

## Re-Searching Happiness

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### Abstract

Unravelling the mysteries of happiness is of interest to men and women since time immemorial. Philosophers and researchers across fields and across generations have devoted considerable time and effort to develop a deeper understanding about happiness and its connection with giving meaningfulness to human life. From expounding about an abstract concept such as happiness, the focus has now moved to providing achievable means of attaining happiness and understanding its impact on day to day lives of individuals. The idea of what brings true and lasting happiness is being adapted and implemented from various religious, philosophical and psychological disciplines to study its impact on alleviating human suffering. National and international level policies have been framed to combat the different challenges impacting the peace and well-being of individuals. One of the most interesting developments in this respect has been in the field of education. A shift has been observed in the educational policies of many countries which have realised that the purpose of education is not mere attainment of academic excellence, but of nurturing both cognitive and non-cognitive skills in children. This is a marker for a holistic approach to developing individuals who are content and at peace with themselves and the society.

**Keywords:** *Happiness, well-being, mindfulness, education, joy, holistic development*

*I have spent my days stringing and unstringing my instrument while the song I have come to sing remains unsung.*

*Rabindranath Tagore*

Happiness is construed as an essential outcome desired of all human endeavours. Like many other noble men such as Aristotle, Dalai Lama and others, Dambrun (2017) points out happiness as the ultimate end desired for its own sake, whereas all other desires are done for the sake of something else.

Over the centuries, there have been remarkable innovations and developments across fields and people are ever more desirous of having the best of everything in their lives. They are toiling hard to attain material possessions which they assume shall guarantee everlasting happiness. As a fruit of their efforts many people do experience

feelings of pleasure, however these emotions seldom last long. Happiness means much more than transient feelings of pleasure. It is a deeper state of mind, a state of equilibrium experienced when the individual is in harmony with oneself (Ventegodt, S.Merrick, J.Anderson; 2013). Happiness has been defined to include "the experiences of joy, contentment and positive well-being, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful and worthwhile" (Lyubomirsky, 2011).

There is a distinction between fluctuating occurrences of happiness experienced as a result of sense gratifications and experiences of

emotional stability and feelings of harmony (Dambrun, 2017). Aristotle argues that common man relates happiness with pleasure and hence is guided by the hedonic principle (W.D. Ross, 1999). Individuals by nature are more inclined towards increasing their pleasures and avoiding painful experiences, which leads to fluctuating experiences of happiness (Dambrun, 2017).

The environment we have nurtured over the centuries is rendering us more pain than pleasure. Owing to the limitlessness of human desires, the number and array of human and natural atrocities is on an increase. Amid such an environment, how do we claim our happiness?

Aristotle has elaborated that success or failure in life does not depend on the material fortunes of a person but it is the virtuous activities that a person engages in which constitute happiness. He asserted that such virtues can be learnt and with proper study and care it is possible to develop humans capable of noble deeds, which is a precursor to attaining happiness. (W.D. Ross, 1999)

Further, research indicates that practising mindfulness can help reduce negative emotions and can enhance experiences of happiness and well-being (Cebolla et. al. 2017). The training in mindfulness is based on practising values such as kindness, compassion, gratitude and awareness about inner strengths for fulfilment of life goals, ultimately, aimed at pursuit of happiness. (Cebolla et. al. 2017). Mindfulness along with spiritual intelligence is found to improve mental health in students and decrease psychological anxieties (Nemati et al, 2017). It is useful to enable people to have a clear view of internal and external realities (Brown et al cited in Nemati et al, 2017), as well as to enable them to organise their thoughts, feelings and actions in a more coherent manner (Nemati et al. 2017).

Thich Nhat Hanh (2012) offers a range of mindfulness activities for children which he proclaims can be instrumental in attaining states of mental evenness. Activities of mindfulness

can help children to be fully alert and be joyful of everyday life experiences. He promotes the idea that through practising such activities, children are benefited in their academic pursuits as this increases their focus and concentration. He further claims that the practice can be helpful in developing students' socio-emotional skills, nurturing personalities at peace with themselves and the society and cultivates capabilities of dealing with conflicting life situations with equipoise.

Yung-Jong Shiah's (2016) Non-self theory further propagates the principle of self-cultivation by practising the teachings offered by Buddhism to attain enduring happiness. He provides a framework highlighting the need to practise non-self-plus-compassion related activities such as altruism, meditation, mindfulness and death mediation as a means to strengthen the self. Pro-social behaviours influenced by benevolence affects is beneficial in harnessing a sense of well-being and experiences of positive emotions while helping in dealing effectively with the challenges of stressful life situations (Dambrun,2017).

Positive psychology also seems to offer some plausible interventions to increase the level of happiness and decrease the negative aspects of psychological functioning. Multiple studies in the field of positive psychology seem to indicate that by guiding students to practise acts of gratitude and identification and appreciation of own strengths can lead to feelings of positivity and an increase in pleasant emotions (McCabe et al., 2011).

Further, Park (2003) suggested that interventions to increase happiness should be initiated early in childhood as the ongoing development offers much flexibility to build a strong foundation based on the virtues of happiness (McCabe et al., 2011). Children go through enormous difficulties such as mental health issues, risky behaviours as well as lack of socio-emotional support (Weisberg, Kumpfer & Seligman, 2003), alcohol

and drug abuse, among other difficulties which impact their holistic development and well-being. It is, therefore, imperative that preventive measures be taken to ensure that students develop resilience and the aptitude to deal with life challenges.

