MIND

A Happy Life May Not Be a Meaningful Life

Tasks that seem mundane, or even difficult, can bring a sense of meaning over time

By Daisy Grewal on February 18, 2014

Cooking dinner, a mundane task associated with a meaningful life. *Credit: Digital Vision/ThinkStock*

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl once wrote, “Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.” For most people, feeling happy and finding life meaningful are both important and related goals. But do happiness and meaning always go together? It seems unlikely, given that many of the things that we regularly choose to do – from running marathons to raising children – are unlikely to increase our day-to-day happiness. Recent research suggests that while happiness and a sense of meaning often overlap, they also diverge in important and surprising ways.

Roy Baumeister and his colleagues recently published a study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* that helps explain some of the key differences between a happy life and a meaningful one. They asked almost 400 American adults to fill out three surveys over a period of weeks. The surveys asked people to answer a series of questions their happiness levels, the degree to which they saw their lives as meaningful, and their general lifestyle and circumstances.

As one might expect, people’s happiness levels were positively correlated with whether they saw their lives as meaningful. However, the two measures were not identical – suggesting that what makes us happy may not always bring more meaning, and vice versa. To probe for differences between the two, the researchers examined the survey items that asked detailed questions about people’s feelings and moods, their relationships with others, and their day-to-day activities. Feeling happy was strongly correlated with seeing life as easy, pleasant, and free from difficult or troubling events. Happiness was also correlated with being in good health and generally feeling well most of the time. However, none of these things were correlated with a greater sense of meaning. Feeling good most of the time might help us feel happier, but it doesn’t necessarily bring a sense of purpose to our lives.

Interestingly, their findings suggest that money, contrary to popular sayings, can indeed buy happiness. Having enough money to buy what one needs in life, as well as what one desires, were also positively correlated with greater levels of happiness. However, having enough money seemed to make little difference in life's sense of meaning. This same disconnect was recently found in a multi-national study conducted by Shigehiro Oishi and Ed Diener, who show that people from wealthy countries tend to be happier, however, they don't see their lives as more meaningful. In fact, Oishi and Diener found that people from poorer countries tend to see their lives as more meaningful. Although the reasons are not totally clear, this might be related to greater religious belief, having more children, and stronger social ties among those living in poorer countries. Perhaps instead of saying that "money doesn't buy happiness," we ought to say instead that "money doesn't buy meaning."

Not too surprisingly, our relationships with other people are related to both how happy we are as well as how meaningful we see our lives. In Baumeister's study, feeling more connected to others improved both happiness and meaning. However, the role we adopt in our relationships makes an important difference. Participants in the study who were more likely to agree with the statement, "I am a giver," reported less happiness than people who were more likely to agree with, "I am a taker." However, the "givers" reported higher levels of meaning in their lives compared to the "takers." In addition, spending more time with

friends was related to greater happiness but not more meaning. In contrast, spending more time with people one loves was correlated with greater meaning but not with more happiness. The researchers suspect that spending time with loved ones is often more difficult, but ultimately more satisfying, than spending time with friends.

When it comes to thinking about how to be happier, many of us fantasize about taking more vacations or finding ways to avoid mundane tasks. We may dream about skipping housework and instead doing something fun and pleasurable. However, tasks which don't make us happy can, over time, add up to a meaningful life. Even routine activities — talking on the phone, cooking, cleaning, housework, meditating, emailing, praying, waiting on others, and balancing finances — appeared to bring more meaning to people's lives, but not happiness in the moment.

More broadly, the findings suggest that pure happiness is about getting what we want in life—whether through people, money, or life circumstances. Meaningfulness, in contrast, seems to have more to do with giving, effort, and sacrifice. It is clear that a highly meaningful life may not always include a great deal of day-to-day happiness. And, the study suggests, our American obsession with happiness may be intimately related to a feeling of emptiness, or a life that lacks meaning.

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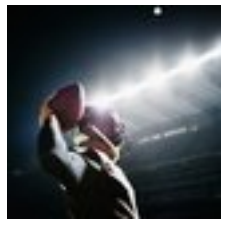

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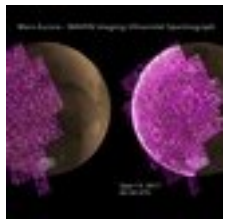

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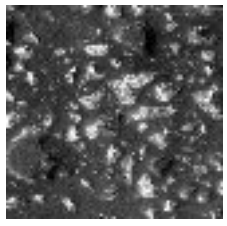

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