



THE HAPPINESS CODE

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“Whoever says money can’t buy happiness is not spending it right,” reads the advertising slogan of a luxurious car. The message is both simple and clear and directly appeals to our widely held belief that money is more or less equivalent to happiness. Classical economists have traditionally reinforced this hypothesis that wealth increases the maximum happiness for all. New scientific findings, especially in psychology and neuroscience, have debunked the economic determinism; proponents of Positive Psychology movement contend that there can't be one cute reductionist formula equating money with happiness. It is found that money is just one among many factors influencing happiness, with many studies concluding that non-financial factors are as or more potent than money than we care to give credit for. Let's equip ourselves by understanding these determinants of happiness in the real world to harness them in navigating the ups and downs of life.

Before we move on, it's worth knowing a bit more about happiness as a concept for study. Happiness is of two kinds: one is hedonic happiness and the other is eudaimonic happiness. Most of us are instinctively familiar with the hedonic camp, which believes that happiness is all about feeling good by indulging in pleasures, experiencing positive emotions like joy, laughter, eating

delicious food, watching Netflix, partying, dancing, watching the sunset, having a thai massage, etc, characterized by the absence of pain. Eudaimonic happiness goes beyond mere sensual delights and incorporates living good in the right way, with the right balance, guided by virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance – each life step progressing towards fulfilling a transcendental purpose beyond self. The Eudaemonists' motto is: **“It's better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied”**.

Neither form of happiness is inherently superior, and balancing the two is crucial for a holistic understanding of happiness. **Research suggests that a 3:1 ratio of positive to negative emotions is ideal;** a lower ratio could lead to long-term stagnation, boredom, and even depression. You may be familiar with William Maslow's Hierarchies of Needs, which show the range of human motivation from lower physiological needs to self-actualisation at the top of the pyramid. More recent theories include Caroll Ryff's 6 scales of happiness and Martin Seligman's PERMA model of happiness. For brevity and breadth, we'll focus on the latter two:

HAPPINESS MODELS ON RAMP!

Ryff's six components of well-being are

1. **Self-Acceptance:** a positive view of the past and the present self that acknowledges good and bad aspects;
2. **Personal Growth:** openness and sense of self-improvement, realising one's potential over one's lifetime
3. **Positive Relations:** building warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others
4. **Autonomy:** independence, authenticity, ability to resist social pressures and evaluate yourself by personal standards,
5. **Purpose in Life:** a clear sense of goals in life and a sense of directedness; making life worthy and meaningful
6. **Environmental Mastery:** competence, seizing opportunities within the given context and repurposing them to fit one's values and advantages.



Martin Seligman's **PERMA formula, also known as the Flourish Model**, can be readily paraphrased as: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment.

Happiness studies are multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary, more like jungles endowed with varieties of knowledge trees and bushes, than a neat garden with rows of flowers meticulously planted. There are many formulas for happiness/well-being, as there are different routes to reach Happy Valley village at Sawombung. Each researcher adds her own interpretations and methods -- and trying to understand all of them would lead to more complexity and less happiness. Suffice it by saying that the gist of all happiness studies points to the above-mentioned correlations of happiness in one way or another in a variety of jargon, proportions and matrices.

With psychologists like Maslow, Ryff and Seligman having introduced happiness as a subject and setting the tone for the rest

of the discussion, let us start with the practical aspects of happiness. What drives happiness, what drags it down, and what remains constant in the business of living?

THE HAPPINESS PIE

If there is only one thing you could take away from this article and stop reading further without losing anything substantial, it is this: the concept of Happiness Pie as propounded by Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology. She posits that three key factors determine the individual's happiness levels, and their impact remains more or less constant throughout a lifetime. These are:

1. **Genetics and personality (upto 50% of happiness)**
2. **Life circumstances (upto 10% of happiness)**
3. **Intentional activities (upto 40% of happiness)**

Genes determine the lion's share of a person's propensity to be happy or sad. In a way, your dispositional destiny is in the hands of genes, which have been more or less fixed since birth. In the Nature vs. Nurture debate, nature wins hands down, as evidenced by studies of identical twins. It's not for nothing that the English word happy is derived from the old Norse word 'happ,' meaning luck or chances.

