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An Inquiry On Happiness

Happiness. It is what everyone strives for. Not just momentary, fleeting happiness, but happiness that is lasting. While there are many minor contributors to happiness, lasting happiness largely comes when people, from within, find purpose and meaning doing what they love while socializing with people that they love and care about.

In recent years Americans have become less and less happy. This has left many wondering, “Why are people so unhappy?” Before answering this, the question, “What makes people happy?” needs to be answered. People often look for quick fixes for happiness. They think buying that expensive purse will make them happy or drinking too much at a party will give them joy. These things may give someone joy in the moment, but it will eventually wear off and leave a person feeling empty. People often wonder if money will make them happy. Looking at happiness in terms of finances has shown that having money will make a person happier to a point where they can survive and live comfortably, but when a person's income reaches a certain point, happiness is no longer affected. Other professionals look at the components that go into happiness from a psychological standpoint. These findings largely point to social relationships as being one of the biggest factors in a person's happiness. They also conclude that the way people think and interpret different situations influences their happiness levels. When people have a positive and optimistic outlook on life, they tend to be happier. The inquiry on happiness is not new; for thousands of years people have been attempting to figure out how to become happier. Many philosophers tried to do just that. Even though the philosophers relied on their own

thoughts, what they came up with is not that different from much of today's research. Many philosophers assert that happiness is not found in material desires.

Happiness is a word filled with much ambiguity. In order to figure out how to become happy, happiness must first be defined. An excerpt from a psychology book, *Handy Answer: The Handy Psychology Answer Book* written by Lisa Cohen provides data about happiness and what makes people happy. She writes that the most basic definition of happiness is that it is when a person feels positive emotions for an extended period (Cohen). Though most people would agree with that definition, some would argue that happiness is much more complicated than that. An online magazine used to educate the public on health and wellness created by the University of California put out an article designed to show people ways to increase their happiness. They say that the true definition of happiness is having both satisfaction in one's life as well as meaning or purpose (Happiness Research). To make the claim that happiness includes being satisfied with one's life, it must first be distinguished that satisfaction and happiness are not the same. The two are related but being satisfied does not guarantee happiness. Satisfaction is a state of being in which a person has their needs filled, but it does not involve emotion. A journal written by Guglielmo Maria Caporale, Yannis Georgellis, Nicholas Tsitsianis and Ya Ping Yin used data taken by the European Social Survey. They sought out to find whether or not income had any effect on people's happiness. They compared Eastern European countries with Western European countries in their research. In the article they discuss how happiness requires emotion and is based on how someone is feeling (Caporale et al. 4). A person can be satisfied but not happy with their life. They first established that happiness can

either be momentary, or it can be lasting. Psychologist World is an informational website devoted to psychology and providing articles to educate its subscribers. The article “Psychology of Happiness” says that lasting happiness is what everyone strives for, and there are many aspects that go into achieving it (Waude). There are certain activities that put people in a sort of “flow.” Activities that flow are almost are transcendent. When people are in this flow, they don’t look at the clock, and they lose all awareness of time. Time seems to fly by. They stop thinking about themselves and are almost lost in the activity at hand, not thinking about anything else. Being in that state also requires effort in order to complete the activity. Doing activities like these can bring happiness into people's lives. For artists, an activity like this may be painting or for an athlete, running in a race. People can often find meaning or purpose in these transcendent activities and therefore, they contribute to lasting happiness.

