such as those involving well-being, contentment, hope and optimism, and happiness. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) Because such positive emotions are almost always associated with happiness, research focused on gratitude tends to lend subsequent attention to its relation to happiness. (Gruszecka, 2015)

What does the research say?

In *Appreciating Gratitude: Is Gratitude an Amplifier of Well-Being?* (2015) the theory that gratitude enhances well-being is supported in both correlational and experimental research. (Gruszecka, 2015) In examining how this happens, the author cites the intense experience of and subsequent focus on positive experiences. Feeling gratitude is an enjoyable experience that evokes many pleasant emotions, and not only our well-being but our overall health is literally augmented by experiencing positive affect. (Cohn at al., 2009; Emmons & McCullough, 2003: Nelson, 2009).

Another study found strong correlations between dispositional gratitude and various measures of happiness and subjective well-being. (Watkins, P. C., Woodward, K., Stone, T., & Kolts, R. L. (2003). They also demonstrated that gratitude also corresponded with an indirect measure of happiness (semantic differential ratings of neutral words).

While enhancing optimism and positive emotions, (Young & Hutchinson, 2012) gratitude also operates as a protective factor against stress and depression. (Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008)

According to Positive Psychology, gratitude is a signature strength and is consistently associated with greater happiness (Siegel, 2015). It helps in dealing with adversity, relishing positive experiences, feeling positive emotions, and plays an indispensable role in building stronger relationships. (Siegel, 2015)

Definitions

The evidence linking gratitude to happiness and subjective well-being is compelling, and once again it's imperative to define what is meant by the term. Some define gratitude strictly in terms of an appreciation for receiving something, such as this definition from Gruszecka: (2015)

"Gratitude is appreciating both the gift and the gift-giver combined with a need to reciprocate which goes beyond ordinary reciprocity. This means that gratitude is a positive emotion that we feel when another person has intentionally given, or attempted to give, us something of value" (Gruszecka, 2015, p.186)

Other terms are more holistic, including a thankful appreciation of what one receives, whether tangible or intangible, (Siegel, 2015) and acknowledgment of the goodness in one's life.

Whether specific or broad, large or small, it appears indisputable that gratitude is strongly related to happiness, and unique to well-being. (Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2009) Tying into meaning, Hemberg (2017) also argues that gratitude is associated with purpose in life, self-acceptance and personal growth.

Implementation

Much like mindfulness, employing gratitude may seem like a great idea, but just how does one do it? Is it as easy as counting our blessings? Finding the silver lining?

Neil Pasricha, author of *The Happiness Equation: want nothing + do anything = have everything* (2016) offers the simple, straightforward notion that if you can be happy with simple things, then it will be simple to be happy. He suggests finding a notebook or journal to jot down simple gratitudes, citing Charles Dickens' sage advice from centuries prior: "Reflect upon your present blessings, of which ever man has many, not your past misfortunes, of which all men have some" (as cited in Pasricha, 2017, p.24).

The gratitude journal idea is not exclusive to Pasricha; it's an idea that has taken flight with great success, and ready-made fill-in-the-blank gratitude journals can be found online and in bookstores alike.

Shawn Achor, one of the world's experts on human potential, offers up similar advice in what he calls 'Three Good Things', a simple exercise involving making up a daily list of all the good things (or perhaps just three) in one's life (or job or career, as his advice pertains more to one's work) (Achor, 2010). He speaks to the power of forcing (and thus training) the brain to scan the past 24-hour period for potential positives, with the simultaneous benefit of pushing out the negatives (annoyances, frustrations) that were previously looming in the background. (Achor, 2010)

List-making isn't for everyone; fortunately, journaling about positive experiences offers a nice variation of the exercise. Achor points out that while we've long known about the comfort and relief that can come from venting about hardships and suffering, studies show that equally powerful effects can come from journaling about positive experiences (Achor, 2010). He further affirms the staying power of these exercises, citing over a decade of empirical evidence on how the brain is wired.

