

Towards a concept of happiness and well-being

If we ask people what they want in their lives, they often reply that they want happiness. I find the word happiness in some ways quite confusing, as it seems to mean different things to different people; it is also embedded in the American (USA) Constitution.

It is often assumed that happiness results from external events: thus if someone is very successful, or wins the lottery, this would make them happy. However, research suggests otherwise. Increased material wealth – at least beyond a certain point – does not lead to increased happiness (Csikszentmihalyi 1992). Happiness seems to be more to do with what is going on within us, whatever the external situation: those that thrive and flourish will experience negative feelings from time to time: yet overall they have a high ratio of positive feelings to negative feelings.

“Humans are disturbed not by things,
but by the view which they take of them”.

Epictetus
First Century Greek Philosopher

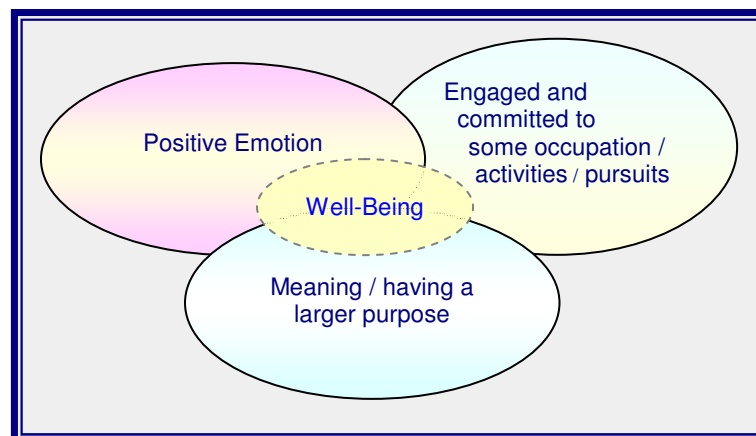
In terms of human psychology and general well-being, the construct (i.e. happiness) can be helpful. As a start, I have found the outline of happiness below helpful: it is quoted by Davidson (Davidson 2005), but originally comes from the work of Dr Martin Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania¹.

Seligman suggests that we can regard happiness as embracing three components:

- i. Pleasure / positive emotion;
- ii. Engaged, goal directed pursuits / occupations (i.e. we are involved in, and committed to, various pursuits / activities).
- iii. Meaning; and / or having a connection to some larger purpose. (This might be, for example, the ecology of our planet in the context of global warming.)

[paraphrased from Davidson 2005]

We can represent this trio schematically thus:



The essence of Well-Being

So this suggests that true happiness cannot be obtained by setting out on a self-centred ego-centric course. Rather, through positive emotions and feelings, we come to see ourselves as part of a greater whole, and ultimately we may see the oneness of all aspects of the cosmos.

Thus happiness is more of a by-product of our engagement with the world and society, in the context of an overall positive internal state, rather than the result of fortunate external circumstances. The

¹ Seligman also played a central part in the development of Positive Psychology.

concept of Well-Being may actually be more helpful than “happiness”.

Angela Clow, Professor of psychophysiology at Westminster University, suggests that the concept of Well-Being may a better word than happiness for British (as compared with North American) citizens (Professor Angela Clow in a talk on "Stress, Health and Happiness" at the Edinburgh International Science Festival on 09.04.2006). Happiness as used in this document thus overlaps with Well-Being, and is a much profounder concept than pleasure.

Victor Frankl², in his book “Man’s search for meaning”, makes a striking comment. He suggests that the question: “What do I expect from life?” may be less helpful, in the long run, than another question: “What does life – what does my family, society, and the cosmos – expect from me?” This second question may help us to see the inter-connectedness of all things, and broaden our perspective.

One of the central tenets of Positive Psychology is that negative emotions and feelings tend to limit us and lead to reductive type behaviour patterns: while positive emotions and feelings – such as joy, love, gratitude, interest, and serenity / equanimity – lead to a broadening and expanding perspective. I think Fredrickson (2009) would see happiness in term of the individual’s flourishing and overall well-being – which comes about when the ratio of positive to negative feelings over a period of time exceeds three to one³ (see Fredrickson 1999).

References and sources include

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly: 1992. Flow: The Psychology of Happiness. Rider.	ISBN 0-7126-5477-1
Davidson; Richard J. 2005. Emotion Regulation, Happiness, and the Neuroplasticity of the Brain.	Advances in Mind-Body Medicine; 21; 3/4; pp 25 - 28
Epictetus (circa + 55 –135 PE) was a Greek Stoic philosopher.	(Quote slightly modified by replacing men with humans – IR)
Frankl, Viktor E.: Man's Search for Meaning; 1946; 1984; Pocket Books; Simon & Schuster.	ISBN 0-671-02337-3
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Fredrickson, B. L. & Losada, M. (2005). Positive affect and the complex dynamics of human Flourishing.	<i>American Psychologist</i> , 60 (7) 678-686.
Fredrickson, Barbara: 2009. POSITIVITY. ISBN 978-0-307-39373-9	

Linked themes in this Autogenic Dynamics section

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² Victor Frankl survived several years in a concentration camp in the 1940s, and then went on to develop what became known as Logotherapy in continental Europe. He also used to say this to European and American students:

“Don’t aim at success – the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself”; or as the by-product of one’s trust, respect and commitment to a person other than oneself.

Frankl 1946 / 1984 p 17
(Last part of last sentence slightly changed from original)

³ This is not a guessed at ratio: it is based on mathematical modelling and is the result of research by Fredrickson & Marcial Losada (2005).