Summer has finally arrived. Longer days and happy weekends are filled with promising possibilities for family fun, friends, reading books, traveling, or building sandcastles. A big part of summer is feeling happy. When people think of summer, they think of feeling good, somehow being free, and lots of happy memories.

Most CRNAs are highly scheduled individuals, and as summer whizzes by, few of us really take the time to slow down, to be happy, to be ourselves, to be with people we love, and to enjoy the feeling of happiness.

When it comes to happiness, we tend to think of it as something that depends on having and doing. It means having the right relationship, the right body, the right house, the right job, the right life, and always, doing, doing, doing. Although the pursuit of happiness motivates us to study, to work, to marry and have children, to make friends, to pursue financial stability, and to dream of the future, defining happiness objectively is difficult.

Happiness is…

Because traditionally psychologists have studied what makes people unhappy, we know what happiness is not: stress, fear, depression, anxiety, phobias, and anger. More recently scientists have begun to ask: “What makes happy people happy?” This shift in thinking has given rise to the new “science of happiness,” or positive psychology. Emerging studies confirm what the great philosophical and spiritual thinkers taught us long ago: In spite of powerful genetic and environmental influences, much of our mental well-being depends on our own actions and attitudes.

Pioneered by Ed Diener, PhD, and Martin Seligman, PhD, of the University of Pennsylvania, positive psychology is based on the idea that we can enhance our sense of well-being through the empirical study and adoption of certain habits and attitudes. It is now taught at more than 100 campuses in the United States alone.

These experts suggest that happiness begins in you and observe that feelings of joy are not always triggered by “big things.” Seligman divides happiness into three components—pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Pleasure is easily recognized. Each of us knows what pleasure means to us. Yet, it is fleeting and does not last. What contributes then to sustained happiness?

To feel happy, proponents of positive psychology suggest we need to be really engaged and engrossed in what we do. It is called “flow” and is described as that experience, that feeling, we get when we are so engrossed in something that we do not even bother to look at the clock. But, they also caution that you can have too much engagement. For example, you can become too engrossed in work, becoming a workaholic and less happy. Or, you can experience “flow” in gambling or other habits that will not make you happy.

Psychologists also suggest we need meaning in our lives in order to be happy. Studies indicate this derives from doing an interesting job, or working on a project you really believe in, or by doing something worthwhile. Simply stated, using our unique strengths and attitudes in taking care of ourselves, our friends and families, and our communities makes us happy.

Happiness and the Brain

Scientists have also observed that happiness is “a placeholder for positive emotional states.” Does happiness then have a biochemical basis? Historically, scientists have studied in detail the negative emotions in relation to the brain, hormones, the nervous system, and organ response. Positive emotions, however, were considered too subjective for study.

We all know from our own life experience that positive emotions feel good, and that those good feelings serve as rewards. Current research suggests that positive emotions do more than simply reward good behavior and signal well-being. They balance negative emotions, change patterns of thought, improve resilient coping, and produce well-being. Because positive emotions broaden thinking and build enduring psychological resources like resilience, they also trigger upward spirals toward enhanced emotional well-being, and a sense of happiness.

When we engage in a new activity or experience, the brain’s reward systems are activated and the happy brain chemicals, norepinephrine, and dopamine, are released. Dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with positive emotions and feelings, is essential for activation of the reward system because it sets in motion the neural circuits involved in motivation.

Activation of brain reward systems is a natural component of
Happiness does not depend on outward things. But, on the way we see them.

Leo Tolstoy

normal behavior and serves to drive actions toward goals that are normally beneficial. Emotions are instant estimates of the value or significance of something and because your emotions measure that value, they provide psychological motivation for living or for improving your life. Further, the greater the emotion associated with the memory, the easier it is for the brain to recall the memory.

Summer then may be the season of positive psychology. Summer is often about memories—those beautiful, longer days that allow for outdoor activities into the late dusk hours, whether at home or at the beach—days filled with the laughter of children, family reunions, and festivals celebrating everything from art and music to flowers and beer. Summer truly is a time for building new memories or thinking about previous times when we felt happy or were anticipating summer fun and new experiences. Yet, in this fast-paced world, summer seems just another round of schedules and routine and the pursuit of happiness often neglected.

You have worked diligently all year, so whether you sit on the beach, tour a foreign land, or simply enjoy being at home this summer, stop for a moment to remember, to be aware of what makes you feel happy. Creating and thinking of good memories, the possibilities, the rewards, and being in touch with family and friends appear to make people more cheerful and experience higher levels of happiness.

Resources


Happiness does not depend on outward things. But, on the way we see them.