Beneficial as it may be, gratitude listing or journaling should not be without cautionary advice; in a recent study (Lyubomirsky, 2008) whereby participants who were asked to write down five things they were grateful for over the course of six weeks, half the participants were instructed to make their list once a week, while the other half did so three times a week. Results demonstrated a boost in happiness *only* in the group who made the list once weekly; it appears "paying thanks for our blessings in a repetitive, boring manner can destroy the positive effects of gratitude that are conducive to boosting happiness." (Gruszecka, 2015, p.189)

This finding illustrates the importance of authenticity when expressing gratitude, of which not subscribing to the monotony of a routine may help. Young & Hutchinson (2012) offer the idea of choosing a different letter from the alphabet each day and writing five things one is

thankful for that begin with that letter in an effort to thwart habituation and increase the scope of the client's thinking.

If list-making and journaling aren't a person's forte, other methods of expressing gratitude do exist. A Japanese therapy system called Naikan, (meaning 'looking inside') is a Buddhist practice of arduous self-reflection. (Krech, 2002) The practitioner takes twenty minutes to focus on three questions: "What have I received from people today?" "What have I given to others?" and "What troubles and difficulty have I caused to others?" (Young & Hutchinson, 2012) This focus on one's moral relationships with others is what differentiates this therapy from other, more mainstream gratitude techniques. (Bono & McCullough, 2006)

Naikan practitioners report a greater recognition of the interconnectedness of life, which isn't surprising given that a growing awareness of the many benefits one receives from others is central to the technique. (Young & Hutchinson, 2012)

Benefit finding, a particular technique for gratitude involving the art of finding the positive effects of adversity, has been proven effective in reducing depression regardless of the severity of a person's suffering. (Young & Hutchinson, 2012) Interviews revealed that "when clients looked at "the other side of trauma," they found that painful events can lead to a startling recognition that the situation has important benefits" (Young & Hutchinson, 2012, p.108) This is similar to the concept of PTG we visited earlier.

Gratitude is unquestionably imperative in finding, experiencing, and maintaining any sort of happiness. Its benefits are countless, but perhaps best summed up by Gruszecka (2015): "…gratitude multiplies positive emotions, helps build on personal resources, inhibits anger, makes it easier for people to deal with stress, encourages prosocial behaviours, brings people together, helps people lean on others for support and makes them more likely to reach out a

helping hand to others in need. Finally it help form new social bonds and strengthens those that already exist. And of course, each of these positive outcomes is in itself conducive to happiness." (Gruszecka, 2015, p.189)

Forgiveness

Lastly, forgiveness is an important construct that positively affects life satisfaction and well-being (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009; Worthington, Berry, & Parrott, 2001). It has been found to contribute positively to the quality of interpersonal relationships, the development of coping skills, as well as physical health and psychological resilience. (Eldeleklioglu, 2015)

Definitions

Forgiveness is a process, and like most constructs has a host of possible definitions, but generally involves letting go of and replacing resentment with mindful awareness and empathy (Mehanem & Love, 2013).

In her evaluation of the effect of forgiveness on life satisfaction, Eldeleklioglu (2015) gives a global definition of the concept as "the willingness to let go of negative feelings, such as anger and revenge, that an individual feels toward another person for an unjust hurt; instead, the individual tries to develop positive feelings, such as love, generosity, and mercy, toward the other person". (p.1564)

Comprehensive as this definition may be, it is worth noting another, more succinct version from Wade and Worthington (2003) who conceptualize forgiveness as "the replacement of damaging emotions with prosocial ones toward the offender or self" (p107). It's the word 'prosocial' that I draw focus to – it's arguably a better fit than the word 'positive' for the transformation of emotions involved in forgiveness. Even arriving at the decision to forgive can be difficult, and attempting to then conjure up 'positive' emotions or feelings for or about

someone who's hurt us might simply be too much to ask. It's possible it could even derail the whole process. Choice of wording may be a matter of personal preference, but it is worth noting as it could be the one factor that facilitates or impedes a person's ability to truly forgive.

