

Three Keys to A Happier Life

If you would like to be happier, I'll tell you in this article about three often overlooked ways to increase your happiness significantly and sustainably.

These three key components of happiness come from Positive Psychology, the field of psychology begun by Professor Martin Seligman in the late 1990s. In essence, they describe a more complex and sophisticated view of 'happiness' which makes it rather easier to obtain.

The problem with traditional notions of happiness is that they are based in the idea of feeling good all the time. Ask most people what would happen if they increased their happiness, and the reply will typically describe an increase in joy, cheerfulness and enthusiasm. That's okay as far as it goes, but as we'll see, circumstances do not always lend themselves well to feelings of this sort.

Instead, the positive psychological definition of happiness has expanded to include elements of contentment and wellbeing. Seligman describes happiness as being based on three lives – the pleasurable life, the engaged life and the meaningful life. The better each of these lives is lived, the happier the person will be.

The pleasurable life is simple and is the life that perhaps corresponds mostly closely to traditional ideas of happiness. Certain experiences like good food, fine weather and physical affection are pleasurable. When we experience them, we often do respond with greater joy and cheerfulness. However, there are distinct limits to how happy the pleasurable life can make us. First of all, most pleasurable experiences eventually produce diminishing returns. The first piece of chocolate cake is very enjoyable, the second perhaps a little less so and the fifth may make us feel positively sick. Second, many things that are pleasurable in the short term will cause very unpleasant consequences, often to health, if indulged to excess.

And herein lies the key. Many people are limited in their happiness because they primarily look to the pleasant life to provide it. The other two lives – the engaged and the meaningful – are much subtler, sophisticated and less commonly talked about. Yet their potential to provide happiness is almost unlimited.

The engaged life revolves around those experiences that fully absorb your attention. If you've ever read a fascinating book, got involved in a deep conversation or become immersed in an addictive

game, you've had that experience where time seems to pass without you noticing it and your attention is completely taken up by the task in hand. This experience, termed 'flow' by positive psychologists, is very enjoyable.

Flow typically arises when a person is engaged in a challenging activity requiring a high level of skill. For example, if you are a cook, a carpenter or a writer and you undertake to create something you're not quite sure you can do, your high skills are matched to a significant challenge and the result is a wonderful experience of flow. Equally, really listening to music or reading a book can provide the same experience.

Flow is very powerful and there are few limits to how much we can experience. The key is to find those skills and abilities you are passionate about using and developing, and seek out appropriate challenges for them.

The meaningful life is the final and perhaps most abstract component of the three. Often times, many of us have our hands full simply doing what is required to get by. Yet every so often, those rare times may arise when we feel able and ready to do something for someone else, or to contribute to a cause or organisation that is bigger than us. Such experiences can be deeply meaningful – the act of helping an old person with their shopping or reading to a child may not be particularly pleasurable or engaging, but they are likely to be meaningful. We may feel better about ourselves for having done it, with a sense that our life means more than just an endless struggle for survival.

The easiest way to develop a more meaningful life is simply to spend time thinking for yourself about what matters to you. What causes, ideas or organisations attract you? How would you like to be remembered by friends and associates? What activities give you a sense of purpose and meaning?

By now, you should have a rather more detailed understanding of the components of happiness. Going beyond the pleasurable life gives you many more options for being happier. The amount of engagement and meaning in your life is really limited only by your creativity and your willingness to think differently. Take the opportunities these ideas offer and see how much happier you can make yourself today.

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