



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Understanding Happiness

What are some of the key findings of happiness research? What does the Bible say about happiness, and how does a Christian view of happiness relate to recent research?

Introduction

“Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.”

Helen Keller (1880–1968)

“If you’re not happy, you can become happy. Happiness is a choice.”

Jennifer Aniston (born 1969)

These words from Helen Keller and Jennifer Aniston illustrate two different approaches to happiness. Helen Keller’s perspective was common in the ancient world and throughout most of Christian history. That view emphasizes that happiness is a by-product of living an ethical and loving life. People should, in that view, seek worthy goals and high purposes for their lives, and happiness will follow. Happiness may not be constant and pervasive, but moments of true happiness will be the reward for those who live a life of good character.

Jennifer Aniston’s belief that happiness is a choice that anyone can make—and that everyone should make—has become quite common. This approach sees happiness as within our control. Our habits will shape

our level of happiness, including how we see the world and what we choose to think about, believe, and focus our attention on. This view is undoubtedly fed by consumer culture and all its “buy me now and you’ll be happy” advertisements. However, it probably also arose because the self-sacrifice connected to an ethical life can be taken too far and encourage misery and a spirit of martyrdom.

The view of happiness as something we can directly choose has arisen in recent decades in tandem with an explosion of happiness research. Online pollsters identify the happiest countries and cities on earth. Researchers conduct surveys of habits and attitudes that contribute to happiness. Psychologists try to tease out the connections between happiness and health, happiness and marriage, happiness and life expectancy, happiness and various economic and political systems, happiness and the workplace, and happiness and religion. Open any magazine and you’re likely to find an article on some aspect of this vast new happiness research. Go into any bookstore and you’ll find new books on happiness.

Much of the happiness research originates in the United States, which is not surprising since the U.S. Declaration of Independence states that the pursuit of

happiness is an unalienable right endowed by the Creator. However, the research is truly worldwide now. In the past most psychologists studied problems and how people can cope with them, but the global happiness research has given birth to a new field: positive psychology.

One of the challenges of happiness research is that while we often think we know what will make us happy—such as losing weight, owning a better car, or making more money—sometimes achieving those goals does not change our mood. Research shows that most people overestimate the effect that changes in external circumstances will have on their happiness level.¹

And indeed during the past fifty years, though the standard of living in the United States has increased dramatically, levels of happiness have remained virtually unchanged.²

Critics of happiness research note that human beings are notoriously bad at knowing what makes them happy. That's why philosophers and religious leaders have long advocated seeking an ethical and loving life rather than seeking happiness. Critics of happiness research also note that researchers can't agree on a definition of what happiness is.³ The numerous different happiness scales and ways to measure happiness indicate the slippery nature of the concept of happiness.

Definitions and Overlaps

Wikipedia defines happiness as "a mental or emotional state of well-being characterized by positive or pleasant emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy."⁴ Synonyms include satisfaction, pleasure, exuberance, exhilaration, elation, euphoria, ecstasy, and bliss. Since understandings of happiness range from contentment and satisfaction to euphoria and bliss, the challenge of finding a definition is evident.

In the process of preparing this lesson, I talked with a dozen friends, most of them Christians, about their perception of happiness. All of them talked about overlaps of happiness with other concepts, including joy, contentment, optimism, thankfulness, achievement, progress, satisfaction, sense of well-being, and treasure. Several of them noted that the Bible talks more about joy than happiness, and in fact Jesus was clear that joy is one of the gifts he came to bring: "I have said these

things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11).

Several people I interviewed mentioned the apostle Paul's statement about contentment: "I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" (Phil. 4:12). Paul might have agreed with

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some of the new research on happiness indicating that if we choose to focus on what we have rather than what we don't have, we will be more likely to be content. Research indicates that thankful people score higher on happiness scales. The apostle Paul clearly practiced thankfulness, and the Bible emphasizes the importance of a grateful heart in following God and experiencing God's *shalom*.

Happiness in the Bible

My interviewees were right that joy is mentioned more often in the Bible than happiness. In the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), "joy," "enjoy," and "overjoyed" appear 170 times in the Old Testament and 68 times in the New Testament, while "happy" and "happiness" appear 58 times in the Old Testament and only once in the New Testament.

