

Health

November 26, 2006

'Happiness research' shows optimists live longer on average

Authentic happiness, also known as positive psychology, is an emerging field recognized by the American Psychological Association. It focuses on determining and promoting the factors that permit people to thrive. Rather than search for the roots of unhappiness, research coming out of this field investigates the ingredients of a good life and weighs the effects of traits such as optimism, humor and even eccentricity.

There is a lot of disagreement about being able to measure happiness. When you use the word happy, it often has the sort of context of balloons floating up into the sky or something frivolous. But now neuroscientists suggest that happiness is not a vague concept or mood, it is real and it can be measured. Findings from "happiness research" indicate that happiness leads to long life, health, resilience and good performance. Optimists tend to do better than pessimists when coping with stressful situations because they are more likely to put a positive spin on stressors - to look for ways to make the best of a bad situation - and to use problem-solving strategies to tackle difficulties. Some studies even indicate that optimists do better physically, too. One study by the Mayo Clinic found that pessimists had a 19 percent higher risk of death over the course of 30 years than people who were optimists; another study found that optimism may protect older men from developing heart disease; and studies on the physical effect of humor have indicated that it produces strong positive changes in health. An interesting fact that scientists have also found is that, despite all the massive increase in our wealth in the last 50 years, our level of happiness has not increased.

Why aren't we happier? Scientists think that our unhappiness is primarily due to two factors:

1. We go for things that give us short bursts of pleasure (e.g., we go to the store to buy something new when we feel sad, anxious or lonely), but then the feelings quickly wear off' and
2. We tend to see our life as judged against other people - we are always comparing what we have with what "they" have.

Can we cultivate happiness? There doesn't seem to be one key factor to creating happiness, but there are certain common ingredients. People who are happier have: 1. meaningful relationships with family and friends; 2. are married; 3. have meaning in life and a belief that there is something "bigger" than themselves; and 4. have goals that they like working on and which use their inner strengths and abilities.

One fascinating study reported in the journal July-August, 2005, American Psychologist used several different activities to see if they could "create happiness". Two of the activities significantly increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms: identifying strengths and keeping a gratitude journal. To use these techniques, they suggest: 1. Before going to bed each night, write down three things that went well and why you think they occurred; and 2. Identify your character

strengths - such as courage, love, integrity, curiosity, kindness, fairness, forgiveness, leadership, humor, spirituality, and others - and use one of these top strengths in a new and different way every day. These techniques were used with adults, but think of how creatively they could be used with children to help them enhance their inner happiness!

Finally, an international movement which is working to bring happiness to the world is the Me-to-We program. It is a philosophy that suggests that finding happiness and meaning in our lives and our world is done by reaching out to others. Thinking “we” instead of “me.” It was founded by international child rights activist and founder of the Free the Children movement Craig Kielburger. You can read more about Free the Children at www.freethechildren.com and the Me to We program at www.metowe.org .