

Three Paths to Happiness

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Presented by Pauline Wallin, Ph.D.

201 S. 32nd St., Camp Hill, PA 17011

717-761-1814 www.drwallin.com email: drwallin@drwallin.com

Why are some people happier than others? From research on twins (identical vs fraternal) we know that the cheerfulness has a strong genetic component. It is estimated that genes account for about 50% of what happiness researchers call “positive affectivity.”

No one has actually found a "happy gene." However, inborn predispositions such as optimism and extroversion, do make a difference in one's experience of happiness.

But even if you didn't pick the right type of parents – that is, if you're in the lower 50% of genetic bubblyness – there's still hope. The emerging field of Positive Psychology is finding more and more evidence that happiness can be learned, and that there are specific things you can do to increase life satisfaction.

Not everyone experiences happiness in the same way. Martin Seligman, a research psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Authentic Happiness* (2002), describes three distinct paths to being happy:

1. ***The Pleasant Life:*** This refers to enjoyment of sensory pleasures – food, aromas, music, roller coasters, sex, hot showers — the kinds of things that make you go, “Ahh. . .” But before you say to yourself, “That's my kind of evening,” keep in mind that pleasures get old fast. You may have noticed, for example, that the first bite of chocolate mousse tastes the best; the eighth bite is just calories. That's because of the brain's tendency to adapt and to progressively ignore repeated sensory input. Here's what Seligman recommends to help you enjoy the pleasures over time:
 - Savor the moment. Share it with others. Pay attention and sharpen your perception. Take a mental picture.
 - Be mindful of the context of your experience. Practice meditation techniques to increase your mindfulness.
 - Space your pleasures. This will counteract the effects of habituation that reduces pleasure.
2. ***The Engaged Life:*** While the pleasures feel good, they don't last. And pursuing one sensual indulgence after another eventually feels empty, devoid of purpose and meaning. A much more enduring path to happiness is the engaged life, which usually involves a task, a project or an activity, as well as an intellectual or physical challenge.

Have you ever been so absorbed in something that you lost track of time? Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced “cheeks sent me high”) defines this as a state of *flow*. It doesn't feel the same as pleasure – there's no sense of raw delight – but it can bring a

tremendous sense of satisfaction. Marathon runners often experience flow, as do artists, musicians, carpenters and others who love their work.

One doesn't have to be alone to experience flow. You can get it from stimulating conversations, supportive teamwork, and playing with your kids.

How do you attain the sense of flow? It's best achieved by using your "signature strengths." These are character strengths like curiosity, fairness, love of beauty, humor, and gratitude. To find out what your top strengths are, take the free online Signature Strengths test at <http://viastrengths.org>.

When you apply your signature strengths in pursuit of a challenge, you feel that "this is the real me." You don't need any external reward to pursue your strengths. It doesn't feel like work. After several hours of using your strengths, you feel exhilarated rather than drained.

3. ***The Meaningful Life***: This refers to using your strengths in the service of something larger than yourself. People who are involved in society's positive institutions, such as marriage, family, and religious and charitable organizations, are more likely to experience an overall sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

The meaningful life is the ability to look outside yourself, to have concern for the next generation, and to care for others.

Some ways to attain the meaningful life include taking a leadership role, mentoring, and being involved in your community, or with charitable or professional associations.

Happiness is something you do, not something you find

You can increase your overall happiness by a combination of the above three paths: savoring pleasures, being engaged in what you do, and giving of yourself to others. If you focus on only one of these, you won't be as happy as when you balance all three.

It's also important to cultivate a positive attitude. This is not the same as pretending pain and misery don't exist. A positive attitude is one of optimism, appreciation, and focusing on solutions.

Here are some exercises to help you focus on the positive. Studies show that doing these for just a few weeks will improve your happiness:

1. Prior to going to bed at night, write down three positive things that happened that day. Do this for a few weeks. Research shows that people who do this exercise tend to fall asleep more easily and to wake up in a better mood.
2. Express gratitude to someone. Thank them for something. Even better, write a letter describing how the person has made a difference in your life, and deliver it in

person. This powerful exercise has benefits that last beyond the delivery of the letter.

3. Perform a random act of kindness – hold a door open for someone; let someone go in front of you in line; pay someone a compliment. You’ll find that doing so will give you an instant boost.
4. When faced with a setback, think of it as one door closing and another opening. In other words, find the opportunity, the “silver lining.”

Further reading:

Emmons, R. (2007) *Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin

Lyubormirsky, S. (2007) *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, Penguin Press

Seligman, M.E.P. (2002), *Authentic Happiness*, New York: Free Press

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1998) *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* New York: Basic Books

Websites

Get the latest news on research from Positive Psychology at Positive Psychology News Daily
www.pos-psych.com

Take free online tests and surveys at the Authentic Happiness website:
www.authentichappiness.com

Free online Signature Strengths test: <http://viastrengths.org>

Pauline Wallin, Ph.D., is a psychologist and coach in Camp Hill, PA. She works with individuals, families and businesses, helping people to maximize their strengths and realize their dreams.