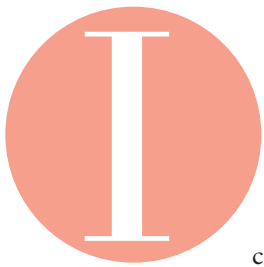


Happiness

What a Concept!

Now, How to Market It?



MICHAEL D. YAPKO, PHD

I was recently in Auckland, New Zealand, conducting clinical training on major depressive disorder (MDD), and, coincidentally, while I was there, the Dalai Lama came to share his reflections on what it means to be a higher order human. To receive the Dalai Lama was a much celebrated local event.

The evening news showed the Dalai Lama arriving at the airport, exiting his airplane, and walking through the airport. Surrounded by swarming reporters, photographers, video cameras, and those eager to see him in person, his trek through the airport seemed slow and cumbersome. But, the expression on the Dalai Lama's face was one of contentment, apparently happy to be exactly where he was, doing what he was doing. One young man, I'd guess around 25 or so, took this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to invade the Dalai Lama's space and, while basking in the involuntary attention of the Dalai Lama and his impromptu entourage, unashamedly asked, "Your Holiness, what is the *fastest* route to enlightenment?"

The Dalai Lama's expression changed from a good-natured enjoyment of the positive attention his presence had fostered, to a look that was, to me, indistinguishable from the look one would have if one were unexpectedly punched in the stomach. He looked *stricken* that someone would ask such a question. To his credit, but the apparent frustration of some, he did not attempt to provide a verbal answer. Instead, he let the momentum of his entourage gently push the man aside as he continued on his way through the airport.

Is Happiness Something You Should Strive to Achieve?

The episode with the Dalai Lama impressed me when I witnessed it, and I have since thought about it many times. It raised many questions, but none more pivotal than: *Is enlightenment a goal you can set out to accomplish?* No





one seriously doubts the merits of being enlightened, but there is good reason to wonder if it is possible to define and measure such an abstract phenomenon and then strive to make it available to people en masse through an “authentic enlightenment” program.

No one seriously doubts the merits of happiness, either. The physical, emotional and social benefits of happiness have already received substantial empirical support, and the emerging science of positive psychology is developing a strong momentum. Why wouldn't it? Its core ideas resonate powerfully with the goals of clinicians who strive to help individuals, marriages, families and communities thrive. Is happiness a worthy topic of consideration for serious researchers and clinicians? I think the answer is an emphatic *yes*. I count myself among those who advocate for a more positive psychology.

But, there is good reason to pause and reflect before jumping on the “Don't worry, be happy” bandwagon. When Martin Seligman, arguably the most influential psychologist of this era, launched positive psychology as a means to identify, articulate, and promote “the good life”(i.e., a “full” life that is worth living through its emphasis on individual well-being and personal meaning, as well as social contribution), happiness was (and is) indirectly defined as something *obtainable*. What are the effects of striving for happiness when people are told they “should” because they'll live longer and live better? Who *wouldn't* want that? So, people who never really gave it much thought, who never really contemplated whether they were (or needed to be) happy or not, will likely be cajoled or even pushed onto a new treadmill, one where striving for happiness becomes the goal. And the therapists who can convincingly promise people the greatest levels of happiness in the shortest amount of time will likely have the most lucrative practices.

JON FEINGERSH/CORBIS

Chasing Happiness as a Goal

Does it seem cynical to suggest that obtaining happiness will be reduced to a marketing strategy by some? It shouldn't, because it's already happening in a variety of parallel ways. As someone who has spent his professional lifetime studying the phenomenology of depression in depth, there is a great deal I have learned about some of the qualities of the millions of people who are far from happy. In broad terms of generalization, I've learned a lot about how they think, how they approach problems to be solved, how they relate to others, and how they approach abstractions like happiness. Do they know why they're taking all kinds of drugs with uncertain properties other than because of their blind and desperate wish to feel better? People want to feel good and will follow anyone or anything they believe can eventually help them *achieve* it. Will we as therapists define ourselves now as "purveyors of life satisfaction," standing alongside the religious leaders who similarly promise spiritual satisfaction?

