

Is Happiness Having What You Want, Wanting What You Have, or Both?

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Most people want to be happier. Psychological theories on happiness generally contend that happiness depends on the extent to which people have what they want. For example, most people want money, and those who make more money tend to be slightly happier. However, some theologians, particularly Rabbi Hyman Schachtel, argue that happiness is not having what you want, but *wanting what you have*. This maxim sounds reasonable enough, but can it be tested, and if so, is it true?

It turns out Schachtel's maxim can be tested. Texas Tech University psychologist Jeff Larsen and Amie McKibban of Wichita State University asked undergraduates to indicate whether they possessed 52 different material items (e.g., a car, stereo, bed). If they had (say) a car, the researchers asked them to rate how much they wanted the car they had. If they didn't have a car, they were asked to rate how much they wanted one. Larsen and McKibban then calculated the extent to which people want what they have and have what they want.

The findings show that wanting what you have is *not* the same as having what you want. While people who have what they want tend to desire those items, the correlation between the two was far from perfect. As for happiness, Rabbi Schachtel was both right and wrong. The researchers found that people who want more of what they have tend to be happier than those who want less of what they have. However, people who have more of what they want tend to be happier than those who have less of what they want.

These results, which appear in the April issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, show that people tend to grow accustomed to newly acquired possessions and thereby derive less happiness from them. They also suggest, however, that people can continue to want the things they have and that those who do so can achieve greater happiness.