

Preface

Pleasure, happiness and wisdom are all different, but they are also interconnected in our lives. We seek all three, particularly happiness, but sadly, many of us only know how to find pleasure.

Perhaps the most common error made by us humans in the modern world is to mistake pleasure for happiness. So many people unremittingly pursue pleasure, believing that somehow it will bring them happiness, but despite the brazen, hedonistic pursuit of all things that bring instant gratification, the deep and satisfying glow of real enduring happiness somehow seems to elude them.

The growth of the assiduous pursuit of pleasure in the modern world is intimately connected to a population that is exposed to an unrelenting frenzy of media saturation marketing. It has spawned the 'I want it all; I want it now' generation which, in turn, has spawned an explosion of needy people, some of whom need to be kept at arm's length. There are now highly narcissistic people from all walks of life who can be fun and stimulating, but their neediness will far outweigh any gains in happiness for those who get too close to them.

Almost all of us are now exposed continuously to advertisements that convince us erroneously that we need to buy, to indulge or to consume the instant gratification they offer with their products and services. They push down the throats of an increasingly young audience a cocktail of junk advertisements through every form of media. They convince an unquestioning public that wasting their money on activities that offer instant gratification is the route to happiness—money that many don't even have!

The well-educated, intelligent and enterprising marketing experts do an outstanding job for their company bosses, whose often sole objective is the pursuit of profit for their shareholders, but it is at the considerable expense of creating a new generation that is less happy than the previous one. The current cohort of young and middle aged people is less happy than their predecessors, the populations of the 1950s and 60s, despite having three times their wealth.

If we can understand the difference between pleasure and happiness, recognize the people we need to keep at arm's length and distinguish and then embrace the behaviour that will lead us to wisdom, we may be able to turn the tide and become even happier than our predecessors were. Wisdom is the science of happiness.



Can happiness and wisdom be bought?

‘Happiness is like a butterfly; the more you chase it, the more it will elude you, but if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder.’ Thoreau

Some people believe that you can buy happiness; most people know that you can’t buy wisdom; but everyone knows that you can buy pleasure. It is now fairly common for unhappy people to lie to themselves and others by projecting an image of happiness and bliss in their world, but on some level, they know they are lying. They cheat by trying to create the illusion of happiness in their mind and the minds of others, but on some level, they know they have cheated.

It is normal for human beings to seek happiness. The problem is that most of us don’t go about it in the right way. The most common fault is to mistake pleasure for happiness. Many people today, in western society in particular, see their route to happiness through one of the following courses.

Fame > Money > Happiness

or simply

Spend Money > Happiness

If we substitute ‘pleasure’ for ‘happiness’ in the above two sequences, they will be much more accurate. Money will buy pleasure, but happiness is more difficult to attain. The major difference between pleasure and happiness is that pleasure is fleeting; it doesn’t last. Pleasure is the feeling of enjoyment or delight; it is a positive stimulus that you get when you do something to give yourself a temporary boost. Happiness, on the other hand, endures. It continues as an underlying mood or lasting feeling of contentment.

So, what can we do to be happy? There are many small changes to our lives, which, when implemented and combined, can lead to greater happiness. But making changes without really understanding what is going on doesn’t give us the full picture. It’s a start—a step in the right direction—but a thorough and honest self-examination and acting on the newly gained knowledge will make life much more worth living.

For most people, the aim of life isn’t great wealth, a big house, a huge amount of possessions, an expensive car or lots of exotic holidays abroad; it’s just to be happy. Then there are those who seek fame, often for fame’s sake, somehow believing that the achievement of celebrity status will bring happiness. They are wrong.

It appears that some people are created happier than others, with the ability to enjoy life programmed into them at birth. For others, reaching the goal of happiness isn't so simple; perhaps they weren't programmed to be happy.

There may be some truth in the belief that some people have happiness programmed into them at birth. You don't have any choices at birth: the house you are born into, your familial wealth, the conditions in which you live or your upbringing. But perhaps the two most important choices that you don't have are the genes you inherit and the love you receive, if any, including whether that love is conditional or unconditional. These choices have already been made for you by your mother and father.

A large part of your happiness comes down to your luck at birth. If you are fortunate, you will have inherited healthy genes from your parents and live in and be brought up in an environment where you are loved unconditionally. Unfortunately, probably the vast majority of people on this earth are not that lucky.

But there are things that can be done, even for those who feel programmed to be unhappy. Any programming can be changed. It's possible to rewrite a person's life program. This book is designed to help individuals rewrite their own life program—to re-program the way they think with the knowledge that happiness will follow.

Firstly, we will look at a number of simple ways of making small modifications to a person's actions that can lead to bigger changes, how someone might look at things, the things people do and an individual's relationship with the people who influence him. If someone feels that he is not in control, he may be unduly influenced by someone with narcissistic tendencies. It isn't necessary to change the balance of power—it may not be possible to do so—but there are subtle changes that can be made that can result in a disproportionate change in a person's ability to influence his relationship. Very small changes can have big effects.

Once we have taken the first few tentative steps to modify our behaviour with a view to increasing our level of happiness, we can then look at the way the great thinkers in history viewed happiness. The thoughts of the great philosophers on happiness that have influenced western society for over two thousand years should lead us to a deeper understanding of the major influences on happiness.