Happiness in Cultural Context

What about happiness as a goal in our "Do it now!" culture? Do our mental health experts know how to teach gradual skills in evolving happiness to impatient people who are more inclined to take a fast-action pill? ("So, your Holiness, what is the *fastest* path to happiness? Um, if I do double-time, um, can I speed it up some? My friend did it in six months, but, um, I'm a lot smarter than he is...") The drug companies in particular make a fortune from people's hope for "the good life," and people routinely allow extreme physical and psychological treatments they hope will relieve their depression and offer a taste of, dare they say it, happiness. Hope is powerful in shaping compliance, and now we can sell the hope for an empirically supported happiness.

Social critic Eric Hoffer once said, "The search for happiness is one of the chief sources of unhappiness." He may have had a point. Antidepressant medications are selling well beyond what they



should, especially given what we know about their benefits being much more about marketing than science. Similarly, a recent comprehensive study of the popular sleep drug, Ambien, versus cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for improving sleep showed CBT performed better in almost every way (i.e., more and better sleep). Yet, people continue to prefer Ambien to CBT, and drug sales roll on merrily. If only CBT didn't require people to think...

When the Solution Becomes More of the Problem

If we are less philosophical about

happiness (e.g., What is happiness? Who deserves to be happy? What is the purpose of life?), and instead we consider it more pragmatically, I believe we can legitimately wonder if we are reinforcing the problem by trying to solve it. Often, the solutions people attempt end up becoming more of the problem (like the workaholic who decides to work harder to eventually have more spare time).

People are already quite likely to define themselves according to their feelings. A depressed man is advised to exercise because he'll feel better. He says, "I know, but I don't *feel* like it." A



PETER SHERRARD/GETTY IMAGES

So much of human misery could be *prevented* if people would just think ahead.

More Than a Feeling

People regularly use their feelings as the reference point for making key decisions; people use their feelings as the compass for charting the course of their lives and even follow their feelings when they lead them into trouble. Will focusing people on their feelings of wanting to feel happy ultimately be helpful? How will happiness experts dissuade people from constant self-reflection, or from the deep self-absorption that our cultural values already engender, or from concluding that each decision must be made according to its potential contribution (or lack thereof) to their emotional happiness? It's too soon to answer these questions. But, when might our focus shift away from our feelings as the sole or primary guide to living and emphasize some of the other critically important aspects of human potential? One that leaps to mind is the power of foresight. So much of human misery could be *prevented* if people would just think ahead. But, who is teaching them to do that? And, will being happy catalyze foresight?

Global Goals and Mere Wishes

The cognitive literature has taught us that most humans are surprisingly global in their quality of thought. We want world peace, but have no concrete means to produce it. We want financial security, but can't quite figure out how to balance the checkbook. We want to be current, but there's too much with which to keep up. We want to participate and contribute, but, really, who has the time?

I doubt there is a therapist who hasn't had a client say, "Well, all I want is to be happy." How much more global a statement can anyone make? And when you

ask questions to encourage a bit more specificity, such as, "What do you mean by happy?" the client looks at you like you're brain dead. Happiness is their goal, but they don't know how to produce it, recognize its parameters, or, perhaps most difficult of all, grasp when it is irrelevant. As someone wise once said, "A goal without steps is merely a wish."

Will Therapists Become Their Own Source of Unhappiness?

How will the emerging literature on happiness affect the process of psychotherapy and the people who provide it? Time will tell. But, the danger of happiness becoming a commodity to try and package and sell seems a legitimate concern in a culture where the end usually matters more than the means and where what people have or do often matters much more than who they are.

Positive psychology and the science of happiness, still in their infancy, afford us a deeper understanding of some of the components of happiness and perhaps even some of the things we can proactively do to be happier. But, people routinely use products differently than the way they were intended to be used. That's true no matter how clearly the directions were written. ○



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depressed woman is told to get out and socialize to reduce her loneliness and build a social network. She replies, "I know it would help, but I don't *feel* like it." The problem is this: We're encouraging people who are usually already too wrapped up in their emotions and even globally define themselves by them to be even more emotionally focused. Whether focusing on negative emotions or positive emotions, the focus is still on emotions. Perhaps that's not such a good idea for some people. It's the flip side of wanting to do cognitive therapy with Mr. Spock. You don't need to; he's already into logic.