

Samantha Samuels

Happiness reflective journal

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

Autumn session, 2014

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_14outline.pdf

Samantha Samuels’ reflective journal starts on the next page.

“Samantha Samuels” is a pseudonym.

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

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CST 228

Happiness Journal

18/04/2014

I came to Australia for two reasons. One was to experience a place that my grandmother loved, and the other was to work on increasing my happiness. This class would help me on my journey to be truly happy for once in my life. It would teach me how to stop dwelling on the negatives in my past, and instead be grateful for the wonderful people and things in my life. As I began my journey in Australia, even before I started my happiness journal, I noticed that I had been expressing a lot of gratitude for the people in my life that I loved, the people that I was meeting every day, and the things in my life that I am lucky to have, such as my health. I admired how beautiful nature in Australia was, especially the ocean and the stars. I gradually became more positive and a lot happier.

Once I was instructed to begin my happiness journal I decided that the activity I would like to practice would be Sonja Lyubomirsky's "Happiness Activity No. 1: Expressing gratitude. I would implement this activity by

1. Twice a week for five weeks, writing three things in my diary that I was grateful for, and explaining why as a reminder to myself.
2. Writing a thank you letter to a loved one.
3. Whenever I find something to be grateful for, take a moment to actually admire it and be as grateful as I can be.

These activities would force me to think about the positive things in my life rather than the negatives, which is something that I have always found myself doing. According to Kennon M. Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky "grateful thinking fosters the savoring of positive life experiences and situations, so that people can extract the maximum possible satisfaction and

enjoyment from their circumstances”. This quote alone made me eager to start my gratitude activity.

Writing in a journal was recommended by Lyubomirsky in her book *The How of Happiness*, as well as by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D, who stated that “studies have shown that those who kept gratitude journals felt better about their lives...exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week”. While writing in my journal, I would find myself smiling because I was so happy about the things I was grateful for. For example, my best friend Nicole who completely understands me, and my dad, whom without I could not be in Australia. I wrote about how grateful I am for the nature of Australia, as well as the amazing friends, both Australian and American, that I have met here. As the days flew by I found myself becoming happier, becoming a lot more grateful for my life in general, and never dwelling on the negatives. I believe this has to do with Kennon Sheldon, Todd Kashdan, and Michael F. Steger’s explanation that “gratitude has been shown to contribute to well-being by boosting the retrieval of positive autobiographical memories. The reappraising benefit of gratitude on memory was shown to promote successful closure of unpleasant open memories, ultimately contributing to happiness”, meaning the more you are grateful for positive memories in your life, the less you remember the negative ones resulting in happiness.

Doverspike also mentioned a “gratitude visit” where you would write a letter to a loved one, visit them, and read them what you wrote. Unfortunately, because I am on the other side of the world from majority of my loved ones, I was only able to write a letter and then email it. I chose my amazing father. If there is one person in this world that I feel needs to hear how grateful I am for them, it is him. I wrote a very long, heartfelt email where I completely poured

my emotions out to him. After writing the letter I felt a huge sense of relief. I knew that he would appreciate the things I had to say to him, and that alone made me smile; the feeling was, and still is, indescribable. Lauren Suval quoted a girl who wrote to a loved one, whose experience was very similar to mine. She “felt overwhelmed with a sense of happiness...typing very quickly...easy for [her] to express gratitude that was long overdue... [she] began to get teary-eyed and even a little bit choked up.”

Finally, my third task, which I had been doing all along. The second I stepped foot in Australia I was extremely grateful for the opportunity. That, along with the happiness class helped improve my thinking so that I was always being grateful for something. I am constantly finding myself looking at something or someone and saying to myself ‘I am so lucky. This is incredible and they are absolutely amazing’. Whenever one of my friends is complaining about something, I will stop and explain to them a way in which they should be grateful. For example while walking a long distance with my friends after a very long day, and while they were complaining about how hot and tired they were, I said ‘let’s take a moment to be grateful for the fact that we are healthy and actually have the ability to walk unlike some people that we know’. I have become so optimistic and I am so proud of myself. I talk about myself a lot more positively than I did before, and I talk about the situations in my chaotic life with a lot more optimism than I ever have. Stopping to be grateful for everything around me has truly changed me for the better. This occurrence is explained in a Psychology journal where Michael McCullough and colleagues discussed how gratitude can “provide as a reinforcer of pro-social behavior” meaning if done once it will be a motivator to be done again.

This class along with this Australian adventure I am on will forever be a part of who I am. When I get home to Massachusetts, I am going to teach other people the strategies I have

learned on how to be happy. I cannot express enough how positive this experience has been for me, and how successful the activity of expressing gratitude has been as well. I am so excited to continue my journey to happiness and to becoming an even better person.

Word Count: 1,065

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