

Happiness Has a Dark Side

May 16, 2011

It seems like everyone wants to be happier and the pursuit of happiness is one of the foundations of American life. But even happiness can have a dark side, according to the authors of a new review article published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. They say that happiness shouldn't be thought of as a universally good thing, and outline four ways in which this is the case. Indeed, not all types and degrees of happiness are equally good, and even pursuing happiness can make people feel worse.

People who want to feel happier can choose from a multitude of books that tell them how to do it. But setting a goal of happiness can backfire, says June Gruber of Yale University, who co-wrote the article with Iris Mauss of the University of Denver and Maya Tamir of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It's one of the many downsides of happiness – people who strive for happiness may end up worse off than when they started.

The tools often suggested for making yourself happy aren't necessarily bad—like taking time every day to think about things you're happy about or grateful for, or setting up situations that are likely to make you happy. “But when you're doing it with the motivation or expectation that these things ought to make you happy, that can lead to disappointment and decreased happiness,” Gruber says. For example, one study by Mauss and colleagues found that people who read a newspaper article extolling the value of happiness felt worse after watching a happy film than people who read a newspaper article that didn't mention happiness—presumably because they were disappointed they didn't feel happier. When people don't end up as happy as they'd expected, their feeling of failure can make them feel even worse.

Too much happiness can also be a problem. One study followed children from the 1920s to old age and found that those who died younger were rated as highly cheerful by their teachers. Researchers have found that people who are feeling extreme amounts of happiness may not think as creatively and also tend to take more risks. For example, people who have mania, such as in bipolar disorder, have an excess degree of positive emotions that can lead them to take risks, like substance abuse, driving too fast, or spending their life savings. But even for people who don't have a psychiatric disorder, “too high of a degree of happiness can be bad,” Gruber says.

Another problem is feeling happiness inappropriately; obviously, it's not healthy to feel happy when you see someone crying over the loss of a loved one or when you hear a friend was injured in a car crash. Yet research by Gruber and her colleagues has found this inappropriate happiness also occurs in people with mania. Happiness also can mean being short on negative emotions—which have their place in life as well. Fear can keep you from taking unnecessary risks; guilt can help remind you to behave well toward others.

Indeed, psychological scientists have discovered what appears to really increase happiness. “The strongest predictor of happiness is not money, or external recognition through success or fame,” Gruber

says. “It’s having meaningful social relationships.” That means the best way to increase your happiness is to stop worrying about being happy and instead divert your energy to nurturing the social bonds you have with other people. “If there’s one thing you’re going to focus on, focus on that. Let all the rest come as it will.”