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Psychologists now know what makes people happy

By Marilyn Elias, USA TODAY

The happiest people surround themselves with family and friends, don't care about keeping up with the Joneses next door, lose themselves in daily activities and, most important, forgive easily.



A new psychology movement says the happiest people surround themselves with family and friends.

By Chris Clevenger, via AP

The once-fuzzy picture of what makes people happy is coming into focus as psychologists no longer shun the study of happiness. In the mid-'90s, scientific journals published about 100 studies on sadness for every one study on happiness.

Now a burgeoning "positive psychology" movement that emphasizes people's strengths and talents instead of their weaknesses is rapidly closing the gap, says University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman, author of the new book, *Authentic Happiness*. The work of Seligman and other experts in the field is in the early stages, but they are already starting to see why some people are happy while others are not:

The happiest people spend the least time alone. They pursue personal growth and intimacy; they judge themselves by their own yardsticks, never against what others do or have.

"Materialism is toxic for happiness," says University of Illinois psychologist Ed Diener. Even rich materialists aren't as happy as those who care less about getting and spending.

Because the December holidays are friend- and family-oriented, they painfully reveal the intimacy missing in some lives, Diener says. Add in the commercial emphasis — keeping up with the Joneses and the Christmas enjoyed by the Joneses' kids — "and it's a setup for disappointment," he says.

And yet some people manage to look on the bright side, even if they lose their jobs in December. Others live in darkness all year for no apparent reason. A person's cheer level is about half genetic, scientists say.

Everyone has a "set point" for happiness, just as they do for weight, Seligman says. People can improve or hinder their well-being, but they aren't likely to take long leaps in either direction from their set point.

Even physical health, assumed by many to be key to happiness, only has an impact if people are very ill. Objective health measures don't relate to life satisfaction, but subjective feelings do. Plenty of healthy people take their health for granted and are none the happier for it, Diener points out. Meanwhile, the sickly often bear up well, and hypochondriacs cling to misery despite their robust health.

Good feelings aren't "all in the head," though. Actions matter, just not in the way often believed.

Life satisfaction occurs most often when people are engaged in absorbing activities that cause them to forget themselves, lose track of time and stop worrying. "Flow" is the term Claremont Graduate University psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced cheeks-sent-mee-hi) coined to describe this phenomenon.

People in flow may be sewing up a storm, doing brain surgery, playing a musical instrument or working a hard puzzle with their child. The impact is the same: A life of many activities in flow is likely to be a life of great satisfaction, Csikszentmihalyi says. And you don't have to be a hotshot to get there.

"One of the happiest men I ever met was a 64-year-old Chicago welder with a fourth-grade education," he says. The man took immense pride in his work, refusing a promotion to foreman that would have kept him from what he loved to do. He spent evenings looking at the rock garden he built, with sprinklers and floodlights set up to create rainbows.

Teenagers experience flow, too, and are the happiest if they consider many activities "both work and play," Csikszentmihalyi says. Flow stretches someone but pleasurably so, not beyond his capacity. "People feel best when doing what they do best," he says.

Everyone has "signature strengths," Seligman adds, and the happiest use them. Doing so can lead to choices that astound others but yield lasting satisfaction.

Signature strengths

That's what happened to Greg and Tierney Fairchild. He was a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia, and she'd already earned a Ph.D., when they learned that the child she was carrying had Down syndrome, along with a serious heart defect requiring surgery.

In the Fairchilds' intellectual circle of friends, some viewed having a retarded child as unthinkable — and let them know it. Lots of people, including some family members, assumed they'd opt for abortion. After thoroughly exploring all the angles — medical, practical and emotional — they decided to keep their daughter, Naia.

"We're pro-choice, so it's not that we wouldn't get an abortion under some circumstances, or think that others could make a different choice here," Greg says.

They were leading with their strength. An interracial couple, they both had long histories of taking bold, less traveled paths rather than following the parade.

Greg was the first black on his high school track team at a Southern, mostly white school; he became student body president. Tierney was the only MBA student at her university also getting a Ph.D. in education because she wanted to train executives.

And they chose each other, despite all the stares of bigots they knew they'd face forever.

"We haven't shied away from tough choices," Greg says, "and we've been able to persevere through some difficulties other people might not have been able to."

Tierney says, "We thought having Naia would be a challenge, but we really wanted her, and just because something's a challenge, I'm not the type to turn away."

Their struggles are depicted in the new book, *Choosing Naia* by Mitchell Zuckoff.

That was a few years ago. Now Naia is a 4-year-old people magnet with a great sense of humor, the first Down syndrome child to be "mainstreamed" at the preschool for University of Virginia staff. (Greg teaches in the business school.) She walked late, talked late and is potty-training late—just as her parents expected. "And so what?" Tierney asks. "She's brought us a huge amount of joy because she's such a happy child."

Tierney, who is manager of executive education at United Technologies Corp., feared she'd have to quit work to care for Naia, but that wasn't necessary. Tierney and Greg gave Naia a baby brother, Cole, 22 months ago. "We're so grateful for these kids," Greg says.

Gratitude helps

Gratitude has a lot to do with life satisfaction, psychologists say. Talking and writing about what they're grateful for amplifies adults' happiness, new studies show. Other researchers have found that learning to savor even small pleasures has the same effect. And forgiveness is the trait most strongly linked to happiness, says University of Michigan psychologist Christopher Peterson.

"It's the queen of all virtues, and probably the hardest to come by," he adds.

'More fun, less stuff'

There's also evidence that altruistic acts boost happiness in the giver. That doesn't surprise Betsy Taylor, president of the Center for a New American Dream, a Takoma Park, Md., non-profit that favors simple living and opposes commercialism. "The altruism part is worth keeping in mind over the holidays," Taylor says. "Our mantra is 'more fun, less stuff.' Do for others, we say."

Karen Madsen, 51, of Everett, Wash., is a believer. For several years, she's organized local families to buy holiday gifts for needy foster children. Madsen sinks in about \$1,000 herself, often trimming her own kids' Christmas haul to do it. "You'd see these notes from foster kids, 'I don't really need anything, but my little sister needs a coat because she's cold.' "

Her son, William Shepherd, a high school senior, doesn't mind. "It's a lot of fun to go shopping for their toys," he says. "I have enough, and it feels good to make sure other people can enjoy the holidays, too."

Many parents would be amazed that a kid could be happy to get less, but surprise is the name of the game with happiness. People aren't very good at predicting what will make them happy, cutting-edge research shows.

Even Seligman, the happiness maven, tells how he wanted no more children — he already had two grown ones — and his current wife wanted four, "so we compromised at four," he says. His book reveals he's besotted with these kids and marvels at them daily. "I just didn't know," he says.

None of us knows, says Harvard University psychologist Daniel Gilbert. "There's a reason why Euripides said, 'It would not be better if men got what they wanted.' " People expect that events will have a larger and more enduring impact on them — for good or ill — than they really do, Gilbert's studies find.

People tend to rationalize bad things, quickly adapting to new realities. They also visualize future events in isolation, but real life teems with many experiences that dilute the impact of any one. This means winning the lottery doesn't make people's lives stellar, but they recover from romantic breakups much quicker than expected.

"If you knew exactly what the future held, you still wouldn't know how much you would like it when you got there," Gilbert says. In pursuing happiness, he suggests "we should have more trust in our

own resilience and less confidence in our predictions about how we'll feel. We should be a bit more humble and a bit more brave."

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