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Happiness consultancy report

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

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Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong

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Assignment

The consultancy is a continuation of your reflective journal.

- You continue with the activity you used for your journal, or a different one, and/or an additional one.
- You recruit two or more individuals — called clients — to undertake an activity known to increase happiness, either the same activity as your own or a different one.
- You introduce your clients to the activity, for example through a presentation, talk, workshop and/or handout.
- You monitor their engagement with the activity on a regular basis (at least weekly) through observations, interviews, survey and/or other means.
- You evaluate the effect of the activity on yourself and your clients using questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and/or other techniques.

For more details see http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST_13outline.pdf

Jess Skipper's consultancy report starts on the next page.

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CST228 Happiness Consultancy

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Activity: Exercise as a Happiness Activity

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Exercise as a Happiness Activity

In the exploration of the benefits of exercise there is a massive correlation between the various reporting in both the academic and popular fields. Exercise conditions our bodies to enable us to enjoy our life more. Individuals that exercise experience a state of reduced tiredness and have more energy and less tension, anger and depression (Hills and Argyle, 1997; Okonski, 2003; Maddox, 1982; Covey, 1989). Additionally the act of exercise enhances self-esteem and body image creating a better individual view of the self (Hills and Argyle, 1997; Covey, 1989; Barletta and Bond, 2012; Servan-Schriebe, 2005; *The Happiness Institute*, 2013). In studies of exercise as a method of counselling for depressed patients, exercising not only made people happier than medication but also decreased their chances of relapsing back into depression (Okonski, 2003, Barletta and Bond, 2012; Lyubomirsky, 2007).

It is argued that regular exercise at the peak of your abilities can cause a drug-induced euphoria (Maddux, 1997; Hills & Argyle, 1997; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Servan-Schriebe, 2005; *Prevention*, 2009; *The Happiness Institute*, 2013). Maddux refers to this as 'flow': a state in which 'people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter' (Maddux, 1997 p343). After extended periods of exercising this euphoric state can become addictive to the point that people will seek it, even without other motivation (Hills and Argyle, 1997; Lyubomirsky, 2007).

However, despite the agreement about the benefits of exercise on a person's wellbeing, there is a great amount of debate about how exactly one should go about undertaking this activity. There is a large consensus that exercise should last for 20-30 minutes and you should maintain a heart rate of 70-80% higher than your resting heart rate during the activity (*Prevention*, 2012; Okonski, 2003, Mendes, 2009; Servan-Schreibe, 2005; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Covey, 1989). However, Barletta and Bond (2012) recommend that even just 5-10 minutes of exercise a day will yield benefits, yet Maddox (1982) claims that one should aim for one to two hours per day at a heart rate of 50%.

One major discrepancy between the popular and academic reporting on the benefits of exercise is the lack of acknowledging the negative effect of pushing yourself too hard during exercise. Academic writings on the subject are a great deal more flexible with the regularity of the exercises, and make a concentrated effort to tell individuals not to push themselves (Okonski, 2003; Hills & Argyle, 1997; Maddux, 1997). Often, it was reported, unfit individuals would start an exercise program and attempt to overcompensate for their state of ill health (Maddox, 1982; Covey, 1989; Lyubomirsky, 2007). This can lead to a very strenuous, yet spasmodic routine of exercise that would not only be unpleasant, but also prove unlikely to encourage an individual to continue their program (Covey, 1989; Maddox, 1982; Hills and Argyle, 1997; Lyubomirsky, 2007). The 'no pain, no gain' approach is not conducive to an effective exercise program. Yet this was not what was reported in the popular reporting I accessed. In most cases it was ignored in favour of a strict regimen or, in the case of the *Prevention* Magazine article I found, individuals were encouraged to push themselves as hard as possible (2012).