While definitions abound, what *is* generally agreed upon and what is perhaps even more important is noting what forgiveness is not; it is not pardoning, excusing, condoning, denying, forgetting, or reconciliation. (Enright & Coyle, 1998; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Much of the resistance or difficulty in forgiveness often lies in these misconceptions, (Menahem & Love, 2013) so it is imperative to clarify that forgiveness is wholly intrapersonal to overcome this barrier.

What does the research say?

Forgiveness is a long and difficult struggle, which is a possible reason why, despite impressive progress in research, forgiveness studies have suffered from a lack of empirical integration (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; Strelan, & Covic, 2006). As the authors of *The road to forgiveness: A meta-analytic synthesis of its situational and dispositional correlates* (2010) attest, "With a few notable exceptions, there have been no attempts to systematically analyze the vast amount of empirical data that has accumulated on forgiveness". (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010)

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss possible reasons behind this lack of attention, it is viable that the incredibly subjective nature of forgiveness makes it difficult to conceptualize (let alone agree on) what constitutes the endpoint of the process. (Strelan, & Covic, 2006)

To forgive and forget is a well-known idiom that has been touted since time immemorial, and, while we've noted, the actual process of forgiving and forgetting lacks empirical research,

(Lichtenfeld, Buechner, Maier, & Fernández-Capo, 2015) it would be fair to say most anyone who's been offered this advice knows how difficult it actually is.

No matter how we might try to pretend otherwise, hurt feelings run deep, and are often deeply ingrained in our sense of self. (Menahem & Love, 2013) The process of untangling and reassembling one's identity when it has become so enmeshed with the dark emotions around unforgiveness, which can well be defined as "a combination of delayed and chronic negative thoughts and emotions (i.e., resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger, and fear)" (Bruning, Standard, Luskin, Evans, Benisovich, Harris, & Thoresen, 2001) sounds daunting at absolute best.

The studies demonstrating the stream of benefits of forgiveness might well be motivation enough for someone to embark on the journey… But again we return to the question of how. Just *how* does one go about something as complex, profound, and personal as the art of forgiveness?

Implementation

In *Forgiveness in Psychotherapy: The Key to Healing*, (Menahem & Love, 2013) the authors profess that "The process of forgiveness involves reconceptualising past offenses with awareness and empathy, which leads to the letting go of blame and replacing it with a kinder, more generous outlook. Anger and resentment are the glue that holds negative beliefs in place, blocking the way to peace and happiness. As such, the interaction of cognitive and spiritual techniques works to undo this maintenance of negativity, replacing it with goodwill and positivity." (Menahem & Love, 2013, p.830)

They believe this process is accomplished through the use of cognitive techniques and meditation, which echoes that of other research that suggests a blend of cognitive behavioural strategies and heart-focused meditation practices, such as the process model developed by

Enright and the Human Development Study Group (Enright and Fitzgibbons, 2000). The 20-step model represents the process of forgiveness as having four phases: uncovering, deciding, working, and deepening.

McCullough and Worthington's five-step REACH model (1995; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997) involves recalling (R) the event, building empathy (E), giving an altruistic (A) gift of forgiveness, publicly committing (C) to the forgiveness they have experienced, and holding (H) onto the gains achieved.

The combination of techniques targets both mental and spiritual beliefs of oneself and the world, helping to overcome anger by bolstering empathy (through learning to cognitively identify with transgressors) and fostering compassion (through mediation). (Menahem & Love, 2013) Clearly, the deliberate reduction of negative affect and active generation of empathic, prosocial feelings is at the core of these strategies. (Menahem & Love, 2013)

Hanson and Mendius' recent book *Buddha's Brain: the practical neuroscience of happiness, love & wisdom,* (2009) is a wonderful demonstration of the successful marriage of cognitive techniques (neuroscience) with spiritual ones (Buddhism).

