

Brandon Cleal

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

Brandon Cleal's reflective journal starts on the next page.

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

Evidence for the benefits of mindfulness

Happiness levels of an individual are considered to be dependent on three elements: the individual's predisposed 'set point', their personal circumstances, and the intentional activities they undertake (Lyubomirsky, 2006). For my chosen five-week 'intentional activity', I chose to practice mindfulness.

Perhaps one of my favorite descriptions of mindfulness comes from the book 'Happiness: Essential Mindfulness Practices' written by Thich Hanh (2009, p. 2), which describes mindfulness as "the energy of being aware and awake to the present. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment". The goal of mindfulness is to allow a person to maintain awareness moment to moment, distance oneself from beliefs and emotions to enable an individual to see things objectively and ultimately foster clear thinking and open heartedness. Therefore, it enables an individual to become a more centered and balanced individual (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn 2008).

There is a plethora of evidence on the positive benefits an individual can gain by practicing mindfulness. This evidence can be summarized under three general categories. These includes an increase in mental health, an improvement in physical health, and overall, an increase in an individual's total wellbeing (University of Exeter 2014).

In a pair of studies conducted by Brown and Ryan (2008), a pattern of correlations was discovered, consistent with rumination partially mediating a causal link between mindfulness and hostility, anger, and verbal aggression. These correlations support the idea that mindfulness could reduce rumination which, in turn, could reduce anger and increase overall well-being. Other mental health benefits that correlate mindfulness with increased well-being is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

which aims to change suffering associated with mental disorders, stress, and chronic diseases (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Essentially, MBSR can assist individuals to develop awareness for their own thoughts and feelings. This is established without judgment, thus allowing an individual to find a greater level of acceptance for themselves. MBSR has also been proven to help patients reduce the tendency to constantly replay negative thoughts and experiences in their head (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). It is implemented using a structured program that combines meditation practices, such as sitting and walking meditation, and yoga.

As well as having significant benefits for mental health, mindfulness has demonstrated substantial benefits for physical health. For example, stress is a well-known contributor to immune suppression (Miller 2004, p.601). In a study one year before this (Carlson et al. 2003, p. 577), mindfulness showed an enhanced quality of life and decreased stress symptoms in breast and prostate cancer patients. The study was the first to show changes in cancer-related cytokine production as a result of increased mindfulness through the MBSR program, thereby strengthening patient immune responses. In addition, mental relaxation has been shown to result in physical health improvements. For example, there is empirical evidence to suggest that, on average, individuals who meditate for over five years are twelve biological years younger than other people of the same age (Sharma 2006, p.208).

Implementation

As a science student, I was skeptical about the benefits of a five week mindfulness activity. As such, I wanted to quantitatively measure my initial happiness and mindfulness level, so that I was better able to compare results afterwards. I completed the Berkeley University's Mindfulness Quiz, followed by the Oxford

Happiness Questionnaire and received a mindfulness score of 52% and a happiness score of 60%.

After reading some of the difficulties other students have faced with their mindfulness activities, I decided that, to maintain motivation, I had to choose an activity that would not confine me to a particular time or place. After reading the book 'Happiness: Essential Mindfulness Practices' (Hanh 2009), I decided to practice walking and sitting meditation whilst focusing on my breathing. The book states that this is the best and easiest place to start when you are practicing meditation.

Initially, I tried to be mindful every time I walked, sat down and studied. After speaking with my tutor, Chris, I realized that this was not a realistic option as my mind needed a simpler starting point. I decided to focus on walks to and from university, as well as on the first time I sit in the day. I then committed to increasing the amount of time spent on each activity, including being mindful whilst walking around university and also when savouring food.

Reflection

Generally, I consider myself a person who experiences a high level of happiness. I also experience a high level of stress and anxiety when it comes to university assignments and family issues. In my reflections, I found that I adopt a 'suppress and forget' approach when it comes to anger and stress. This was compounded by absentmindedness, as I would usually just forget that there was an issue at all, yet still have the symptoms associated with it.

While participating in these mindfulness activities, I focused on becoming more aware of how I feel physically and emotionally. Initially, I found these suppressed feelings to become quite overwhelming. I would get frustrated with

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acknowledging a feeling of anger or stress whilst simultaneously attempting to stop myself from considering the reasoning behind it. I continued the techniques outlined the book, as my research indicated that the benefits of mindfulness would take time.

Throughout the 5 weeks, I began to feel a significant difference in my mood. I started to allow myself to 'let go' and stop concentrating on a reason for stress or anger, but focus on the fact that the feeling was there, and just let it pass. I also noticed a difference in my social interactions with other people. I felt myself concentrating and actively listening much more than usual, which is something I did not even know I had a problem with. A peripheral benefit I gained from mindfulness practice was the information I learnt about myself and the environment I live in. I started to notice things I would usually overlook, and as cliché as it sounds, after the 5 weeks, I can honestly say I have a greater appreciation for life.

Evaluation

At the completion of the 5 weeks, I repeated the Berkeley University's Mindfulness Quiz and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. I received a mindfulness score of 72% and a happiness score of 68%, a vast improvement to my initial scores. Previous studies estimate the short term benefits of mindfulness to only take effect after 6 weeks (University of Exeter 2014). This evidence contradicts my experience, with positive outcomes occurring within 4 weeks.

The major benefits I noticed in this challenge included: a reduction in anger, stress and anxiety when completing university work and before going to bed. I have an increased ability to enjoy and appreciate doing what would conventionally be seen as 'nothing' and allowing my mind to be blank for short periods. I realised that my productivity increased when exercising and doing university work.

Consequently, I felt more motivated to continue being productive. These benefits are consistent with academic evidence, which states that practicing mindfulness increases overall well-being.

Word Count: 1097

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