Can money buy happiness? This question has long been debated in classrooms, on television, in books and in research, but it seems the answer is more complicated than a simple yes or no. Jennifer Aaker, Sara Leslie and Carole Robin from The Stanford School of Business wrote a journal providing a definition of happiness. The journal included how to obtain it and also looked into some myths about happiness. The journal focused on the economic aspect of happiness. The research concluded that having enough money to pay for basic needs does have a positive effect on one’s happiness, but having an excess of money does not show an increase in happiness. There is a great increase in happiness when someone transitions from poverty to making about \$20,000 a year. Then when they jump from \$20,000 to \$50,000 per year, happiness increases at a much slower rate. When the annual income increases to more than \$50,000, then

happiness increases very minimally (Aaker et al. 2). Another study showed that once a person's annual income reached around \$75,000, there was no longer an increase in happiness (Happiness Research). One study showed that in countries with poor welfare systems, those who went from being unemployed and impoverished to having a livable income are happier (Caporale et al. 9-10). All of these studies point to happiness and wealth being positively correlated but once someone reaches a certain amount of money, their happiness levels off. When someone no longer worries about having enough money, they may start to worry about acquiring material things. The desire for more and more could be a possible reason for that leveling off of happiness. Therefore, these studies show that having wealth does not necessarily equate to true happiness.

Studies show that material things give people immediate satisfaction, but once they get used to having them, they no longer provide that happiness. Buying a sports car might make someone happy for a week or two, but once their insurance goes up, that happiness might start fleeting. The happiness provided by the acquisition of material things is not lasting (Happiness Research). In fact, a research study conducted in Europe has shown that people actually are more concerned with the amount of money they have compared with other people rather than with the actual amount of money they have. The comparison of wealth is more influential on happiness in countries that value money when determining social status (Caporale et al. 1). In Eastern European countries happiness was more largely affected by comparison to others than in Western European countries. This is due to the social norms of the Eastern Europe and the emphasis that is placed on comparison to others (Caporale et al. 1). In Lisa Cohen's book she states that happiness is also not determined by the amount of money a person actually has, but it is about

their perception about the amount of money they have (Cohen). When a person is living on the streets, worried about where their next meal will come from, they do not care about that new handbag or getting the latest I-Phone. However, once a person is comfortable financially, they do not worry about money as much. They have the time and energy to worry about fitting in and social status. With an excess of money, comes an excess of wants. Everyone wants to fit in and often the amount of “things” someone has can influence that. People begin to care about material things. This is when money might even decrease happiness. Once people start to get material things, they keep wanting more and they simply cannot have everything. They work too hard to earn enough money to keep up with everyone else. It becomes an obsession and can result in unhappiness. Some of the richest people in the world are workaholics. They simply are not content with the money they do have. A New York Times article written by Alex Williams offers commentary about how the richest people in the world do not seem to be happy and that they work too hard. The article states that Chief Executive of Apple, Tim Cook, reportedly wakes up at 3:45 in the morning to start his work day, for example (Williams). Another culprit of this temporary happiness comes from a sudden increase in wealth. People become optimistic about their financial situations and this creates an immediate but not lasting sense of happiness, sometimes referred to as the “tunnel effect (Caporale et al. 12). It can be determined from this information that an excess of money is not a contributor to happiness. When people work too hard to earn money their relationships suffer as well as the time and energy they have to spend doing the things they enjoy. Thus, wealth and having material items do not define happiness and having too much of either can actually lead to unhappiness.

The United States is guilty of the need to socially climb. One of the reasons for this is likely the increased usage of social media. Affluent social media influencers give children and young adults unrealistic expectations about what happiness looks like. They make them think they need to be decked out in expensive clothing by Gucci, drive Teslas and have so many “friends” and “followers,” for example, in order to fit in. A Washington Post article references a United Nations study that puts the United States as one of the most unhappy countries compared to many other places. The article points to the epidemic of addiction that faces America as a large part of the problem. The United States is a highly addictive country. Not only are people addicted to drugs, but many people are addicted to social media. Seventeen and eighteen year olds spend about six hours a day glued to their screens. They are texting “so called” friends, streaming and on social media. This behavior has been linked to depression (Chiu). Social media, therefore, gives people a false sense of happiness.

