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Happiness reflective journal

MACS325, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

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Assignment: You should find and report on 3 pieces of academic research (e.g. journal articles) and 3 pieces of popular writing (newspapers, magazines, websites, etc.) that recommend a particular activity as enhancing happiness. You should undertake this activity for 5 weeks and report on your experience. In a reflective journal you aim to search out evidence and analyse it; draw conclusions based on the evidence; and reflect on and evaluate the evidence and experience in order to make a pronouncement about its value (in order to improve our lives).

For more details see http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS325_12outline.pdf

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

Cultivating Optimism: 'Best Possible Self' Diary and Sub-Goals Diaries

We all seem to be on the pursuit of happiness, charging down the path of what we think this to be or what may lead us to find such, ironically however, happiness is not something we can find but rather a by-product of alternative paths and choices we make and take throughout our life. There is no one path fits all and there is certainly no way we can buy our happiness. Happiness, it turns out, is the result of carefully chosen personal goals which have meaning and value to us, the way in which we seek these goals, and the attitude we have along the way. Fortunately there exists research and evidence which provides methods and strategies to develop the needed life skills to achieve our own form of happiness. One method being Optimistic thinking and a strategy to achieve such, the 'Best Possible Self' Diary.

Optimistic thinking has been proven to be one key ingredient for happiness, it focuses on structuring a more positive outlook on life and circumstances; creating a happier person from the inside out. One particular activity, developed by Positive psychologist Laura King, has an individual write for 20-30 minutes about their ideal life one, five or ten years from now in which all their hopes and dreams have come to fruition. This activity as idealistic as it sounds has been proven to increase individuals' happiness and health for a number of reasons. First, by imagining that you have accomplished all your goals and desires you trick your brain into thinking you have achieved something meaningful to you, secondly, the process of writing itself holds much credit in increasing happiness- by writing your brain is using a different neural network which structures and analyses information in a new and more manageable form. Lastly, by writing down your goals you begin to see more practically how they can be achieved and what is needed in order to do so.

Unsurprisingly, there exists much literature on the benefits of optimistic thinking and the 'Best Possible Self' activity within both popular writing and academic text. While both forms of literature support the evidence for the 'Best Possible Self' diary and state how it increases happiness, academic literature explains why such a strategy works. For example in 'Anatomy of Happiness' Pennebaker states that writing affects the brain, neurotransmitters, the way genes are expressed... telling us why such an activity increases happiness. In general terms popular writing provides a brief outline of what the activity is, the benefits it can bring and how it can be done, in the context of its target audience. On the other hand, academic texts are more focused on the research undertaken on this subject and how the findings of the activity support other evidence on its relationship to increased happiness and well-being.

I undertook this activity over a five week period; for the first week, on every second day, I wrote for 20-30 minutes, where I wish to be one, two, five and ten years from now. This may sound exhaustive but to my surprise I found myself looking forward to writing 'My Best Possible Self' each time. Throughout this process I discovered four main goals which hold significant value and meaning to me. In order to continue, I took these four goals and used the next four weeks to create a sub-goal diary based on my findings from the 'Best Possible Self' activity. For each of the four weeks, I set aside 30 minutes to write down the steps needed to accomplish each of my four goals. I found it best to undertake this activity in the morning as my mind was in a more neutral state than later in the day.

I found it much easier to write in context of five years from now when compared to one year. I felt at ease and invigorated when imagining where I will be- mind, body, soul and all other spheres in five years time when I have aspired to all my dreams. On the contrary I avoided writing my 'Best Possible Self' one year from now, and when I finally did I found myself bombarded with barrier thoughts like 'what about money', 'will you still be living where you are' or 'have the friends I do now' and so on. If anything, writing in context of one year from now made me realise what IS causing me anxiety and stress. The sub-goals diary was also helpful; it broke down what steps I need to implement now in order to achieve where I wish to be in the future, solidifying my aspirations and showing me that they are realistic in the given time frame and showing me how I can best go about reaching them.

My overall happiness I believe has increased in different ways for a number of reasons. The most notable observation is that when an unfavourable situation has arisen since beginning the 'Best Possible Self' diary is that, rather than stressing about the event I instead ask myself whether or not this will affect my goals and if not, do not let myself worry about what has happened. I have also found myself each day striving to be the person I have written about in this activity and working towards my goals in each way I can. Because I have both subjective and objective goals I know that regardless of whether my objective goals become a reality or not, I still have the intrinsic fulfilment of self-growth. I was surprised with how helpful this activity has been for me and my findings align with the research and evidence supporting the effectiveness of the 'Best Possible Self' diary in attaining a greater state of happiness. As a result of my personal discoveries I have recommended this activity to friends and family who have given me positive feedback of the benefits they too have found from undertaking this happiness strategy.

Bibliography

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