



We know that happier people are more likely to live longer and tend to be healthier, more successful and more socially engaged than people who describe themselves as less happy. So what causes happiness? And can we change how happy we are?

# Are you Chasing Happiness?

By Mark Shields

During the years of working as a Coach with many people from many different backgrounds, it is clear that my clients all have one thing in common. They are all chasing their own idea of happiness. I say "their own idea" because it is different to each and every one of us. Some may be unfulfilled in their career and job or some may not have the intimate relationship they yearn for.

**There is an acronym I use with all my clients which is L.A.M.B.S.S. This stands for: Love • Autonomy • Meaning Belonging • Status • Security**

## How many of them do you have in your life?

Many people have one or more of these missing in their life and as a human being these are the things that maintain our wellbeing and keep us happy. There has been much research in recent years looking into what happiness is and researchers have come up with the following:

- Happiness is made up of pleasure, engagement and meaning.
- It involves both daily positive emotions and a global sense that life is worthwhile.
- People can accurately report their own levels of happiness

Using this framework, the researchers are learning more and more all the time about who is happy, what makes us happy and why.

## So what are the sources of happiness?

Many people believe that if they had more money, a better job, fell in love, that they would be happier.

Quite often we underestimate how much control we have over our own happiness. Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky, in her book "The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want", analysed studies and reports that:

- 50% of our happiness is set by our genes
- 10% by life circumstances beyond our control
- 40% by our own choices

So you can see that even though there is a large proportion set in our genes (which is why many of us blame our parents for our inadequacies) there is almost equally a large proportion assigned to our own control. Everyone has a different "set-point" or base line of happiness so this shows that as individuals we have the power to raise or lower our set point. In order to change our set point we need to cultivate positive emotions. These are gratitude, serenity, joy, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, love.

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A Psychologist by the name of Barbara Fredrickson has demonstrated through her research that positive emotions “undo” some of the physical effects of stress, such as increased heart rate. Study subjects who experienced a positive emotion returned to a normal resting heart rate more quickly after experiencing stress than subjects who had not experienced a positive emotion.

Our evolutionary blueprint is designed to manage stress through the “fight or flight” process. So imagine Palaeolithic man going out to hunt for his lunch and meeting a sabre tooth tiger. His bodily response is to “fight” the tiger and catch his kill or runaway as fast as he can in order to save his life. Either way his body releases hormones of adrenaline to speed up his heart beat which pumps blood quicker around his body in order to energise his muscles to take physical action. Now this response would come into play every now and again but in our modern day chaos of life stress is all around us minute by minute every day so our systems are on red alert more often than not and this takes its toll on our wellbeing. Fredrickson points out that negative emotion like anger or fear evolved to narrow our focus and help us get out of a threatening situation safely, like the caveman scenario above. Positive emotions, on the other hand, like kindness, amusement, interest and gratitude put us in a frame of mind to explore the world around us and build a larger repertoire of actions that we can draw on during stressful times. Fredrickson’s theory makes sense to me as a Coach as in my clinics when I meet someone of a depressed orientation, I always set them a task to keep a Gratitude Diary. On return to the clinic they have already made an

improvement in their outlook because thinking about what you are grateful for in life changes your negative emotions to positive ones.

Positive emotions do not always come naturally to some people particularly people who may have a genetic predisposition to negative thinking (50%) or unfortunate life circumstances (10%), therefore, it is particularly helpful for these types of people to introduce the daily prescription of positive thinking in to their lives just as they would if there were taking medication. Positive emotions are the fuel for resilience which helps people finds meaning in ordinary and difficult events and finding meaning in life events leads to more positive emotion and so an upward spiral of greater wellbeing is created. So the next time you hear your inner dialogue spouting negativity, kick it into touch and turn that negative statement into a positive one, this will certainly start you on to a road of positivity into 2015 and may lead to the change that you are looking for in your life.

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