To combat these differing opinions on the methods of how to actually undertake exercise as a happiness activity, it is important to look at the notion of 'fit'. If an activity feels natural to you and you feel good doing it then you are naturally more inclined to undertake it (Lyubomirsky, 2007). There is no point committing to a program that requires you to make sacrifices or negatively impacts your day-to-day life, as it will undermine your resolve and any benefits you may achieve (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Servan-Schreibe, 2005; *The Happiness Institute*, 2013). For example, if an individual finds that they are generally not a 'morning person', yet they commit to waking up at half past five every morning to go for a run, they will find themselves neglecting their activity and choosing to sleep in. So whilst the reporting states certain parameters for the activity, it is best to essentially do what you can (Maddox, 1982).

My Experience

In the first assignment of this course, the reflective journal, I came to the conclusion that finding the right fit of exercise was crucial for my success. My initial plan was too ambitious and because of that I failed, in line with what the research says (Okonski, 2003; Servan-Schreibe, 2005; *The Happiness Institute*, 2013; Hills & Argyle, 1997). My exercise program was to go for a 20-30 minute run at around five-thirty in the afternoon, three times a week. Initially I had planned to go for a one hour run, four times a week at six in the morning. However I found that I would choose to sleep through my alarm, and when I did actually go, I'd become incredibly tired for the rest of the day. However, after finding my 'fit' and changing my program I achieved a wealth of results including an incredible increase in happiness and energy, and my sleeping habits improved dramatically. I was incredibly flexible with my schedule, if I missed a day I would

just go on another day to make up for it, and this flexibility helped to maintain my routine. At the end of the assessment I had every intention of continuing my exercise plan into the foreseeable future.

However it was not to be, as I fell ill shortly after the end of the first assessment and spent a week feeling sick on the couch. That was enough to break my habit of going running. In order to try and kick-start my running again I tried a wealth of different techniques. In my first attempt, I had been so excited to reach goals such as running three kilometres, and then finally running five kilometres. However since I had already reached those goals, reaching them a second time served no motivation. According to Lyubomirsky (2007), committed goal pursuit gives us a sense of meaning and control over our lives and provides us with an incentive to act. I discovered in order to try and recommit to undertaking exercise as a regular part of my life, I would need to try and set some more goals. I decided to enter a ten-kilometre fun run in Sydney. It cost money to enter, thus I was financially committed, but additionally it would take some training for me to get up to a standard where I could run ten kilometres in one go. By setting a major goal, the accomplishment of smaller sub-goals on the way to my final goal has contributed to my desire to undertake running again, renewing goals I had already once achieved (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

It is well established that routine is crucial for exercise as a happiness activity to work. People who exercise two times a week are a great deal happier than those who do not exercise at all (Mendes, 2009). As the instances of exercise increase, so do the levels of happiness (Mendes 2009; Okonski, 2003; Maddux, 1997). Okonski (2003) cites stimulus control as the best means of maintaining a routine. By conditioning your environment and cultivating stimuli,

an individual will automatically act out their activity (Okonski, 2003; Lyubomirsky, 2007). Maddux (1997) does not encourage a 'mindless' habit of routine but a self controlled and disciplined routine; by still consciously choosing to exercise, you will maintain the emotional benefits, but mindlessly doing it apparently negates the happiness side benefits (Maddux, 1997). Additionally, the more you do an activity, and the better you get at it, the more likely you are to do it again and achieve a greater sense of fulfilment and happiness out of it (Hills and Argyle, 1997; Lyubomirsky, 2007). In the past, the flexibility of my routine was a positive thing, and helped me to stay committed to my plan. However it is clear that the fact that it was an assessment also contributed to my commitment, as once I finished the assessment and encountered an obstacle, my resolution completely disappeared. Thus for a long-term adoption of my exercise routine, I must turn my running into an automatic response, and not a decision. By taking the ability to not go for a run out of the equation, I not only am forced to go, but will also build willpower at the same time, building a behaviour of habit (Covey, 1989; Lyubomirsky, 2007).

