

Alana Ayliffe

Happiness reflective journal

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

Autumn session, 2015

Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong

Subject coordinators: Chris Barker and Brian Martin

Assignment

Choose an activity that research says increases personal happiness, such as expressing gratitude, helping others, being optimistic or practising mindfulness. (See Lyubomirsky for ideas.) Undertake this activity for at least 5 weeks, keeping a personal diary of your observations about your experience, with entries once a week or more. You can keep the diary on a blog or as typed or handwritten notes.

During the time you undertake the activity, you should also read academic writing. In your diary, you can comment on the connection between what researchers say about the activity and your experience of it.

Your submission is in two parts:

1. A 1000-word reflective journal
2. Your diary.

In the reflective journal, you should report on 5 or more pieces of academic research (e.g. journal articles) that recommend your activity as enhancing happiness.

For more details see http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST_15outline.pdf

Alana Ayliffe's reflective journal starts on the next page.

This document is located at <http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/happiness-journal-tops/>.

CST228

*Happiness: Investigating its
Causes and Conditions*

Reflective Journal

Due: 17 April, 2015

Weighting: 25%

(Student No. xxxxxxxx)

My Approach

I am the eternal optimist; I see the potential in an empty glass. I bounce back from hard knocks relatively unscathed, and tend to have my dial set to “*everything’s gunna be alright*”. However I had an epiphany in the initial workshop for this course, and it changed my life.

I heard someone talk about their optimism project, the little grievances and mild annoyances they faced, and how they planned to overcome them. It shed light on the negative thought processes holding me back in life.

I’ve been carrying the weight of an existential unease, and this has meant wasting time mentally whingeing, preventing me from making the most of my time and energy. This subsequently detracts from the goals I set and minimises the importance of my key values and beliefs: achievement in my studies, fitness and good health, and commitment to family and friendships.

I had chosen exercise for my happiness-boosting activity, but I realised making myself exercise was just scratching the surface. I needed to delve deeper, to think about the things in life I am really striving for consistency with—habits, routine, structure. Renowned psychologist and author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) asserts habits developed by an individual have a critical affect on their levels of happiness. And it was my well-established habit of dreading exercise, and the subsequent avoidance, that was really getting me down. Why did I feel this way about something I know is good for me, something I even *enjoy* 95% of the time?

When I thought about the other things I dread in the same way, I was astounded. I worry about not studying enough, instead of cracking open a textbook. I create excuses for not working out, then suffer mortifying regret. I procrastinate about reading, when I truly love it. I dread social occasions, but follow through, enjoying them despite my misgivings. Thinking about my job makes me groan, but I come home satisfied and happier. Something wasn’t adding up.

Anthropologist Lionel Tiger (as cited in Mishra, 2013) writes about mood versus attitude, and it really struck a chord with me. An attitude is made up of three components: the cognitive, the emotional, and the behavioural. My three components were out of sync. Cognitively I know the benefits of exercise, study, time with friends. But emotionally I avoid them, and behaviourally I circumvent them. I procrastinate. Or whinge.

So I immediately changed direction and set out to learn a whole new set of cognitive skills, that is, “learned optimism”. The idea that an optimistic outlook can be mindfully cultivated, typically by challenging negative self talk.

The Evidence for Optimism, and it's Application

Learned helplessness is the opposite of optimism, and it doesn't just affect behaviour—it goes right down to a cellular level, making the immune system more passive. In stark contrast “the blood of optimists has a feistier response to threat, more infection-fighting white blood cells, t-lymphocytes.” (Seligman, 2006, pp. 172-73). A meta-analysis in 2009 found optimists are less vulnerable to disease, their attitudes strongly related to protection from cardiovascular disease and cancer. They also have a better resistance to depression. (Seligman, 2001, p. 194).

Psychologist Martin Seligman is the leading author and co-founder of the positive psychology movement. Most of the articles I researched cited Seligman, so I've regularly chosen to use his work, preferring the primary resource over a secondary.

Seligman (2006) writes about the freedom to choose—you use optimism when you need less depressive thoughts, more achievement, better health. But you also choose when not to use it, for example when owning up is needed.

This frees you up to use optimism as a tool to better achieve the goals you set for yourself, to use the wisdom learned from a lifetime of trial and error (Seligman, 2006, p. 292). It's not a one-size-fits-all

personality trait. It's not about being positive all the time, or even forever happy. It is about learning a new set of cognitive skills. Seligman (2006) calls this "flexible optimism", the ability to keep your eyes open for when you need to employ the skill.

This method recommends keeping an ABC diary, similar to the diary I've created for this project, where you tune into your "perceptual dialogue". You learn to be objective, to *describe* the situation you're in, not your feelings or your assumptions about what's happening, or what might happen as a result.

My Experience

Our reflexive explanations are usually distortions: just believing something, feeling something, doesn't make it true. By challenging my cognitive routines, unpacking my negative outlook on impending events, I could see in plain view how contradictory they were. I needed to distance myself from pessimistic thoughts about commitments, to verify their accuracy, a process Seligman (2002) calls disputation. He recommends using the ABC model (Adversity, Belief, Consequence) pioneered by Albert Ellis (Seligman, 2006, pp. 4–5).

I personalised the method, using "Acknowledge", rather than "Adversity". I notice a negative thought, which is often half the battle. I then look at the Belief behind what I'm thinking or feeling. I challenge anything that doesn't match up with my values, morals and beliefs, and dismiss it. The Consequence then becomes "completion": I've analysed the roadblock, it's now time for action. I create a plan, and commit to its completion.

I then look for reinforcers for the desirable behaviour. This wasn't suitable in the form of reward (I give myself enough), but I viewed being able to write about my positive experience as the prize. I got to analyse, assess, and I got to brag. Research shows writing about self-regulatory topics can be associated with a significant increase in subjective well-being. (King, 2001) Writing about what I faced, how I was challenged, and

how I overcame it, helps to highlight my achievements and growth, and reinforces why I'm doing it all in the first place. I plan to research and write further in the field of psychology on the examination of motivational consequences of writing about goals.

My Evaluation

This was a challenge to myself to change negative thought patterns concerning daily life and activities, through cognitive analysis and the practice of learned optimism. My aim was to be more productive, fulfilled and engaged in the areas of my life I value most: my education, health and fitness, and my relationships. By logically unpacking the knee-jerk dread surrounding the activities I value, I learned to quickly reason with myself, bringing to the fore positive emotions and memories of the relevant activities. I have found this practice to be incredibly helpful, and can even go as far as to say it has changed my life, or to be more accurate, it is *changing* my life.

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(* learning to accept who you are)