There are many unknowns when it comes to determining what makes people happy. However, one determinant that almost all psychologists agree upon is that one of the most central components to happiness is having positive social interactions. Socialization is a basic need that humans have to have to feel satisfied with their lives. A long-term Harvard study shows this idea of relationships and their influence, not only on happiness, but overall, on the quality of life. The current director of the study at Massachusetts General, is Psychiatrist Robert Waldinger. The study began nearly eighty years ago with about two hundred sixty eight Harvard sophomores. The study followed them throughout the remainder of their lives and then throughout the lives of their children. The study expanded even more to include a population from the inner city of

Boston. The study found that having close relationships kept people from having life-disconnection, and it slowed the rate at which people declined both physically and mentally. A strong correlation exists between the happiness of an individual and their health. People who were in stable marriages had less pain, both physical and emotional in the old ages. Even when their bodies started to deteriorate, those who had loving marriages expressed feeling less physical pain than those who did not have stable partners (Mineo). The results of the study have also shown that people who have strong social connections tend to live longer than those who do not. Robert Waldinger said in regards to his findings, “Loneliness kills. It’s as powerful as smoking or alcoholism.” People are typically very aware of the impact that substance abuse has on physical and mental health, but loneliness is not often put in the same category as these. Waldinger suggests that lack of socialization can be just as harmful as drugs or alcohol (Mineo). Action for Happiness is a group that strives to create a happier and more caring society. They published an article on their website seeking to educate the public about how they can be happier. They reference several journal articles and studies in their publication. One study states that lacking meaningful social relationships can be as harmful to a person’s health as being obese (Connect with People). The happiest people tend to be the ones who spend the least time alone (Aaker et al. 10). In today’s technological obsessed age, many people, especially the youth and teenagers in America, are addicted to their screens. Thus, they are less likely to go to parties or to hang out with friends. The amount of time they spend sleeping, reading or doing other activities that are linked with increased happiness is decreased. It is not surprising that many adolescents are depressed. Those who spend less time on their phones and more time with other people have

been shown to be happier (Chiu). Consequently, all these findings show how positive social interactions highly correlate with increased happiness.

Humans are social creatures, and our happiness depends on it. The quality and quantity of our socializations determine our happiness, but the happier a person is actually plays a role in the quality and quantity of those social relations. There are four key areas that make for a meaningful social relationship. One is sharing in positive emotions together, for example, laughing and having fun. The next component is the feeling that a person can speak their mind and that they will be understood. The next is having mutual support. The last piece is having experiences and partaking in activities together (Connect With People). People tend to want to socialize more with those who are happy. If a person is unhappy and they isolate themselves or cannot foster good relationships, then they can be stuck in a cycle of unhappiness (Connect With People). Not being able to make friends can also lead to poor self esteem which further decreases happiness. On the flip side, creating lasting friendships increases one's self esteem and in turn, has a positive influence on happiness. People that are extroverted report being more happy, in general, than introverted people. This is another example of how loneliness decreases happiness (Waude). It, in turn, proves that socialization increases happiness.

Other psychologists look at how doing acts for other people is crucial to happiness. The Berkeley Wellness article showed that the body actually functions in a way that supports and rewards people for socialization. A Functional MRI showed that the pleasure and reward parts of the brain light up when giving to charity. Helping or supporting others has the same effect (Happiness Research). When people were given the choice to either take money or give it to

someone else, there was very little difference in their happiness. When a person decided to give the money to someone else, it had a positive impact on their happiness (Connect With People). So, selflessness and altruism, which gives people purpose and meaning, are both positive influencers on happiness.

The last piece when discussing social relationships is having love, someone to share a life with and someone to share purpose with. Love can be a missing piece for some in their journey for happiness. Being loved and feeling love gives people meaning in their lives (Aaker et al. 10). Marriage has been shown to be a positive factor in increasing happiness. Women who have stable marriages or partners are less depressed and happier than those who do not (Mineo). These claims support the idea that part of being happy is finding meaning. Marriage is sometimes described as a partnership, and being a part of that partnership, can give a person purpose beyond just themselves. Being in love often entails putting someone over oneself and as shown before, being altruistic can bring someone happiness. Therefore, having meaning and purpose in a loving relationship leads to increased happiness.