Doing a similar word count in other translations will result in different totals for "happy" and "happiness," because both Greek and Hebrew have words that are translated "blessed" in some instances and "happy" in others. For example, Psalm 33:12 in the New International Version (NIV) reads: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD." Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, also uses "blessed." The NRSV translators made a different choice: "Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD."

The Psalms make many statements about the characteristics of people who are happy or blessed. The characteristics mentioned include:

- They delight in God's law, walk in God's law, and keep God's decrees (Pss. 1:2; 119:1, 2).

- They take refuge in God (Pss. 2:11–12, 34:8).
- Their transgressions are forgiven (Ps. 32:1).
- In their spirits there is no deceit (Ps. 32:2).
- They trust the Lord (Pss. 40:4, 84:12).
- They consider the poor (Ps. 41:1–2).
- They live in God’s house and sing God’s praise (Ps. 84:4).
- Their strength is in God (Ps. 84:5).
- They are disciplined by God, and God teaches them God’s law (Ps. 94:12).
- They observe justice and do righteousness (Ps. 106:3).
- They fear the Lord and delight in God’s commandments (Ps. 112:1).
- They seek God with their whole heart (Ps. 119:2).
- They fear the Lord and walk in God’s ways (Ps. 128:1).
- Their help and hope is in God (Ps. 146:5).

The question of blessedness versus happiness arises again in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–11. This time most of the commonly used translations, such as NIV and NRSV, use “blessed”: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3, NRSV). *The Message* makes a small shift in wording: “You’re blessed when . . .” A few translations, such as the Good News Translation, make a different decision: “Happy are those . . .”

When I talked to people about their perception of happiness versus blessedness related to the Beatitudes and in the statements in the Psalms, all of them said that being happy and being blessed have significantly different meanings to them. Happiness implies that we can independently arrive at that state, while being blessed implies that something has come to us from beyond ourselves as a gift. And when a gift comes from somewhere or someone else, it implies a relationship with a giver. When receiving a gift, dependence and trust come into the picture, which may not be the case when experiencing happiness. Everyone felt that using the word “happy” in these Scriptures takes away something significant about relationship and the receipt of a gift.

Several interviewees also talked about the significance of joy in the New Testament. Jesus, the apostle Paul, and the other writers of the Epistles talk about joy frequently. Galatians 5:22 indicates that joy is a fruit of the Spirit. For Paul, joy often seems to have a relational

aspect to it. In several places, Paul mentions his great joy when he sees people following Christ (Phil. 2:2; 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19, 20; Philm. 1:7). That relational, faith-connected aspect of joy motivated one of my interviewees to say, “Happiness is shallow. Joy is deep and spiritual and is not based on circumstances.” Interestingly, some of the research indicates connections between happiness and relationships, as well as happiness as a result of being part of something with a bigger purpose.

Research Findings

Given the vast array of research on happiness, this handout can mention only a few of the interesting findings. One thought-provoking idea comes from Sonya Lyubomirsky’s book, *The How of Happiness*. She examines twin studies to conclude that roughly 50 percent of an individual’s happiness level is genetically determined. She argues that an additional 10 percent of happiness is affected by life circumstances and situation, and 40 percent is under our own control and can be influenced by the choices we make.⁵

Psychologist Martin Seligman is one of the most widely read authors who has brought the research findings of positive psychology to a popular audience. He uses the acronym PERMA to summarize correlational research findings indicating that people are happiest when they experience:

- pleasure (good food, warm baths, etc.);
- engagement (getting absorbed in an enjoyable yet challenging activity);
- relationships (he notes that social ties are a very reliable indicator of happiness);
- meaning (belonging to something bigger than ourselves); and
- accomplishments (having goals and realizing them).⁶

The items in Seligman’s PERMA acronym illustrate that some of the happiness research is moving in the direction of the question raised at the beginning of this handout. Does happiness come from immediate choices or from giving ourselves to the pursuit of an ethical and loving life? The answer must be, “Yes, both.” The last four items in Seligman’s list all require some degree of commitment to something beyond ourselves, but we

make choices constantly about pursuing those goals at the same time that we make choices about enjoying or ignoring the pleasures of our daily lives.

The ancient Greeks differentiated between two kinds of happiness: pleasure-seeking happiness (hedonism) and pursuing the things that make life worth living (eudaemonia). Only one item on Seligman's list relates to hedonic pleasure, and all the rest have connections to things that make life worth living. Psychologists have coined the term *hedonic treadmill* to describe the reality that the efficacy of a new sensory pleasure wears off over time. If you haven't eaten any chocolate for a while, one square of chocolate tastes great. But if you have one square every day, pretty soon one square isn't enough, and you want to eat two or three of them. That is the hedonic treadmill. Seligman's acronym indicates that hedonic pleasure contributes to happiness, but it is not sufficient alone.

