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# Happiness and the Search for Meaning

## The Unrealistic and Unattainable Idea of Being Constantly Happy

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**What we can do ... is look towards having a more frequent experience of happiness and greater meaning in our experience of the world.**

**I**t has always struck me the number of people who communicate their hope both inside and outside of therapy to be 'happy'. To many, this ideal sounds reasonable and straightforward yet when one scratches the surface it is quickly realised that for some, happiness is sought after not just as an experience but as a constant state of being.

***One thing that is known is that humans are happiest when they are working towards something of meaning to them.***

When you think about it, the idea of being constantly happy is both unrealistic and unattainable. This does not just apply to happiness - any emotional experience whether it be feeling proud, immune to the opinions of others about us, sadness, joy etc. etc. are all temporary experiences. Emotions are physical experiences we have and attach labels to, and like all experiences, they pass and are individually finite.

I read an article some years ago where a psychiatrist was asked how one can reach happiness. His response was to assert that at any given moment, we are both consciously and unconsciously experiencing any number of emotions - some stronger than others and more noticeable, others a lot more subtle. So happiness, like all emotions, is not a destination to be reached but an experience that comes into our awareness and felt sense and, when it is time, passes.

This raises an interesting question. If happiness is an experience that will pass, what experiences in life are most likely to give me that happiness? One thing that is known is that humans are happiest when they are working towards something of meaning to them. We create a 'meaningful world' for ourselves to help us exist in a way that feels fulfilling. For some the foundation of meaning is religion or spirituality, for others it is money, career, family and relationships or any of the other infinite possibilities. Regardless of the framework we all create meaning for ourselves in order to be able to tolerate our existence and perhaps have the experience of joy and happiness more often. The use of the word tolerate may seem odd, but less so when one considers the following:

**... anxiety we have about who we are and what we're doing on this planet, what it means to have our name and our face; we keep running to the mirror to look at that face — we don't really know who that person is. And we don't like the face, usually, mostly. We look in the mirror, we say, "That's not my stupid face, besides it's getting old." So we run back and we take a pill or we take a drink, or we read a book, or we make love, or we call our mother long-distance, or something. We don't know what we're doing here, what it means to be named John Smith, to be born on Elm Street. These are sources of great anxiety for us, whether we admit it or not.**

**- Becker, E. *Growing Up Rugged Fritz*, Perls and Gestalt theory**

The above words speak an uncomfortable truth about the experience of being human. We cannot always be happy and content - as indicated by Laura Perls, the famous Gestalt Therapist, who noted that for as much as we can be aware of ourselves and the fact that we are individually unique and matter to the world, we are also aware that we are mortal and one day will perish. Our belief systems are often engineered to ignore this fact to allow us to get on with our day-to-day lives and yet it is ever present. This is the existential dilemma that all humans experience consciously or not and because of it, the experience of the less pleasant emotions such as anxiety will form part of our experience. How can they not exist with such a dilemma?

What we can do however, is look towards having a more frequent experience of happiness and greater meaning in our experience of the world. Once the therapy we engage in with a trusted counsellor moves beyond the more immediate problems and the wounds to the soul from past experiences and trauma, it is not uncommon for such existential and spiritual questions to form part of the next step of self-awareness in therapy. It is both an exciting and humbling process and one becomes aware of both how magnificent we can be as an individual, and how one day our time will come when the world we know will no longer have the gift of our presence.

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