

THE HAPPINESS INSTITÜTE

As the founder and Chief Happiness Officer of The Happiness Institute, Dr. Happy is frequently asked about happiness. As such, we thought you might like to see some of the more common questions along with his responses.

Q: What is The Happiness Institute and what's your role there?

A: The Happiness Institute was Australia's first, and remains its only, organisation focused solely on promoting happiness in individuals, couples, families and organisations.

After working for more than a decade as a clinical psychologist I established The Happiness Institute in an attempt to promote the principles of positive psychology. Rather than helping people go from minus 10 (i.e. distress) to zero (i.e. normal), I wanted to spend more time helping people go from zero to positive 10 (real and meaningful happiness).

At The Happiness Institute we promote happiness through our coaching, courses and consulting activities by teaching the proven and effective strategies that have evolved from the exciting new field of positive psychology. This includes (among other things) teaching optimistic thinking skills, helping individuals and groups identify and utilise their core strengths, and encouraging as many as possible to build positive relationships.

My role is as founder and CHO (Chief Happiness Officer). My responsibilities primarily revolve around developing and delivering happiness programs, training others to deliver our programs and increasingly, consulting with organisations to enhance happiness and positivity within their teams and businesses. I also spend much of my time educating the public about happiness and positive psychology coaching, as well as writing and speaking.

Q: What exactly is "happiness"?

A: Happiness, for us here at The Happiness Institute, is a term that covers a range of positive emotions. Ultimately it means different things to different people; it's an entirely subjective experience. For some, the experience of happiness is one of predominately "high arousal" feelings such as joy and excitement; for others, it involves more "low arousal", but equally important, emotions such as calm, contentment, peace and tranquillity.

Ideally, we should all try to experience and enjoy all these different forms of positive emotions but the reality is that some people will tend more to the high arousal end of the spectrum (e.g. extroverts) while others (e.g. introverts) might be more likely to seek out low arousal forms of happiness.

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It should also be noted, here, that at The Happiness Institute we don't believe anyone will be 100% happy 100% of the time. True happiness involves recognising that as humans it's perfectly normal to experience the full range of emotions including so called "negative" ones such as anger, sadness, anxiety and stress. The key, however, is responding to and managing these emotions so that they don't unduly or excessively impact on functioning and that they don't persist for too long. Where possible, it's also important to try to learn from unpleasant and difficult circumstances as doing so can actually enhance happiness in the long term.

Q: What do people think will make them happy, as compared to what actually makes them happy?

A: One of the biggest mistakes many people make is to think they'll find happiness in "external" things such as money and/or material possessions. Although these things aren't "bad" we know from the research, and from our considerable experience in this area, that the positive feelings we get from "stuff" is only short lived, it's only temporary and relatively superficial.

In contrast, what really contributes to real and meaningful happiness are variables such as good quality relationships, optimistic thinking, compassion for others, the ability to identify and utilise strengths and the practice of strategies such as appreciation and gratitude.

In fact, at The Happiness Institute we believe happiness is something you choose (see "The Happiness Institute's CHOOSE philosophy – 6 powerful positive psychology strategies").

Q: How dependent is happiness on favourable events in one's life? How dependent is happiness on a predisposition to be happy?

A: Partly and partly! Anyone experiencing significant negative (or traumatic) events will find it harder to be happy. At the same time, happiness depends less on what happens to us and more on how we think about (or interpret) what happens to and goes on around us.

There's no doubt that happy people think about the world in a fundamentally different way – a more optimistic way. Optimistic thinking is certainly positive thinking but it's also realistic thinking. So even when bad things happen to happy people they think about events in a constructive and helpful way, looking for solutions rather than just focusing on problems.

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As for a happiness predisposition – there's no doubt that as “biological animals” our happiness is partly dependent on our genes. But the contribution of predisposing factors to happiness is only about 30-50% which means there's at least 50-70% of our happiness that's within our control!

As noted above, at The Happiness Institute we believe happiness is something you “choose” and it's the choices we make, every minute of every day that largely determine our happiness.

Q: What effect does the self-comparison between oneself and another have on happiness levels?

A: Comparing ourselves to others, as a general rule, is not very helpful – especially if we compare ourselves to others who're “better off” than we are on whatever we're comparing. For instance, those people who compare themselves to others who're wealthier tend to feel dissatisfied with what they have (i.e. unhappy). At the same time, however, those who compare themselves to others who're lower on the socio-economic ladder tend to feel better.

Ultimately, however, I suggest we don't compare ourselves at all as we all have different needs and there are different things that will make us happy so what works for someone else might not work for us!

Q: Does money make us happier?

A: The simple answer is that money does not lead to happiness, except where or when someone is living under extreme hardships such as living below the poverty line. If someone is struggling to eat, or if they don't have a permanent place to sleep or live, then there's no doubt that some money (and/or financial stability) will increase their happiness.

But above this point, increasing amounts of money have relatively little impact on happiness. This is not to say that money leads to unhappiness but that more happiness is more likely to come from other endeavours such as building positive relationships and finding purpose and meaning in life.

Q: Economically, we're much better off than we once were. Do you think this has made us happier?

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A: No! Across almost all of the “Western World” (and even in much of the “Developing World”) most countries have become more affluent over recent decades but NOT necessarily any happier. The reason for this is explained in my previous response.

One could easily then ask “Why are we not any happier?”

And my response would be along the lines of ... people are looking in the wrong places! Too many people look for happiness in shopping malls whereas true happiness will more likely come to those who spend more time engaged in other, more meaningful endeavours; such as spending time with significant others (i.e. their family and friends).

The same is true in the workplace, most employers focus excessively on the wrong things (such as pay and other “employment conditions”) whereas the research suggests that as long as basic conditions are “fair and reasonable”, focusing on other variables (such as enhancing positivity, teaching optimistic thinking, developing effective team work, helping people set clear goals and finding meaning in jobs) will lead to more happiness at work (and then, more productivity and ultimately, more profitability).

Q: And finally, what can we do to improve happiness levels?

A: One of the first things I'd do is to introduce “happiness lessons” into schools. My dream is that one day life skills such as optimistic thinking and effective interpersonal skills will be considered to be just as important as, if not more important than maths, science and history.

I'd also encourage people to consider that seeking help to experience more happiness is not a selfish endeavour (in fact it will not just help you but also, all those with whom you interact) and it's not in any way a sign of weakness (but rather, no different to seeing a personal trainer to improve your health and fitness).

Along similar lines I'd encourage people to consider that seeking happiness is in all of our interests as happy people are more generous, more altruistic and they do more good things for others. If we all, at home and at work, do more to create happy and positive environments then we'll all, ultimately benefit. Happiness should, in any context, be considered a front line priority!

For more information about The Happiness Institute's coaching, courses or corporate consulting activities please feel free to email or call.

After all...life's too short not to be happy!

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