However, as Lyubomirsky and Layos' (2013) positive-activity model suggests, it is not merely practising the activities but the conditions under which they are practised that also affect the experiences of happiness. The model elaborates on three factors that impact the well-being of the individuals. The first one highlights the **activity features** such as dosage, variety, social support as well as whether the activities are present/past or future oriented; others vs. self-oriented or whether the activities are social vs. reflective in nature. Secondly, the **person features** as the motivation and effort, efficacy beliefs, baseline affective state, personality, social support and demographics, and, thirdly, the **person-activity fit** which presumes that certain activities influence certain individuals more than others (Lyubomirsky and Layos, 2013). All of these contribute to and influence the well-being of an individual.

Anand and Roope's (2016) capability framework further estimated parenting to have a significant impact on happiness of two to three year olds. The amount of time parents spend with their child and the cognate activities they engage in impacts the development of cognitive as well as non-cognitive skills of children. Reading and telling stories, shopping, indulging in art and craft activities have all turned out to be statistically significant indicators of child happiness. In addition, engagement with siblings, wherein they get an opportunity to imitate and indulge in playful activities, also helps in the development of social skills in children (Anand and Roope, 2016).

An array of indices have been developed and used in the recent past to measure the happiness levels of nationals of different countries. While

there is a lot to learn from those at the upper end of the ladder, there is a dire need to address the well-being issues of those at the lower end. The need is to rethink and redirect efforts to value human life and work for the welfare of human beings.

Research around the world has been influential in motivating policy makers to reap the benefits of nurturing happy individuals for building happier societies. Measures have been taken to understand the contextual causal factors of unhappiness and strategies have been adopted to develop the necessary skills and competencies, which will lead people to experience more fulfilling lives.

UNESCO's mandates and frameworks such as Incheon Declaration (2015) and the Commission on Global Citizenship Education (2012), among others have all prioritised happiness as the primary purpose of human existence and highlighted the role of education to cultivate, in individuals, the competencies and skills that are essential for promoting healthier and happier societies (UNESCO, Bangkok).

One such initiative, in this regard, is UNESCO's Happy Schools Framework, which identifies 22 criteria under the categories of people, process and place which can be effectively implemented to bring about positive changes in the school system and the society at large. The ideas and strategies, shared under the framework, are based on responses from various stakeholders across the school system and cater to the ground level challenges faced at the school level.

In the happy school criteria, the topmost priority is given to the establishment of friendships and relationships based on the virtues of trust, respect and tolerance. Further, a safe, accessible and amiable learning environment with amenities is considered essential to nurture strengths and competencies and a freedom to explore and engage in creative pursuits. Engaging in meaningful activities to develop social skills and build a spirit of collaboration is

regarded as meaningful for realising optimum development of the learners across all domains.

Based on the vision to build an educated and enlightened society, Bhutan's National Policy on Education highlights happiness as one of the essential goals of education. The policy promotes realisation of the happiness principle by nurturing a collaborative school and community network through its nine domains of happiness.

Bhutan is one of the first few countries which has been proactive in its inclination to nurturing happy individuals as a benchmark for the national development since early 1970s, ruling out measurement of the nation's progress through Gross Domestic Product in favour of Gross Happiness Product. GNH delineates multiple dimensions of an integrated nature, which are collectively responsible for attainment of balance and harmony in human life (Schroeder & Schroeder, 2014). Bhutan's education policy aligns itself with the values enshrined in GNH policy, which aim to promote interdependence and development of strengths and values that prepare for 'nationally rooted and globally competent' individuals (NEP 2018). The education policy gives precedence to monastic order of the Buddhist traditional form of education to foster spiritual development of individuals, by practising techniques of meditation and mindfulness. The aim is to build a positive school culture extending out to the outside community for nation building (UNESCO, 2016).

Japan's Education Policy promulgating the principle of "zest for living" aims not only for academic excellence but also the attainment of mental and physical well-being as much as development of a well-rounded character. Preservation of local culture and traditions and the establishment of a collaborative culture, while nourishing individual strengths to prepare people for global citizenship, are the core

objectives laid down in the policy (UNESCO, 2016).

Countries such as Republic of Korea, Singapore and Vanuatu have also progressed in their efforts to build happier societies through changes in their education system, adapting to a more holistic outlook of the purpose of education than mere academic skill development.

Based on the ideology of Education for life are also a set of schools in parts of America by Swami Kriyananda's Ananda Sangha community. The schools, other than developing academic skills, cater to other aspects that are essential for leading fulfilling lives. Nurturing the virtues of kindness, good will, spirit of cooperation, it seeks to instill a state of inner equilibrium which is essential for developing mature individuals who are adept at dealing with negativity both within and externally (Kriyananda, 2006).

Similar practices are also in existence in different parts of India, however, a great leap has been taken by Delhi government schools with the introduction of the Happiness Curriculum. The programme is still in its inception stage, but promises increased student alertness, improved relationships and abilities for critical and creative thinking.

The curriculum includes a range of activities designed to instill values and morals in children, which are essential for developing societies devoid of the evils of violence, hatred, jealousy and greed, and in creating mature and honest individuals who shall contribute in meaningful ways towards the development of self and the society (SCERT & DOE, 2018).

The curriculum draws heavily on practising mindfulness to attain inner peace and experience sustainable happiness. By actively engaging students, it aims to build students' capabilities in mindfulness, critical thinking, perspective taking and self-reflection skills through activities, stories, discussion and reflection-based enquiry. It seeks to do so by creating an environment

where students feel safe, valued and are at liberty to express themselves (SCERT, 2018).

Considering that India ranked 133<sup>rd</sup> in the World Happiness Report, 2018, such an initiative is appreciable and a much desired one. Reforms in the education policies are needed to elevate the

life conditions of human beings and to create more peaceful and happy societies. For all these years the world has focused on building skyscrapers and making great technological advancements, but there is a need to take appropriate steps to reach the pinnacle of human experiences of joy, peace and inner wisdom.

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