This genetic link aligns with the Big 5 of personality classification, which is known by the **Acronym OCEAN**. Accordingly, an individual's personality falls in a spectrum of 5 interrelated inborn

traits: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. To predict happiness based on personality types, the individual scores in Extraversion and Neuroticism matter significantly. Happy people are generally high on the Extraversion score, which means they tend to be more sociable and extroverted, deriving their energy from mingling with others. Introverted people tend to be moody, solitude seekers and generally creative. Neuroticism, on the other hand, is misery's companion. Neurotic people are anxious and nervous, and their antennas are always attuned to the pessimistic side of situations, but they are hard workers and conscientious. If you are born introverted and neurotic, you have been dealt an unlucky hand from birth by the role of dice. That is, genes from birth determine the probability of someone being happy, and the DNA colours the life canvas with bright colours or dark shades. In the Happiness Pie, personality traits account upto 40% of our hedonic destiny. You are stuck somewhere in this Russian Roullet of life.

Second, major life events, like marriage, the death of close ones, unemployment, etc., can explain 10% of subjective happiness, events we can relate to. This finding is counterintuitive, and 10% is much less than we thought could be attributed to unpredictable events unfolding in our lives.

As shown above, hereditary and life circumstances together wield 60% of the power to define our happiness. **The good news is that actions under our direct control can shape 40% of the keys to make or break our happiness.** The intentional choices we make daily at home, work, and in relationships can potentially steer our happiness level, tilting it to the positive side by a wide

margin. It is as if we have found the rudders to the sails of our happiness ship, the ability to change its course with a proper mindset and deliberate action plans. Even if we were born neurotic, we have the choice to crank up the smiley face by calling our best friend. Feeling moody? That's no problem. Maybe it's time for some Alan Walker songs.

SILVER LINING IN HUMAN NATURE

The picture of happiness formula presented so far may seem more pessimistic and fatalistic, like the painting of *Scream*, rather than that of *Monalisa*, but there is more to it than meets the eye. Happiness, like *Monalisa*, is enigmatic. In any unexpected misfortune, there is a spirit of optimism ready trying to sprout from underneath, or, on the flip side, behind every outstanding achievement, there is an undercurrent Marxist tendency to bring down the system. It's called the Hedonic Adaptation. (Remember it, you will thank me forever.)

Grandma's advice that time heals almost anything is true. Conversely, immediate affect and material achievements are always offset by our natural tendency to adapt to new experiences, making them ordinary over time. In the long run, we get habituated to sadness and joy (with some negative bias) and revert to our baseline happiness, already fixed by our genes. Everybody has a happiness set point that we eventually revert to. It's the bedroom we return to after all the running thither and hither after a day's work. **Tip: Nothing precious is permanent.**

HEDONIC ADAPTION IN REAL LIFE

Can money buy happiness? Yes, but with a million-dollar caveat. After our basic worldly and security needs are met, money has a way of giving us diminishing returns. Larger income doesn't necessarily translate into more happiness but gradually becomes a status symbol in the social contest. A long time ago, a dying Russian peasant whose neighbour owned a cow was praying to God for help. When God asked him how he could help, the peasant replied: "Kill the cow!" How wealthy we are is not an objective criterion but rather a relative one, used as a measuring tape to compare ourselves with people we know living within a radius. Men do not desire to be rich, but richer than others, John Stuart Mill said. Our

sense of achievement is almost always weighed against those nearer to us in time and space. Talking for myself, I don't care about Elon Musk's fortune. The riches of my closest friends give me nightmares during the day.

Another curse of money is that it sets you up for higher expectations, the new financial position becoming a routine launchpad for the next shiny slot in the food chain as in the successive levels of the Angry Birds game. Psychologists call this phenomenon the **hedonic treadmill** or the rat race in common parlance, in which there seems to be no finishing line in sight for anyone. In the modern cut-throat society, happiness and its alter-ego success is a zero-sum game, the winner taking it all on the ruins of others. As Gore Vidal once said with ironic truth, **"It is not enough to succeed; others must fail."**

Fortunately, the hedonic adaptation is helpful during our low points and helps us heal and cope with failures with stoic acceptance. Tragic life circumstances like death in the family, loss of jobs, divorce, etc., turn out to be not as hurtful as we think. We usually bounce back, find comfort in surrender and relationships, and become more resilient, a strength that is celebrated and is often the theme of our most popular movies and cultural tropes. We are always back to emotional square one. **Tip: Use money to buy memorable experiences, not luxury toys.**

