



FOLLOW UP NOTES

THE SCIENCE OF

HAPPINESS

On Happiness

1. The Big Lesson. The big lesson, in my opinion, is that people do not need experts to tell them how to be happy. I believe this to the core of my being, and it helps me have a very open-hearted stance toward my clients. I believe they have A) lots of experience with happiness, B) good intuitions about happiness, and C) resources to help them pursue happiness. Mostly, I think people sometimes need a thought partner around happiness. This doesn't mean me weighing in with how-to advice. Instead, it means discussing how to prioritize happiness, make time for happiness, and feel that they have permission to pursue happiness. Those would be my three major pieces of process advice: explore what kind of priority it is, make time for it, and give yourself permission for it. What people do from there—attending a barbecue, playing soccer, going for a promotion at work, helping a child with their homework, donating to charity—is up to them.

2. Frameworks of happiness. It is fine to define happiness in all sorts of ways. Happiness = your aspirations divided by your actual attainments. Or happiness equals your positive emotions divided by your negative emotions. Or, happiness = the relative balance of competing psychological needs like autonomy and connectedness. I don't care what approach you take to define this concept. Any of them is potentially useful. Knowing PERMA, Subjective Well-Being, Psychological Well-being, and any other model can help guide your questions and better appreciate your client. That said, I think it is helpful to look at existing models of happiness and tinker with your own. Try to remove the causes and just describe what happiness itself is. Feel free to share it with me.

3. Happiness is a process. To me, the most important idea. Happiness is not a destination but an ongoing process that changes, that comes naturally, and which requires continual effort. Everyone is already working on their own happiness. They have intuitions about what will make them happy, and these will guide their decisions to partner, which dish to order, where to live, and a million other decisions. The plan you set up this month



probably won't be exactly the same as the plan for next month and certainly won't be the same as the plan for five years from now. Here are three questions that might help you think of happiness more as a process than as a goal: How are you going to go about pursuing happiness this week? How are you going to pursue happiness this month? How are you going to pursue happiness this year? There will be differences and similarities across your answers, and I hope these will help you think in terms of process rather than outcome.

4. Happiness intervention. This is a real cart-before-horse phenomenon in positive psychology. Researchers come up with some ways to measure a concept. Let's take gratitude. Let's say I conduct a survey and ask people how many thank you cards they write a year and also have them fill out a happiness measure. I find that people who write more thank you notes are also happier on average. Now, here is where everything falls apart. Brittney, the well-meaning blogger, reads my research and writes a catchy little post entitled "This one thing will make you happier!" and, in it, she recommends writing thank you notes because that is what I used as my operational measure. But that's only because I needed something to measure. Not because I think there is something magical about thank-you notes. This is exactly what has happened with the three blessings activity and other positive psych interventions. People think they are prescriptions for happiness and assign them without any attention to culture or context. So, to be clear, I think that gratitude is, indeed, associated with happiness. I think that the cultivation of a sense of gratitude can boost happiness. But I think that for some people that means praying, for others that means writing in a diary, for others it is a photo project, for others it is thank you notes. It is **the concept, not the mechanic** described in the research literature, that is important. It is the concepts we want to explore with our clients rather than suggesting that there is a specific way that they should be applying that concept in their lives. Please note, however, that I do think that positive interventions work and I do not want to vilify people who are using them.

5. More reading on the science of happiness. Finally, for those who are interested, I have included a variety of articles in the lesson. Two are about happiness intervention, including a cautionary note on using them. One is on a brief history of the concept of Eudemonia. And one is a chapter on genetic influences on wellbeing. Some of these are easy, but



some are tough reading. For those who want a really deep dive, here are three articles authored by me that remain some of my favorite writing:

A) "[Subjective well-being of small societies](#)" chapter in which I describe the happiness of the Maasai and other small societies. It focuses on some cultural aspects of wellbeing as well as some methodological issues.

B) "[Optimal levels of happiness](#)" chapter in which my co-author and I describe having too much happiness. It provides a brief definition of happiness, a discussion of what "optimal" means, and evidence for ways in which we can have too much happiness. I think the final section on "considerations" is directly relevant to coaching in that it can inform the questions we might explore with our clients.

C) "[Three Lessons from Ed Diener](#)," in which my co-author and I pay tribute to my father's contributions to positive psychological research. This primary discusses his impact on research methods—how to go about the business of studying happiness—rather than the findings of his research.