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Understanding Happiness

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Abstract:

Happiness is the supreme goal of life that everyone desires to acquire because it has positive impact on the quality of life and well-being of the people. Happy person experiences mental or inner peace, more positive emotions like pleasure, joy, love, enjoyment, and less negative emotions like sorrow, anxiety, fear, and pain. The purpose of the present study is to explore the general concept of happiness and its importance. It also discusses different perspectives of happiness and presents the correlation between happiness and other important life domains. An attempt is also made to address one of the most important questions related to happiness i.e., “should happiness be researched”.

Keywords: Happiness, Importance of Happiness, Hedonic, Eudaimonic, Perspectives of Happiness

Introduction:

Happiness is the supreme goal of life that everyone desires to acquire but in different manners. It has a positive impact on mental health, quality of life, and well-being of a person. The two main important components of happiness are well-being and quality of life. The term “well-being” refers to overall good mental health and doing well socially, academically, physically, and psychologically. It affects the overall performance of a person (Mirasu, 2003). Quality of life has been defined by the World Health Organization Quality of Life as “a person’s perception of their position of life in terms of their culture, value, and relation to their standards, goals, and expectation”. Happiness not only affects positively the mental health of a person but also enhances the quality of life of a person. Lack of well-being leads to problems like stress, anxiety, poor concentration, poor quality of life, depression, feeling of insecurity, poor performance etc (Pillani, 2020).

Importance of “happiness”

Happiness has become a central goal for the governments (Cotofan,

2022). Countries like Venezuela and UAE understood the importance of happiness and created their Ministry of Happiness. Bhutan released its first Gross National Happiness (GNH) report in 2008 and it has 33 indicators categorized under various domains like psychological well-being, health, education, time spent, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance etc. Bhutan and some communities of Japan believe that money is important for good life but people cannot live longer without happiness. Madhya Pradesh is the first Indian state which has initiated its own happiness department and is also planning to introduce happiness as new subject in the curriculum in the upcoming years. In Delhi, the happiness curriculum is already taught in schools. All this shows that happiness and quality of life are now important goals of countries.

Happiness Report (Pillani,2020) considers happiness as a subjective concept. The impact of six components “work and related issues such as earning and growth”, “relationships including family and friends”, “health including physical and mental”, “philanthropy including social concerns”, “religious or spiritual orientation”, and “impact of COVID-19 on happiness” were studied in this report. The report revealed that a nation should focus also on happiness rather than just money and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It also mentions that happiness is related to mental well-being and lack of mental well-being leads to sickness and poor performance among people. According to the report, happiness and leisure time are positively related to each other. The report also mentions about compassion for happiness, the opposition of happiness, and spiritual orientation. The report suggests focussing on not just measuring the materialistic assets but also should include non-materialistic aspects.

The world happiness report 2021 focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on happiness. Happiness was studied in relation to aspects like trust, death, mental health, social connections, work, resilience, and the future of work. It measured subjective well-being based on three indicators i.e., life evaluation (how satisfied a person is with life), positive emotions (like enjoyment, smile etc.) and negative emotions (like worry, sadness, anger etc.). Further, the report found that trust, benevolence, and happiness are positively related to each other. Psychological characteristics like grit, extraversion, gratitude, resilience, quality of social relationships etc played a positive role in well-being while intolerance of uncertainty, pre-existing mental health conditions, and poor quality of relationships were the risk factors of well-being.

Perspectives of happiness

Happiness is not only defined by various psychologists but also defined by several philosophers. Although happiness is being studied from thousands of years, no one has yet been able to comeup with a single, canonical definition. In this context, the present section discusses about two perspectives of happiness i.e.,

the Western and the Indian.

The western perspective of happiness

From a Western perspective, there are two major approaches of happiness namely hedonic and eudaimonia. Hedonic approach is rooted in utilitarian theory according to which a person experiences happiness when he feels presence of pleasure and absence of pain. According to this approach, happiness is based on immediate pleasure, enjoyment, comfort, and success (Agrawal, n.d.; Marathe, 2021). It is also related to the present economic conditions, and achievements of a person. Thus, this approach of happiness includes two components i.e., emotional and cognitive, where emotional is related to pleasant and unpleasant emotions and life satisfaction comes under the cognitive component.

On the other hand, the eudaimonia approach of happiness believes that right actions bring happiness (Agrawal, n.d.; Marathe, 2021). Aristotle supported this approach of happiness and claimed that a person feels happy when he feels fulfillment of the purpose of life, lives a virtuous life and grows in life, and happiness lies within us and does not depend upon external things. Gratitude, kindness and helping others are some of the aspects that give happiness to a person.

Eudaimonia perspective of happiness is also rooted in many other theories where they focused more on “real-self”, and realization of self-potential. Seligman (2002) gave three dimensions of happiness- “pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life”. Pleasant life is related to joy, comfort, and enjoyment etc. A good life is acquired by gaining knowledge about our strengths and abilities and a meaningful life occurs when a person knows the purpose of life and contributes something to society that is helpful to others also.