Do marriage and kids make us happier? The short answer is Yes. The Facebook type answer is: It's complicated. According to surveys, the intoxicating joys of honeymoon taper off two years after marriage. This is not surprising because the hedonic adaptation has been running all along in the background while you are busy making other romantic plans. Two years is enough time to lift the veil off your spouse with all their flaws and in-laws, with or without makeup. The passion that burns bright fizzles out like the candle burning bright, melting soon. For the mathematically minded, five positive moments are needed for every negative marital scene created between a

couple. Who says marriage goals are easy? The same goes for kids. Quality of life decreases after the first kid's birth, coinciding with the return of the hedonic adaptation in her full fury during that much time. Divorces are complicated, but people feel better once it is over. Separation causes more pain than divorce. An affair lasts for a maximum of 6 months, after which it loses its steam, studies say. **Tip: three pillars of marriage are passion, intimacy and commitment. Don't let them fall.**

What about work, Sir? It depends on whether you have a job, a career, or a calling. A job is a means to an end, to keep the bed and hearth warm, and sometimes to subsidize a parallel labour of love. A career caps at 60 years at the current retirement age. The calling is an activity you identify with, the *raison d'être* of your existence outside your home, something you value dearly in and of itself. It's a personal evaluation and you may already know what kind you are dealing with. Whatever your day job is, a sense of autonomy and personal contribution is at the heart of fulfilment at work. **Tip: Love your work or find love in the work.**

Role of religion: Religions are balm for the souls, even more so in poor countries. One possible reason is that the communal congregation in rituals engenders a feeling of belongingness to members of the sects, and faith acts as a buffer from frustration at the lack of development seen in many societies. The transcendental ideologies that underlie many religions also give a sense of meaning and purpose in life beyond the egoistic satisfaction that modern life has expected us to win at any cost. In all the models of happiness and well-being discussed at the beginning of this essay, meanings and purpose are integral, and religion provides a powerful platform and outlet. Find your Path. (Other than religion, cultural attitudes (collectivist/individualistic), freedom, access to education, health, public amenities, type of taxation, respect for human rights, social justice, etc. matter for happiness at the macro level. GDP, HDI, Gallup World Happiness

Survey, OECD and WHO's reports provide some indicators of this kind with broad strokes).

CAN THERE BE TOO MUCH HAPPINESS?

If the thousands of help books published each year are anything to go by, we are facing a glut of happiness advice. But excess of anything cannot be good, happiness included. Suppose there is an Experience Machine, and if we put our brain inside it, we feel good, virtually achieving any desire we fancy and eating and drinking anything, but all of it happening within the brain, simulating the experiences indistinguishable from reality. Will you agree to put your body in the machine for as long as you want, your body kept alive through nasal feeding? Most people say No because not only do we want our experience to be positively felt, but it matters to us that our lived experiences result from our genuine, authentic and value choices. Rolling in 24/7 pleasure is neither sustainable nor desirable, and we must work to deserve higher-order pleasures of life such as art, beauty and wisdom. Arthur Schopenhauer emphasized this point and wrote, **“Imagine a race transported to a Utopia where everything grows of its own accord and turkeys fly around ready-roasted, where lovers find one another without any delay and keep one another without any difficulty: in such a place some men would die of boredom or hang themselves, some would fight and kill one another, and thus they would create for themselves more suffering than nature inflicts on them as it is.”**

Full-throttled pleasure for its own sake is overrated and has the potential to undo civilization through atrophy and complacency. As Buddha taught, true knowledge is awareness of the inevitability of suffering in this world, and the best way to live life is to forgo cravings by following the **‘Middle Path’**, which brings into mind the **‘Golden Mean’** of Aristotle. Of course, we all can't be Buddha or Aristotle, which is another cause of suffering from desiring lofty ideals! Get busy with your duties without concern

for outcomes, the Bhagavad-gita says, and be one with Brahman, the universal consciousness. Have faith. Christianity proclaims that the original sin will be forgiven and rewarded in a life yonder. Altruism is the spiritual Roll and Rock, according to New Age Gurus.

Let me conclude with a profound quote extracted from the official website of Dalai Lama, the living prophet of happiness by compassion:



“The basic source of all happiness is a sense of kindness and warm-heartedness towards others. We are all the same as human beings. We are born the same way, we die the same way, and we all want to lead happy lives. The key to happiness is peace of mind.”

There is no one-size-fits-all perfect formula for Happiness. Perhaps that might be the point: the pursuit of it may be happiness. Happiness may be eclectic too, best of both worlds. **“Happiness is a Cigar called Hamlet,”** says an ad slogan evoking a picture of a smoke-filled theatre showing a Shakespeare play. **PERMA, Happiness Pie, and Hedonic Adaptation**, briefly discussed in this essay, offer the most scientific clues that can be distilled as: Because nothing lasts forever, embrace the present, accept life as it comes, have optimism about it, invest in special occasions and relationships, and strive for a cause bigger than oneself while facing your impending mortality.

Hip, Hip and Hurray! Yaiphare!