My Clients' experience

Both my clients, John and Kate, live with me and thus saw my transformation during my initial phase of running for my reflective journal assessment. John and Kate are very different individuals and have incredibly different lives, thus I chose them as I assumed they would provided varied results. I sat each client down individually and presented them with a handout of my notes about this activity and the research I found on it. This handout was intended to give them something to refer back to in the event they forgot or had trouble with the activity. I explained in detail my experience, particularly 'fit' and

how that turned my experience from failure into a success. Considering my focus on fit, I made it clear that they both could choose different exercises to undertake than mine, and also they could choose to change the regularity to fit their individual needs. In order to measure their happiness after the five weeks of exercise I got each individual to fill out an Oxford Happiness Questionnaire taken from Sonia Lyubomirsky's *The How Of Happiness* (2007, p84) at the beginning of their five weeks and again at the end.

John

John is a 22-year-old male who works as a Plumber. He achieved a score of 4.2 on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. For his activity, he chose to go for a five kilometre run two times a week, and also play touch football once a week. At the end of the five weeks, he returned a score of 4.3 on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire.

John's happiness levels improved only slightly after undertaking the five weeks of happiness activities and at first it was hard to understand why. Through observation, there had been no remarkable changes in his overall attitude, nor in his reported sleep quality. However after coming home from touch football, he would be in a very good mood, different to his usual state. After interviewing John, I discovered some reasons why there was not so much of a change as there had been for me.

Our society currently has a very sedentary lifestyle, with jobs becoming increasingly desk based rather than physically based (Maddox, 1982). The human body has evolved for strenuous labour and activity in hunting, farming and even war, yet the energy needs of the human body are not met in urban

civilisation (Maddox, 1982). This indeed was true of myself, as a University student I spend a great deal of time seated. However John, as a plumber, is in an incredibly labour intensive line of work and often spends all day digging trenches, or cutting up bitumen and concrete. Whilst I had accepted his regimen of running and playing touch football as suitably appropriate, he had not actually undertaken any great feat that would impact greatly on his fitness.

However there was still a change in his happiness levels, not matter how small. Yet I attribute this to his involvement with group sports. He is the youngest on his team by 15 years, so he was not necessarily getting a huge work out, but the group aspect provided an opportunity to socialise, thus bolstering social support and friendships (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 2002).

Kate

Kate is a 39-year-old mother of two, who runs her husband's plumbing business from their home office. Her initial score on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire was 3.6. Kate's chosen activity was to go for an hour-long walk with a friend, four times a week. At the end of the five weeks she returned a happiness score of 3.9.

Kate's lifestyle is very much what Maddox is describing when he says we exist in a sedentary civilisation (1982, p 39). Her entire employment history has been behind a desk usually as a personal assistant, however now that her place of employment is her downstairs study, her levels of activity and movement are even more limited. Despite my warnings that her choice and method of exercise would not be the most beneficial to her, she was determined to go for a walk for an hour, with the notion of overcompensating for her lack of exercise previously

as much of the research indicated individuals had a tendency to do (Maddox, 1982; Covey, 1989; Lyubomirsky, 2007). The research I had done previously indicates that often this over strenuous type of exercise is detrimental to the idea of attempting to stick to a planned regime (Covey, 1989; Maddox, 1982; Hills and Argyle, 1997; Lyubomirsky, 2007). Interestingly though, as I was observing Kate over the weeks and waiting for her to stop doing the exercise, she continued for the entire five weeks.

After interviewing her and conducting some research I found that the benefits of exercising with a social contact was – especially in females – a boost to their success and their motivation (Plante, et. Al, 2011). Not only did it increase their enjoyment of their work out, but also the likeliness that they would return to do it again (Plante, et. Al, 2011). When I questioned her about her success and whether or not she thought that going for a walk with a friend played a part in her success she agreed whole heartedly.

Unlike John, Kate's fitness level was not very high, and she reported several benefits that she had experienced since undertaking her exercise. The first benefit that she noticed was that she was sleeping better, even though she was sleeping a little bit less. Secondly, she found that her energy levels had risen throughout the five weeks and her consumption of coffee had since decreased. This then had a flow on effect and she found she was completing her work quicker and thus had more free time to help the kids with their homework. Whilst her happiness score only rose 0.3 on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, she found that that small change had a profound flow on effect for the rest of her day-to-day life.

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