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What Happiness Is

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*Happiness is not something you postpone for the future;
it is something you design for the present.*

– Jim Rohn

We all think of happiness as something positive; something good that we want to feel and to be. But is it realistic to think we can be happy all the time? To answer this, it helps to understand that happiness happens in two ways: first as a long-term, general sense of wellbeing and second as a short-lived pleasure.

As a short-lived pleasure, happiness is a result of something that pleases us in some way – a funny joke, an uplifting film, a delicious meal, a good night out, a great holiday – and causes us to feel emotions such as contentment, satisfaction and enjoyment, delight, or joy. As a short-lived pleasure, this form of happiness is

temporary; it's a passing happiness. Although short-lived pleasures do contribute towards happiness, we simply can't feel like this all the time. It's not realistic to think that we can.

But happiness is not only experienced as short-lived pleasure. We also experience happiness as a general sense of wellbeing. It's this sort of happiness – a general, stable sense of wellbeing, feeling fulfilled and feeling that life is good – that we can more realistically expect to experience if not all the time, then most of the time.

A Short History of Happiness

Although it might seem that everyone is in the pursuit of happiness nowadays, this is, in fact, nothing new. Over 2000 years ago, in his work 'Nicomachean Ethics' the Greek philosopher Aristotle explored the nature of the good life. He concluded that happiness – wellbeing – is a central purpose of human life; it's what we're all aiming for.

He identified the two types of happiness as *hedonic* happiness and *eudaimonic* happiness. Hedonic happiness is the small pleasures and eudaimonic happiness refers to a sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfilment.

Aristotle suggested that because, as human beings, we have a unique ability to reason – to use logic and good sense, to make judgements and come to conclusions – we

should, indeed we must, use this ability to work out for ourselves ways to live our lives so that whatever else happens in life, we have a general, stable sense of well-being, feel fulfilled, and feel that, overall, life is good.

Aristotle acknowledged that happiness can be affected by such things as our health and wealth, friends, family, the work we do, where we live, etc. And yet, he said, by using our ability to think and reason, we are able to create a life for ourselves that enables us to bear the ups and downs of our existence with balance and perspective and maintain a general sense of wellbeing.

Fast forward 2000 years and, like Aristotle, today's psychologists and researchers are also interested in what makes for happiness and a good life. In his 2011 book *Flourish*, positive psychology professor, Martin Seligman, also suggests that in order to be happy we need to have one or more things in our life to aim for – things that mean something and make sense to us, that interest and absorb us, that we want to be involved in and allow us to feel good when we achieve what we set out to do. He says that, as social beings, we need to interact with others; to connect and feel that we belong. Seligman acknowledges that we need to experience short-lived pleasures in order to experience positive emotions such as contentment and enjoyment, inspiration, hope and joy, etc. But he recognises that although short-lived pleasures *contribute* to happiness, they are not the basis of happiness.

Of course, what's meaningful, engaging, and gives a sense of purpose is different for everyone. As is what makes for positive relationships and provides for positive emotions. But that's where the cognitive abilities that Aristotle referred to come in; we each need to work out for ourselves what makes for meaning and purpose, positive relationships, and small pleasures.

Aristotle and Seligman both agree that happiness requires thought and effort. This is a good thing! It means that the ability to be happy is within your power; *you* have the power to make yourself happy. You can discover for yourself what will bring sense and meaning to your life, what will engage and absorb you. You can identify what brings you pleasure – what the small things are in life that give you moments of happiness.

Rather than waiting to be happy, you can learn to be happy. You can make happiness a habit; your natural, normal way of being.

Unhelpful Beliefs

However, even if you can see that happiness *is* within your power, you may have beliefs and assumptions that have led you to conclude that happiness isn't possible for you.

In Chapter 3 we'll look at some of the obstacles that get in the way of being happy; we'll identify the potential problems, difficulties, and challenges and you'll read

how to manage them. But first, let's look at some common, unhelpful beliefs about happiness.

I Don't Believe I Deserve to Be Happy

Maybe you feel you don't deserve happiness; you don't deserve to be happy because of something you did wrong in the past. You made the wrong decision to do or not do something. You blame yourself; you feel a sense of loss and sorrow and wish you could undo a choice that you made. Maybe you regret something you did or didn't do. Perhaps you did something that harmed or hurt someone else and now you feel guilty; you feel regret and remorse. You believe it would be wrong to try and be happy.

If that's the case, you need to know that regret, remorse, and guilt actually have a positive intent. Rather than keeping you stuck, the positive purpose of these 'negative' emotions is to prompt you to make up for your wrongdoing, to learn from your mistake and to behave differently in future.

Happy people learn from their mistakes and move on. You can do the same. Stop berating yourself for what you did wrong. Acknowledge and accept that what's done is done and can't be changed. There's nothing you can do about it. But what you *can* do is change what you do next.

It could be, though, that you haven't even done anything wrong. But you believe that you have. Perhaps you feel guilty that you can't alleviate someone's suffering, or that

you didn't do enough to help someone. Perhaps you feel guilty that you survived something that other people did not. If that's the case, then you're experiencing imagined guilt. Imagined guilt happens when you feel guilty about events that, in fact, you were not, or are not, responsible for.

Maybe, for example, you feel that you can't appear to be happy while other people in your life are unhappy: your brother is unable to find a job or your partner is depressed; your sister is unable to conceive, a good friend's child died, or you received a promotion at the same time another friend was made redundant. But feeling undeserving doesn't help anyone. You haven't done anything wrong by being happy and showing that you're happy. If you're concerned about other people's situations, know that aiming for happiness is the right thing to do because then you're in a better position to help others to be happy. You can read more about how to help others be happy in Chapter 6.