Happiness starts from within. Besides forging quality relationships, psychologists say that happiness is also in the habits of a person and with positive thinking. The more optimistic people are, the easier they are able to cope with stressors (Waude). Positive psychology is a psychological approach that has been growing in its popularity over the last few years. The root of positive psychology is trying to have people create their own positive emotions. It focuses on turning a person's negative thoughts into positive ones. It takes into account people's strengths and attempts to build upon them as explained in an informative post by Harvard Health

Publishing, an online magazine designed to lead people to healthier lives. An example of a positive psychology exercise would be to have someone name three things that happened in a day that they are grateful for (Positive Psychology). A study showed that when people actively tried to be happier, it worked. If they smiled more, tried to consciously think happier thoughts and worked on being more social, they actually turned out becoming happier. In a way, they tricked themselves into being happier (Psychology of Happiness). Thus, this shows how happiness does come within oneself.

Another contributor to happiness is having meaning and purpose in life. If a person were to try and live everyday happy, wouldn't they, in turn, become happier? Happiness is largely about the way people think and how they choose to react to their experiences in life. If a person does not feel like they have that sense of meaning, it can be a barrier to their happiness. One way in which people often find meaning is through religion. Religion gives people something to devote their lives to. Religion is also a great way to create connections and feel part of a community. Another big way people find a purpose is through their work. Some people say, "I've found my calling." When someone is doing what they feel called to do, it is very fulfilling and ultimately contributes to lasting happiness (Choen). In order to become happier, people need to do more of what they love. They need to simply adjust the way they think about the world and shift into a more optimistic frame of mind, finding meaning and purpose in their lives.

Philosophers, dating back thousands of years, pondered happiness just like many do now. Rather than answering their questions with research and data, they simply put together their thoughts and observations. They tried to logically make sense of the world. Surprisingly, what

they came up with is not that different from what the psychologists of today have to say about happiness. There are so many philosophers that have important commentaries about happiness. Plato, Aristotle and Thoreau stand out as being in line with modern ideals on happiness. Plato was an Ancient Greek philosopher he living around 400 BC. Plato describes happiness as the pursuit of truth, beauty and goodness. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, he describes a metaphorical cave. Prisoners are born into the cave and are not allowed to leave. They are bound so that they cannot even move their heads. They are forced to look at the cave wall straight ahead for the entirety of their lives. A fire behind the prisoners allows for shadows to be projected on the wall in front of them. People walk by holding objects on their heads and the prisoners can see the shadows ahead. The cave dwellers begin to make a game out of guessing which shadows will appear next. The rewards are the admiration of their peers. The prisoners are not unhappy, but they also have not found happiness because they are trapped.

One prisoner escapes the cave and goes into the real world. At first he is scared and the light burns his eyes, but once he adjusts, he sees the truth. Everything he knew as true was not real. The cave full of shadows was just a mirage. He realized all the games and rewards he cared so much about were simply foolish. The escapee had a choice. He could stay in the real world and never go back into the cave in which he was bound for so long, or he could go back and educate the others that were trapped. He chooses the latter. He believes that it is his job to go back into the cave and rescue the others. When the man tells the prisoners that the world of shadows is not real, instead of thanking him, they do the opposite. They become very angry with the man and do not believe him. They tell him that if he tries to free them that they will kill him.

This narrative shows that Plato thinks that happiness is about realizing what is truly important. The escaped prisoner leaves the material world and once he sees the light, he knows that none of the rewards or praise from his peers were worth anything. Plato uses this metaphorical scenario to reflect how he views the world he is living in. He feels that people are caught up in the world of materials and they need to come out of the cave to find happiness.

