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Happiness reflective journal

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

Autumn session, 2013

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 and popular writing (such as news stories) about it. In your diary, you can comment on the connection between what researchers and popular writers 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 3 or more pieces of academic research (e.g. journal articles) and 3 or more pieces of popular writing (newspapers, magazines, websites, etc.) that recommend your activity as enhancing happiness.

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

Jess Skipper's reflective journal starts on the next page.

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

CST228 REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

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TUTORIAL: WED 430

EXERCISE AS HAPPINESS ACTIVITY

CST228 Reflective Journal

The benefits of exercise have been clearly established through extensive study of the relationship between happiness and exercise. 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). Additionally the act of exercise enhances self-esteem and body image creating a better individual view of the self (Hills and Argyle, 1997). In a study of exercise as a method of counselling for depressed patients, exercising not only made people happier but also decreased their chances of relapsing back into depression (Okonski, 2003).

It is argued that regular exercise at the peak of your abilities can cause a drug-induced euphoria (Maddux, 1997; Hills & Argyle, 1997). 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).

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). 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).

What do writers say?

The biggest correlation between both academic and popular reporting is the duration and intensity of the workouts. The general consensus is that exercise should last for 30 minutes and you should maintain a heart rate of 70% higher than your resting heart rate (*Prevention*, 2012; Okonski, 2003, Mendes, 2009; Servan-Schriebe, 2005).

Popular reporting also noted that exercise leads to a drop in depression and stress, greater body image and higher levels of happiness (Servan-Schriebe, 2005; *The Happiness Institute*, 2013) and the state of drug-induced euphoria and resulting 'addiction' were also widely discussed (Servan-Schriebe, 2005; *Prevention*, 2009; *The Happiness Institute*, 2013).

In terms of differences, one of the major things that the academic articles noted that the popular reporting did not was the negative effect of pushing yourself too hard. The academic articles were more flexible with the regularity of the exercises and made a concentrated effort to tell people to not push themselves (Okonski, 2003; Hills & Argyle, 1997; Maddux, 1997). The *Prevention* magazine article encouraged individuals to push themselves as hard as possible (2012). However, the popular reporting also advocated exercise as a 'fun' activity, encouraging socialisation and listening to music to encourage participation and enjoyment (*Prevention*, 1997; *The Happiness Institute*, 2013; Servan-Schriebe, 2005). Socialisation was briefly talked about in Hills & Argyle (1997) however Maddux (1997) expressly frowned upon any other activity that took someone out of the present or disturbed their 'mindfulness'.

What did I do? How did it affect me?

Initially I formed the idea of 'running' or exercise as a happiness activity due to all that I had heard in popular reporting about the 'runner's high' and the other benefits in terms of self-image. Specifically, I planned to go running in the morning for an hour four times a week. After two weeks I had to alter my plan as

I was feeling unhappy at the prospect of exercising and thus missed several planned runs. I had read the concept of 'fit' in class and thus decided to limit my running to 30 minutes a session and to go at 5:30pm (or when I had free time) three times a week, more if I got the chance. Flexibility was crucial.

Initially, I hated this activity. I did not like waking up early to go for a run and I always felt so tired afterwards, which was detrimental to the rest of my day. However after changing my routine I actually looked forward to going for a run. I would take my dog with me and she would be so happy and excited that I found I was happy and excited. I was sleeping much better with no instances of sleep walking or talking, which I suffer from terribly. I woke up feeling energised and I had so much more patience and energy to invest into my personal relationships. My mother and partner both commented that I seemed a great deal happier in general. I missed a session and found that I was cranky and yearned to go for a run. I've kept up this activity even past this assignment as I've actually achieved a positive result from it, which surprised me.

What do I think about it all?

Finding the right fit of exercise is crucial to succeeding in this activity. My initial plan was too ambitious and because of that I failed, in line with what the research says (Okonski, 2003; Servan-Schriebe, 2005; *The Happiness Institute*, 2013; Hills & Argyle, 1997). I definitely experienced a raise in the level of my happiness and sleep quality and felt far less grumpy that I am infamously known for. However one element that helped me to maintain my routine is the benefit I got from seeing my dog so happy after the runs, and the enjoyment of listening to music as I ran. Maddux (1997) argues against socialising or listening to music whilst exercising, however the popular reporting encourages it (*Prevention*, 1997; *The Happiness Institute*, 2013; Servan-Schriebe, 2005) and I have to agree with them.

As far as I am aware, I don't think I ever really attained that 'runner's high' that both popular and academic sources touted. Perhaps I need to maintain

my routine for longer to achieve it, or push myself a little harder, I am not sure. Yet, one thing that caught my attention was in Hills & Argyle's study when they stated that the better you are at an activity, the more you'll want to do it (1997). In the last week of my diary keeping, I managed to run five kilometres, a feat I never thought I would do. I now want to keep running and testing myself to see how far I can go. Thus, in regards to both popular and academic reporting on exercise as a happiness activity, in my personal case it has been a success, despite my initial scepticism and I plan to continue.

Words: 1189

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