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Happiness reflective journal

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

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Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong

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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

Vanessa McCoy's reflective journal starts on the next page.

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

CULTIVATING HAPPINESS THROUGH MINDFULNESS

ACADEMIC EVIDENCE

The pursuit of happiness is a journey unique to every individual. One widely accepted hedonic definition of happiness is that of subjective well-being (SWB), made up of high life satisfaction, frequent positive affect and infrequent negative affect experiences. Happiness levels are thought to be made up of three elements, one's set point, their circumstances, and intentional activities (Seligman, 2002, Lyubomirsky, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, in Caunt et al., 2013). This report focusses on my chosen 'intentional activity', mindfulness.

Among many other activities, meditation and mindfulness have been found to increase SWB. Taken separately, factors such as optimism, self-esteem, social and personal values and philosophy on life all positively influence reports of SWB (Caunt et al., 2013). Mindfulness encourages the enhancement of these factors, in turn increasing SWB. Mindfulness can be defined as a fundamental way of being, a way of relating to all of one's experiences, good, bad or otherwise, with an attentive, dispassionate and non-evaluative mindset (Bauer-wu, 2007; Choi, Karremans, & Barendregt, 2012; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt & Walach, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Studies suggest that mindfulness increases subjective levels of happiness in meditators, as well as SWB. The psychophysiological premise underlying mindfulness is that sustained moment-to-moment awareness, with an open-minded approach, helps guard against clinical and non-clinical psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety and stress perception (Bauer-wu,

2007; Choi et al., 2012; Krygier, Sharestani & Kemp, 2012; Grossman et al., 2004). Mindfulness training improves physiological factors such as cardiovascular reactivity, stress hormones and inflammatory markers and immune system functioning (Bauer-wu, 2007; Choi et al., 2012; Davidson et al., 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003) even when practiced for as little as 20 minutes per day (Krygier et al., 2012). Mindfulness also correlates to enhanced psychological functioning, health and wellbeing, in such ways as increasing emotional intelligence, emotion regulation, and encouraging positive mental health states (Bauer-wu, 2007; Smith, Compton & West, 1995; Krygier et al., 2012; Caunt et al., 2013).

Mindfulness has been found to significantly increase subjective reports of happiness (Smith, Compton & West, 1995) as well as promote greater activity in areas of the brain known to be associated with positive emotional experience (Davidson et al., 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). A study by Choi and colleagues (2012) also found that mindfulness training resulted in outside observers perceiving individuals who engage in mindfulness practice as looking happier.

There are two main styles of mindfulness meditation practice: focussed attention and open monitoring. Focussed attention involves deliberate concentration on a “neutral point of awareness” (Bauer-wu, 2010, p. 1), such as on one’s breath, and gentle re-focussing when one’s mind wanders. Open monitoring is a more advanced practice and involves receptively noticing all that comes into your awareness (Bauer-wu, 2007; Choi et al., 2012). My final

activity was based on focussed attention, or concentration meditation (Krygier et al., 2012).

MY APPROACH

Initially, I attempted an activity called *Mental Time Travel* (MTT) (Quoidbach, Wood & Hansenne, 2009). I engaged in this activity according to the directions laid out in the study by Quoidbach and colleagues (2009), which found statistically significant improvement in measures of anxiety and happiness within two weeks. In just four days, I found MTT made me sad and frustrated. The realistic positive events I had imagined wouldn't eventuate and I was left feeling like a failure. I changed my activity because I believed continuing MTT would have made me feel horrible by the end. MTT was too reliant on things I couldn't control and ultimately was not right for me and my life.

The activity I then chose was mindfulness. I started practicing 'Conscious Breathing' daily, as outlined in *Happiness: Essential Mindfulness Practices* (Hanh, 2009). Each morning I practiced for about 5-10 minutes. As I improved, I extended this to 10-15 minutes. I would sit or lay somewhere comfortable and focus on my breath, endeavouring to settle my mind and reduce distractions.

I tracked my progress using two measures, 1) the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), 2) the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002), which was found to be more sensitive to change. Upon starting mindfulness practice, I used the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI)

to track my level of mindfulness (Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmuller, Kleinknecht & Schmidt, 2006).

| <u>Measuring my progress</u> | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| | | | (Ceased MMT) | | | | |
| | | Start | (Start Mindfulness) | | (Back pain) | | Finish |
| | | Week 1 | mid-week 1 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 | mid-week 5 |
| | Averages | 16-Mar-14 | 20-Mar-14 | 31-Mar-14 | 07-Apr-14 | 14-Apr-14 | 17-Apr-14 |
| SHS | 4.5-5.5 | 5.125 | 4.75 | 5.25 | 3.625 | 5.375 | 5.5 |
| OHQ | 4 | 4.759 | 4.138 | 4.845 | 3.828 | 4.914 | 5.224 |
| FMI | 37.24 | - | 27.5 | - | - | - | 37 |

MY EXPERIENCE

At the start it was difficult to slow my mind and stay focussed. I constantly had to re-focus and gently force my mind away from thinking about other things. I admit I also felt I was wasting my time... I was wrong. Within just 10 days I found that my mind wandered less and I was able to focus more quickly.

In the week 4, I experienced a recurrence of severe back pain. Once I managed to get past the worst of it, I was able to engage a more resilient and positive mindset and return to my mindfulness practice.

Although my pain persisted beyond the end of the five week period, I discovered practicing 'Conscious Breathing' not only helped me to feel calmer and focussed, it helped me cope with the emotional impact of my back pain.

By week 5, I found I was enjoying my activity and felt calmer, less stressed, more relaxed, focussed and mentally stronger.

Over the weeks I was astounded with the improvement in my ability to focus quicker and for longer periods. At the start, I expected the benefits of my activity to only last for a short time each day. I was pleasantly surprised to find that as my days and duration of practice increased, so did the benefits.

The results I got using the SHS, OHQ and FMI reflected my subjective experience. With the SHS my happiness increased, bringing me from mid-range to the upper end of the average scores. On the OHQ I went from only slightly to well above average. I also improved in my mindfulness, going from well below average to only just below it. I believe with extended practice, these scores will improve even more.

MY EVALUATION

As an 'intentional activity' to increase happiness, my mindfulness practice proved surprising to me even though the research clearly demonstrated a positive link between the two. I did not expect to benefit very much from mindfulness practice, however I felt this would be a much better fit for me as it did not rely on any external factors. In as little as 10 days I began noticing significant changes in how I felt which was extremely encouraging. Overall, the benefits I had read about and experienced for myself (such as lower stress and anxiety, better emotion regulation, a positive mental mind-set and more frequent positive affect) continued and grew stronger over time. Each day, I felt less and less burdened, worried and stressed. Although I was

sceptical to begin with, I also ended up feeling more focussed and calm as research had predicted.

Research clearly shows a link between the amount of meditation practice and the magnitude of positive effects, as evidenced by changes in brain structure and function, and with immune system and SWB outcomes (Choi et al., 2012; Davidson et al., 2003; Smith et al., 1995; Krygier et al., 2012; Grossman et al., 2004). My experience indeed supports what the literature has to say about mindfulness. I definitely felt the early effects of prolonged practice even though it was such a short period of time. Given that my FMI score remains below average even after a huge increase, I aim to take up the challenge to improve on my level of mindfulness. My results have also encouraged me to continue my practice.

Word count: 1095

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