This is similar to what the researchers say now. Money and material desires are not what makes people happy. Plato writes, “ Instead wouldn’t he feel, with Homer, that he’d much prefer to ‘work the earth as a serf to another, one without possessions,’ and go through any sufferings, rather than share their opinions and live as they do? I suppose he would rather suffer anything than live like that (Plato 4).” Plato is saying that living a world in which a person craves material things is the worst possible way to live. The story also shows that Plato feels that it is the duty of those who are enlightened to go back and help others. According to the research being altruistic and having purpose can lead people to happiness so Plato was not far off.

Aristotle is another philosopher that wrote about finding happiness. He was a student of Plato. He says that happiness is found when a person lives a morally virtuous life. He regards happiness as the ultimate goal in life. In his book, *Nicomachean Ethics*, he describes that gaining material things and money are not the goal, they are a means to something else. People often strive for excellence, honor, pleasure and reason which can bring someone closer to happiness, but no one thing can guarantee it. When a person gains true happiness, it is not for the sake of anything else. After figuring out the definition of happiness, he outlines how someone can achieve it. He says that living a morally virtuous life is what brings someone to that life of

lasting happiness. This means putting others over oneself, letting go of material desires and practicing good character, not because it will benefit a person, but because it is the right thing to do. Living a life of moderation is a part of this life. Moderation in terms of material pleasures and wealth. He illustrates being virtuous as an activity of the soul. It is a way of living. Once again, Aristotle's view of happiness relates to ideas of the researchers of today. Material pleasures are not the way to happiness. The key to happiness is to be kind to others, live virtuously and just be happy for happiness sake.

Henry David Thoreau is the third philosopher. He says that the way a person can become happy is by limiting the desire for material things and doing what is important in life. Thoreau lived in the woods of New England for years during the mid eighteenth hundreds. He deprived himself of anything that was not a basic necessity. He got rid of the excess and lived as simple a life as possible. The conclusion he came up with was that happiness is found in nature and the souls of every human being. He stresses how society places much emphasis on a person's wealth when determining their social status. He disagrees with this idea. He realizes that after having enough for survival, money does not matter. Having enough food to get a person through the day is enough. This relates to the ideas about the impact of wealth on happiness. A person only needs enough for survival and after that, it does not make them any happier. He also decides what does make people happier. After being in nature, it makes him feel alive. He says that often in society people operate by "laws of convention." This means they do what they feel like they should be doing but not what makes them happy. Thoreau says that in order to find happiness, people must do what makes them feel alive. They should do what they feel called to do. Thoreau finds

happiness in nature. He spends a lot of time outside basking in the natural world around him. A popular Thoreau quote that reiterates this idea is, “Confidently in the direction of your dreams, live the life you have imagined.” He is suggesting, like much of the psychologists of today, that a person must find purpose and meaning to be happy.

Overall, the question, “What makes people happy?” is not as simple as it may seem. The truth is that the answer is likely different for each and every person. With that said, there are a few basic aspects that have been shown to increase a person’s happiness. Money is not one of them. Once a person's basic needs are satisfied, money has no bearing on their happiness. Social interactions, on the other hand, are a positive influencer on happiness. The better the quality and the quantity of a person’s relationships, the happier a person tends to be. Happiness also comes to those who have a positive mindset. Being optimistic has been shown to be a source of happiness. The philosophers from many years ago arrived at similar conclusions to the present day psychologists. Aristotle and Plato say that it is important to give up worldly desires and put others over oneself. Thoreau corroborates the idea that money is not what matters, but doing what a person loves. Overall, it can be concluded that happiness is not determined by the amount of possessions a person has. People need to put down their phones and leave their work at work. Money certainly is not everything. They need to do more of what makes them happy with the people that make them happy. People need to go into the world and experience everything that life has to offer. There may not be an exact formula to achieving happiness, but there are certainly ways that can bring people pretty close. Happiness is a feeling inside that can

only be achieved when a person lives their best life. Lives of purpose, meaning, filled with personal connections and love is the way to find true happiness.

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