

Aging Lifestyles: Lower your expectations and increase your happiness?

by Joe_Volz

Happiness is elusive and fleeing.

On rare occasions, we may realize that we're intently happy - such as when falling in love. We expect this state of euphoria to continue unabated. Yet, too much early happiness might be a bad thing as we age. A provocative new study by Shigehiro Oishi, a University of Virginia psychologist, concludes that people who report a greater number of positive events seem to find diminishing returns from future happy events.

Unhappy people, on the other hand, who experience more negative events appear to get higher returns from happy events.

We find Oishi's findings worth thinking about as we grow older and start to run into the losses we all face in later life - chronic illness, the loss of close friends to death or to a move. Many of us unexpectedly experience a huge loss when we retire only to discover that our work was a large part of our identity and self-esteem.

Commenting on Oishi's research, Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychologist at the University of California Riverside, cautions that lots more research needs to be done before his conclusions can be accepted or rejected.

She doesn't dismiss them out of hand, though. The theory behind Oishi's conclusions "has to do with rising aspirations, or rising expectations - the more you have, the more you expect to have what you have," she explains.

"Say you're famous and you're used to being famous and someone doesn't recognize you or give you proper respect, you get upset," she said by way of an example.

Those with lower expectations, then, might well be more delighted when someone recognizes them since they don't expect it - they expect the opposite, that nobody will remember them.

Lyubomirsky also notes that the theory might hold water if you take 100 very happy people and 100 very unhappy people and then have them experience the exact same kind of events in one week - say, 3 positive and 2 negative - e.g., received a compliment, got a good deal on a major purchase, met a major deadline. On the negative side, the 200 people also got stuck in traffic, a major aggravating occasion for many. "The unhappy people would obtain a greater boost in their happiness that week than the happy people," the psychologist

says.

An unhappy person might go from a 4 to a 6 on a happiness scale, whereas a happy person might go from a 6 to a 7. "So you see that the unhappy person got a bigger boost, but note that they are less happy overall," she continues. How might the happiness/unhappiness theory work when we encounter something really bad, such as a diagnosis of cancer?

Contrary to what many might believe, people with that dread diagnosis often testify to the good they've received as they battled the disease. Here's what a physician wrote online in responding to the research results:

"I am a 57-year-old physician and I think you're on to something. During the last 25 years, I've seen patients diagnosed with potentially fatal illnesses generally go one of two ways. Some simply collapse and perish. Others seize the opportunity to make the most of life, whatever may come."

Reflecting that observation, the doctor adds that he was recently diagnosed with laryngeal cancer. "I knew within a nanosecond of learning my diagnosis and prognosis which way I wanted to go. As I've moved through treatment to rid me of this uninvited invader, my quality and appreciation of life have improved immeasurably."

Poignantly, he concludes, "I've recently tasted a kind of happiness I don't think I've ever known before."

He writes that while still not knowing whether his cancer will be cured. We have concluded that the study is definitely not suggesting that we temper happiness early in life so that our expectations don't rise so high that we cannot continue to reach them. Instead, we would assume that the author is warning us that, sometimes, great joy is an abnormal state and we must be prepared to drop down to reality. Of course, being depressed and pessimistic is abnormal too. Maybe, the answer is that sage advice you received long ago from your grandmother: Life has its ups and downs. You should expect both.

A resource for further thought is "The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want," by Sonja Lyubomirsky, Penguin Press, 2007.

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