The authors reference the notion of ill-will, and offers the advice to regard it as an affliction upon one's own self. (Hanson, & Mendius, 2009) While it often has no effect on the person it's directed toward, it always harms you; it's the metaphorical drinking of poison and waiting for the other person to die. (Hanson & Mendius, 2009)

The authors also borrow an expression from the Buddha in the concept of the first and second 'darts' of pain. The first dart is an offense against us, a dart having been thrown at us; but it is our *reactions* to these experiences, these 'second darts' – which we throw at ourselves- that cause most of our suffering. When we are hurt by someone, we've already experienced the pain

of the first dart; there is no need to add insult to injury with a second dart of ill will towards our offender.

This visual of harming oneself, of actually throwing a dart at oneself, can be enormously helpful to individuals struggling with meditation or traditional cognitive techniques.

Hanson and Mendius do use the word 'forgiveness' and concur with the above-mentioned definition of what forgiveness is not, maintaining that forgiving doesn't mean abandoning or forgetting that an offense has occurred, it just means letting go of the *emotional charge* around the feeling. (Hanson & Mendius, 2009) They further affirm that the greatest beneficiary of forgiveness, is usually one's self.

The authors offer several other straight-forward methods for abandoning ill will, which serve as excellent 'how-to' advice for someone struggling with forgiveness, such as:

- Identifying the triggers – examining the underlying trigger of ill will, such as a sense of threat or alarm. Could you be exaggerating what happened, could you be focusing on a single negative amidst a dozen positives?
- Studying ill will—taking time to investigate it, what causes it and what its effects are.
- Accepting the wound—Life comes with pain. Accepting this fact is different from allowing others to hurt you—it is simply accepting and allowing yourself to feel hurt, anger, and fear, but *letting them flow through you*.
- Communicate—Negative feelings are trying to tell you something. The goal is to understand the message, without getting swept away by anger.
- Expand the category of 'us'—Focus on similarities that make people an 'us' rather than on differences that makes someone a 'them'. Recognize that 'us' is the whole wide world, and find similarities with people you might otherwise regard as

> ‘different’; for example, when you see someone in a wheelchair, reflect about how we are all disabled in one way or another. (Hanson & Mendius, 2009)

Hanson and Mendius also offer a meditation-type exercise call The Ten Thousand Things, (2009) in which you think about someone who has wronged you, and reflect on the possible causes (the ten thousand things) that may have led this person to behave in the way that they have. Possible considerations are biological factors, like age, pain, intelligence, their childhood, the realities of their life such as income, race, gender, responsibilities, their hopes and dreams, their values and fears, their parents and upbringing, and other events that have shaped the life they live today. Then, look inside yourself, and see if you feel any differently about this person, or any differently about yourself.

The benefits of forgiveness are holistic and far-reaching. If one can begin the journey of letting go of anger and resentment and replacing these negativities with empathy and compassion, healing and happiness can truly start to thrive.

Discussion

There is so much to say about happiness. For all that I’ve said here, I feel I’ve barely scrapped the surface, and there are new developments happening every day in neuroscience, psychotherapy, and, well, happiness.

To me, one of the most important findings of all this happiness research is the frightening correlation between the relentless pursuit of happiness, and the increase in alarming statistics of *un*happiness: addiction, depression, disorders and so on. (Perhaps I should have thrown a graph in after all.)

These findings, these conversations, need to be had; in classrooms, online, and in medias. Society needs to educate and be educated that happiness cannot be bought, sold, traded for or

assumed. It is not a state of permanence, nor a final destination. It will ebb and it will flow, as will the hardships that come with life.

Perhaps it is recognizing this impermanence, this fleeting nature or fragility of not only happiness but life itself, that is the launching pad to experiencing true happiness. Perhaps we can consider that we are not meant to live in the absence of pain, grief and loss, but rather hold these experiences *with* those of love, hope, and joy, and recognize that all of human kind is waging the same war. If we can meet not only our neighbour but ourselves with boundless kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, we can sow the seeds of true happiness and well-being.

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