I Don't Believe I Can Forgive

Perhaps, though, it's not that you feel *you've* done something wrong, it's that someone else has done you wrong and you can't move past that. Perhaps a friend has betrayed you, or your partner has had an affair, you've been unfairly sacked or you've suffered an injury as a result of someone else's actions. You don't believe you can be happy because you just can't forgive.

But forgiving doesn't mean giving in, minimising, excusing, or forgetting the offence; the other person is still

responsible for their actions. They may not deserve to be forgiven for your pain, sadness, and suffering, but you deserve to be free of this negativity. Forgiveness is for you, not the other person. Forgiveness means letting go of the resentment, frustration, or anger that you feel as a result of someone else's actions. It involves no longer wanting punishment, revenge, or compensation. Acknowledge and accept that what's done is done and can't be changed. But what you can change is what you do next.

Life becomes easier when you learn to accept an apology you never got.

– Robert Brault

Of course, forgiveness is not a switch you can flip and then immediately forget what the other person did. But even if you don't have the will to forgive right now, you can still learn to live with the fact of the other person's wrongdoing as you work towards happiness.

I Don't Believe I Can Be as Happy as I Once Was

Maybe, though, it's not your own or someone else's wrongdoing in the past that holds you back from striving for happiness. Do you look back on other times and circumstances in your life and feel that everything was so much better then? Were you happier? There's nothing wrong with reminiscing – looking back on happy times in your life – but dwelling on those times can keep you stuck and deceive you into thinking you will never be that happy again.

You need to keep things in perspective. It's easy to idealise the past; to minimise, forget, or deliberately ignore difficulties that may also have occurred during the happier times. Even if you *were* able to recreate the same circumstances and situations when you were happier, it wouldn't be the same.

Whether the past really was that good or whether you've idealised it, dwelling on the past takes you away from making the most of the opportunities of the present. As someone once said: you can't start the next chapter of your life if you keep re-reading your last one.

I Don't Believe I Can Be as Happy as Other People

It could be that you believe that happiness is for other people. You compare yourself with them, see that they're happy and believe that your life can never be the same as theirs. You're right – it can't. Your life can't be the same as theirs. You are too unique to compare yourself fairly; your skills, abilities, contributions, and value are entirely unique to you and your purpose in this world. They can never be fairly compared to anyone else.

There will always be someone else you know, you hear about or read about in magazines and on social media to compare yourself to. There's always someone you can perceive as having more or doing better than you and therefore being happier than you.

But measuring your worth, your abilities, opportunities, your career progress, etc. against other people's can only

lead to you feeling inferior. It's a sure-fire recipe for unhappiness. If you want to be happy you need to let go of comparing yourself to others. Jealousy and envy are incompatible with happiness, so if you're constantly comparing yourself to others, it's time to stop. Instead, be inspired by others and, with the help of this book, start planning how you can work towards what you want. This will make you more positive and in control, since you are no longer looking at what the other person has that you haven't – you'll be too busy working towards what you want. You won't have the time or a reason to be envious!

I Don't Believe I Can Be Happy Until Something Changes in My Life

Are you waiting for something to happen before you can be happy? Do you believe that you'll only be happy once your perfect partner comes along, or the perfect job or new home materialises? Maybe you're waiting for a relationship to end, the neighbours to move, or someone to die. Perhaps you're waiting to have a baby or for the children to leave home. Or it could be that you believe you can only be happy once you're healthier, you've lost weight, or got fitter.

It's easy to believe that happiness is something you'll achieve once all the stars have aligned and something else in your life is finally in place. But this is just a story you've been telling yourself. Happiness is not circumstantial. And that's actually good news; you don't have to wait for everything to be perfect. Instead, you can

learn to be happy while you're waiting for that big lottery win, the perfect partner, the perfect job, or whatever it is you're hoping for. When it comes to happiness, the journey is just as important as the destination; the journey is an inherent part of happiness.

In a Nutshell

- Happiness happens in two ways: first as a long-term, general sense of wellbeing – *eudaimonic* happiness; and second as a short-lived pleasure – *hedonic* happiness.
- Aristotle suggests that, using our ability to think and reason, we can – indeed we must – each work out for ourselves what makes for meaning, purpose, and small pleasures in our lives.
- The fact that happiness requires you to give it your thought and effort is a good thing! It means that the ability to be happy is within your power; you have the power to make yourself happy.
- Rather than waiting to be happy, you can learn to be happy. You can make happiness a habit; your natural, normal way of being.
- However, you may have beliefs and assumptions that have led you to conclude that happiness isn't possible for you.
- Maybe you feel you don't deserve to be happy because of something you did wrong in the past. What's done is done and whatever you did wrong can't be changed. But what you can change is what you do next.

What Happiness Is

- If you're experiencing imagined guilt, you feel guilty for events that, actually, you were not responsible for. And if you're concerned about other people's situations, know that being happy is the right thing to be because then you're in a better position to help others to be happy.
- Even if you don't have the will to forgive someone's wrongdoing towards you right now, you can still learn to live with the fact of the other person's wrongdoing as you work towards happiness.
- If you don't believe you can be as happy as you once were, know that whether the past really was that good or whether you've idealised it, dwelling on it takes you away from making the most of the opportunities of the present.
- Jealousy and envy are incompatible with happiness. Instead of comparing your situation and yourself with others, be inspired by them. Start planning how you can work towards what you want and be happy.
- You don't have to wait for something in your life to be in place, for the stars to have aligned and everything to be perfect, before you can start being happy. Instead, you can learn to be happy while you're waiting for whatever it is you're hoping for.