In a consumer culture, Seligman's list and the list of characteristics of happy people from the Psalms are worthy of pondering. The newest consumer item can give some degree of pleasure, yes. But consuming anything can put us on that hedonic treadmill. Meaningful activities and relationships, balanced with some degree of hedonic pleasure, are necessary for happiness. How-

feel happy are more likely to do kind things for others, and people who do kind things for others feel happier.⁷ We can even smile more to promote happiness. Many of these choices are highly congruent with biblical priorities for living.

Thinking Theologically about Happiness

Theologian Ellen Charry calls happiness "godly self-enjoyment." In her book *God and the Art of Happiness*, she writes, "Happiness is enjoying God, creation, and self by cultivating the wisdom behind divine commands that enable one to become an instrument of the world's flourishing."⁸ She believes happiness is not about good emotions or having needs met but about loving God and obeying God, which Jesus teaches are one and the same (John 14:15).

Charry describes the work of thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, who drew on earlier philosophers and theologians to develop a theology of happiness. Aquinas's perspective is grounded in three truths: (1) God is good. (2) The creation, made by God, is an expression of God's goodness. (3) All parts of creation contribute to the other parts, and when humans become the best creatures we can become, we are liv-

ing into God's purposes for us and for creation. Happiness, then, relates to fulfilling our purpose. According to Aquinas, enjoying physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being can prepare us for enjoying God in the next life. Aquinas sees happiness as a gift

of divine grace, similar to the concept of being blessed that was discussed above.

Charry builds on Aquinas, and her perspective on happiness is deeply rooted in the biblical concept of being blessed. Happiness is a gift that we receive from God when we enjoy the world God made and engage in God's priorities for the world. She emphasizes that hard times come to everyone, but we can experience some degree of happiness in them because we know we are part of the divine plan.

Charry's theological view of happiness has direct parallels with Seligman's PERMA list. Taking pleasure in creation, engaging in meaningful service, nurturing relationships, and working toward goals—all these

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ever, pursuing happiness solely through hedonic pleasure simply doesn't work. Ancient philosophers, the Bible, and happiness researchers seem to be in agreement about that truth. Hedonic pleasure contributes to happiness to some extent, and for many people, figuring out how big a part hedonic pleasure plays in happiness is a day-to-day challenge.

The positive psychology research indicates that while happiness is a shifting target and only partly within our control, we can make numerous choices that contribute to happiness. We can increase gratitude, savor the moment, engage in challenging tasks, set goals, and strive to meet goals in creative ways. We can build and nurture relationships. We can serve others. People who

things play a role in Charry's sense of being blessed or happy. However, in her view the framework for the service, relationships, meanings, and accomplishments is honoring and submitting to God. Enjoying sensory pleasure is a gift given by the creator of heaven and earth. Happiness or being blessed is rooted in God and comes as a gift from God, part of a life of love, obedience, and service.

In an online article on happiness research, one reader commented, "Happiness isn't as complicated as we make it. Most of us just seek it in all the wrong places."⁹ Some of the challenges of happiness include deciding how to define it and figuring out the components that contribute to it. Both the Bible and the research indicate that thankfulness, supportive relationships, caring for others, and engaging in something bigger than ourselves make a strong contribution to happiness.

Endnotes

1. Timothy Renick, "Pursuing Happiness," *The Christian Century*, January 5, 2011, 22–26.
2. Ibid.
3. This Emotional Life, "Happiness: What Is Happiness?" <http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/happiness/what-happiness>.

4. "Happiness," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happiness>.
5. Sonya Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness* (New York: Penguin, 2008).
6. Martin E. P. Seligman, "Can Happiness Be Taught?" *Daedalus* no. 2, (Spring 2004): 80–87.
7. Alex Dixon, "Kindness Makes You Happy . . . And Happiness Makes You Kind," September 6, 2011, http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/kindness_makes_you_happy_and_happiness_makes_you_kind.
8. Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010).
9. Kim Gaines Eckert, "The Psychology of Happiness," *Christianity Today*, September 10, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/september/psychology-of-happiness.html>.

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