

**EDITORIAL**

# The How of Happiness and Wellbeing

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The concept of happiness is unique to an individual. Everybody gets happy for different reasons. There is a large body of research on happiness and there are many well written books on happiness by internationally known psychologists and other experts.

Though everybody is seeking happiness in his/her own way very few people seem to be genuinely happy on a long term basis. Mihaly csikszentmihalyi, former head of the department of Psychology, University of Chicago; well known for his international best seller **“Flow – The psychology of optimal experience”** has nicely explained this paradox in following words -

*“Despite the fact that we are now healthier and grow to be older despite the fact that even the least affluent among us are surrounded by material luxuries undreamed of even a few decades ago (there were few bathrooms in the palace of the Sun King, chairs were rare even in the richest medieval houses, and no Roman emperor could turn on a TV set when he was bored), and regardless of all the stupendous scientific knowledge we can summon at will, people often end up feeling that their lives have been wasted, that instead of being filled with happiness their years were spent in anxiety and boredom”.*(1)

Happiness seems to closely related to the concept of wellbeing. Being continually unhappy without justified cause is one the warning signals of poor

mental health according to William C. Menninger. President of Menninger Foundation Topeka, Kansas, USA.(2)

A happy and satisfied person is more likely to choose healthy lifestyles like regular walking, eating right foods at the right time in the right amount etc. There are more chances of him/her avoiding unhealthy habits like alcohol and drug abuse, sedentary lifestyle, overeating etc.

One of the most important question is what are the determinants of happiness and can we do something about it? Sonja Lyubomirsky, famous for her research work of happiness has eloquently discussed about this question in her book **“The How of Happiness - A new approach to getting the life your want”**. Based on her research work she says that life circumstances determine only 10% of happiness which includes wealth as well as other material things and up to 40% of happiness is within the power of human being to change. Rest 50% is the genetically determined but even this set point can be modified by environmental and behavioral changes.(3)

She has outlined many ‘happiness activities’ which anyone do on regular basis and increase the level of happiness in his/her life in spite of changing life circumstances. Some of the activities are - expressing gratitude; cultivating optimism; avoiding over thinking and social comparison; practicing acts of

kindness; nurturing social relationships; learning to forgive; practicing religion and spirituality; increasing Flow experiences etc. In her book she has given lots of references in support of these ideas.

'Increasing flow experiences' is one of the most interesting ideas related to happiness and seems to be very relevant to doctors who work very hard throughout their life but don't seem to get as much returns in terms of material wealth.

Mihaly csikszentmihalyi got the idea from interviewing people who appeared to get a lot out of life, either in their work or their leisure activities - not only creative professionals such as artists & musicians but people from all walks of life. He even found people doing repetitive routine jobs like assembly line worker in a factory experiencing joy in their work. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a Hungarian American Psychologist, recognized and named this secret as 'flow' - a highly focused mental state conducive to productivity and happiness. In the words of Mihaly csikszentmihalyi - *"Flow helps to integrate the self because in that state of deep concentration consciousness is unusually well ordered. Thoughts, intentions, feelings and all senses are focused on same goals. Experience is in harmony. And when the flow experience is over, one feels more "together" than before, not only internally, but also with respect to other people and to the world in general"*.(4) How close is this description to the meditational experience by the spiritual seekers across the world?

Mihaly csikszentmihalyi also describes the type of person who routinely experience 'flow' in his chosen work. - He calls them 'Autotelic Self'. According to him 'Autotelic Self' is one that easily translates potential threats into enjoyable challenges, and therefore, maintains inner harmony. Mihaly csikszentmihalyi describes following qualities in such a self-

- a) **Setting Goals:** To be able to experience 'flow'. One must have clear goals to strive for.
- b) **Fully immersed in the activity:** After having chosen a system of activity, a person with autotelic personality grows deeply involved in whatever, he is doing. Whether flying a plane around the world or washing dishes after dinner. He invests attention in the task in hand.
- c) **Paying attention what is happening:** Ability to sustain involvement beyond the limits of individuality.

- d) **Learning to enjoying immediate experience:** being in control of mind means that literally anything that can be a source of joy - feeling a breeze on a hot day, seeing a cloud reflection on a high rise, watching a child play with a puppy, drinking a glass of water can all be felt as deeply satisfying experience that enrich life.(5)

In other words it can be said that any work big or small (according to our concept) if done with highest possible level of concentration with selflessness can give us instant joy and peace. Interestingly the concept of Karam Yogi in Bhagwad Geeta seems very closed to ideas Autotelic self.....

"He from whom all beings originate, by whom all is this universe is pervaded, by worshipping Him, through his own natural duties, a man attains the highest perfection." ('Bhagwad Gita', Chapter- XVIIIth, Verse - 46)

In conclusion it can be said that happiness and wellness are inter related and can be achieved by experiencing the 'flow' moments in our day - to - day life without waiting for the great things to happen. Many committed doctors and other health professionals seem to experiences the 'flow' moments on daily basis and this is perhaps their biggest reward in addition to earning their livelihood with respect and dignity.

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