Indian perspective of happiness

The concept of the Indian perspective of happiness comes from Indian scriptures and ancient texts like the Vedas, the Upanishads, Buddhism, the Bhagwad Gita etc. “When a person is detached from the external world and attached with inner self then he or she gets happiness, which is everlasting happiness” (Agrawal, n.d.). According to the Vedas, we get happiness when we have mental peace, and we lose it because of greed, fear, and desires. Three types of approaches of happiness found in the Indian context (Kiran Kumar, 2004). Hedonic is similar to the western perspective of happiness and this is even reflected in Charvaaka philosophy which believes that we get happiness through material things. Transcendental or spiritual oriented approach to happiness is rooted in Vedas and the Upanishads which claims that “happiness does not depend on any object or material things because it includes one’s state of mind and body”. This approach is based on ‘karma’ philosophy which means, one gets happiness based on their good karma. “Anandamaya Kosha” or “Blissful Sheath” is the highest kosha among panchakoshas which believes that we get happiness through

self-realization. The third approach to happiness is collective or hybrid approach. This is a mixture of both approaches i.e., hedonic and transcendental.

Happiness and other important life domains

Happiness is the universal goal of life, and everyone strives for it. Happiness has its influence on various life domains like mental health, emotional intelligence, quality of life, decision-making styles, etc. It has a positive relationship with intrapersonal skills such as independence, emotional self-awareness, self-actualization, and assertiveness (Bhatpahari, 2020). Yildiz and Eldelekloglu (2021) found that happiness is significantly related to self-esteem in decision-making and decision-making styles. Gautam (2019) claimed that happiness is positively related to parental acceptance, parental concentration, positive stability, and self-efficacy. Happiness also influences the academic achievement and academic performance of the students (Hashim and Zaharim, 2020). According to Salavera et al. (2017) happiness influences productive coping strategies such as seeking spiritual support, building hope, focusing on positive and social actions and does not influence unproductive coping strategies such as worry, and self-blame. Research studies claim that there is a significant correlation between happiness and the various dimension of personalities such as extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, feelings, and affects, sensation seeking, judgment. Happiness is negatively related to perceived stress, neuroticism, problematic internet usage, and smartphone addiction (Baltaci, 2020). Kindness and gratitude are also positively related with happiness (Polak & McCullough, 2006). Thus, happiness is positively related to many important life domains and is a very important component of our life. It is also a predictor of many of them. Salehi et al. (2014) found that happiness is a significant predictor of academic achievement of students and it is also a significant predictor of resilience among college students. Numerous psychologists support the view that there is positive association between health and happiness.

The above arguments show that happiness is not a static state and can increase through intentional human efforts. Thus, if happiness results in improving many life domains, then pursuing happiness may be an important strategy in prevention of illness and suffering.

Should happiness be researched?

Million-dollar questions that surrounds happiness are, “Is the investigation about happiness worthy or valid?” “Is attempting to increase happiness futile and worthless endeavor?” Everyone accepts the fact that happiness is a multi-dimensional construct and is not independent of external circumstances. According to Norrish & Vella-Brodrick (2008), the study of happiness is a worthy pursuit. Investigating about happiness, its factors help in improving physical, psychological, social well-being of an individual and the

society at large. The developments in the set point theory of happiness (Diener et al., 2006) supports the need for studies on happiness. There is also a growing emphasis universally on the need to explore more deeply about how various individual differences interact and impact dimensions of happiness. Various formulas, diverse definitions and theories of happiness highlight that happiness is a combination of happiness set point, life circumstances, voluntary/intentional activities which are under individuals' control (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Of these three, happiness can be deeply studied by focusing on the factors that are under the individual's control and the measurement of happiness is believed to be influenced by the current mood of the respondents, situational factors, and the respondent's most recent experiences (Diener et al., 1999). Self-reporting survey is the most used tool to measure happiness (De Vries, 2022) and filling up such self-assessment questionnaires, noting down good things that happen daily or daily enjoyable events etc. can increase a person's happiness over a period (Seligman et al., 2005). It is also observed that unlike the happiness obtained due to changes in life circumstances, the happiness obtained due to intentional activities is long lasting (Sheldon & Lyubomirskys, 2006). Hence, it is not only worth researching about happiness, its factors, effects etc. but despite methodological concerns, it is possible to measure happiness with valid and reliable instruments (Diener et al., 1999). Thus, happiness studies are moving on a spectrum of not only measuring "here and now" pleasure but also to explore about more lasting eudaimonia forms of happiness. Norrish & Vella-Brodrick (2008) also highlighted about further research areas of happiness like whether happiness interventions have a lasting positive effect on subjective well-being? How various individual differences interact and impact dimensions of happiness? How strategies relating to individual happiness can be made congruent with facets that facilitate the well-being of others (Ryan and Deci, 2000) etc.

Conclusion

Happiness is a state of mind in which a person feels mental peace, more positive emotions, and less negative emotions. It includes two main components, namely quality of life and well-being. Happiness has become important because it is linked to many other life domains and is also predictor of many of them such as intrapersonal skills, decision-making, self-esteem, academic achievement, coping strategies, personality traits, etc. The happiness of the citizens of any nation is much more important than GDP and money because the happiness that comes with the economic growth of the country is not sustainable and such happiness may sometimes have negative repercussions on psychological fulfillments (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2008). When a person is compassionate for others then it gives sense of purpose in life and long-lasting happiness and when a person comes out of a problem or stressful life event, the experiences undergone helps in developing

cognitive empathy skills, optimism, resilience and thus give them long lasting happiness. Happiness is also influenced by many factors such as family, friends, education, sociability, health, entertainment, sensation seeking, quality time spent with peers, self-esteem, kindness, gratitude, and school environment etc.

Thus, the studies on happiness are potentially beneficial not only for individuals but would be helpful at societal and national level. Happiness studies make people realize that the happiness derived through materialistic pleasures is not sustainable and thus encourages them to reprioritize their needs towards effective and sustainable sources of happiness. Happiness just like other human emotions is a very valid emotion and it deserves scientific recognition and scientific inquiry.

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