



The Pursuit of Happiness

Until very recently, the study of psychology has essentially been the study of negative emotions. *Psychological Abstracts International*, (a sort of reader's guide to psychology) didn't even index happiness until 1973. Yet happiness is a subject of great interest to many people. Our constitution even guarantees our right to pursue it. When people are asked what is the most important thing in life, about half will respond, "Happiness."

Recently, researchers have been making up for lost time, and a number of scientists are full-time researchers in the study of happiness and optimal experience. Their studies produced some interesting and surprising results.

What happiness is not:

- **Money:** When people are asked what one factor they feel has the greatest influence on *other* people's happiness, most put money at the top of the list. While money enough to buy the necessities of life does increase happiness, studies consistently show that having more than enough money to meet your needs doesn't guarantee more happiness. In fact, one-third of the wealthiest Americans are actually less happy than average.
- **Age:** Forget about adolescent angst, mid-life crisis, and the despair of old age. People have reported remarkably similar levels of happiness at all age levels.
- **Sex, race, ethnic background:** All groups report similar levels of happiness. Men and women may express unhappiness in different ways, but are equally likely to report themselves "very happy" and "satisfied" with life.
- **Fame, fortune, unlimited leisure, disabilities, handicaps:** Studies have consistently found that objective life circumstances, once we have adapted to them, bear little relation to our level of happiness. Dr. David Myers, a prominent happiness researcher, states that winning the lottery or suffering a paralyzing injury will give virtually no clue as to the level of happiness one year after the event.

Common characteristics of happy people:

- **Self esteem:** Happy people like themselves and think they can make a difference in the world.
- **Control:** Happy people believe that they choose their destinies
- **Optimism:** Happy people are hope-filled and believe that negative events will not last and are limited in scope.
- **Extroversion:** Happy people are outgoing, enjoy spending time with others, and seek out relationships. People report being happier in groups than alone, so relationships can also help to *make* us happier.