“No man is happy that does not think himself so”
(Marcus Aurelius)

What is your recipe for happiness? This is the question we asked 251 people (18 – 84 years old) to answer in a recent research project. Before reading on I suggest you take a moment to reflect and write down the ingredients list for your recipe for long-lasting happiness.

**What is happiness?**

Researchers debate the best way to define happiness. One approach defines happiness as Subjective Well-Being. People with high Subjective Well-Being are satisfied with their life as a whole and experience many positive emotions and few negative emotions.¹

Subjective definitions of happiness suggest that people know when they are happy and can tell us how happy they are.

If people know how happy they are they should also be able to describe their ideas about what causes happiness. This idea was the basis for a research study I conducted with some colleagues titled “Exploring the Causes of Subjective Well-Being: A content Analysis of Peoples’ Recipes for Long-Lasting Happiness”.² Participants in our study were asked to write down the ingredients list for a recipe for long-term happiness. Researchers counted how many people mentioned each of a number of key themes (ingredients) in their happiness recipes. Some themes were drawn from previous research into the causes of happiness, while others were new categories.
we created based on a sample of 50 responses to our survey. We organised our themes using a model for understanding the causes of happiness.³

The causes of long-term happiness:

Three dimensions are proposed to influence long-term happiness. Approximately 50% of a person’s happiness level is decided by a happiness set-point determined by our genes.³ This portion of happiness remains stable over time. When big changes affect happiness we eventually adapt back towards our set-point. Life circumstances contribute about 10% of our happiness level.³ People tend to overrate the importance of circumstances such as marriage, employment, health and wealth for long-term happiness. Though these circumstances influence happiness, people adapt to big changes in their lives and their happiness levels eventually move back towards their set-point. The final dimension, intentional activities is where we have the most influence over our happiness.³ An estimated 40% of our happiness level is determined by the variety of things we think and do in our daily lives. Intentional activities can be divided into behavioural, cognitive and volitional activities.

Behavioural activities are our actions. Actions such as physical activity, social activity and meditation have been shown to increase happiness. Cognitive activities are our thoughts and attitudes. Cultivating gratitude and forgiveness, and finding ways of coping with adversity are examples of attitudes that increase happiness. Volitional activities involve the pursuit of goals that are in line with our values. These give us a sense of purpose and meaning.

What did our research find?

Social relationships: 95% of people in our study spoke of at least one important relationship in their happiness recipes. Examples were relationships with family (65.7%), friends (67.2%) and partners (30.3%). Relationships were so dominant that we added social relationships as a fourth dimension alongside the three dimensions in the model described above.³ If we are serious about pursuing happiness it is clear that we should spend energy developing and maintaining our relationships. Perhaps we should even rethink whether happiness is an individual pursuit at all (or a collective one).

Circumstances: 83.1% of participants spoke about circumstances such as health (43.3%), employment (39.3%) and religion (23.9%) in their happiness recipes. People seemed able to distinguish the importance of sufficient wealth (38.9%) to meet basic needs from money (4.5%) in general. It appears that people overrate the influence of circumstances on their long-term happiness. This may be because we are unaware of our ability to adapt to major changes in our life’s circumstances.

Behavioural activities: 76.6% of people in our study referred to behavioural activities including hobbies & interests (36.8%), physical activity (33.3%), humour & laughter (24.4%), good food (24.4%), time in nature (20.9%), meditation (20.9%), relaxation (20.4%) and travel & holidays (17.4%). Engaging in regular bursts of enjoyable activity is beneficial for both immediate and long-term happiness.
Philosophy of life category included “having a personal belief and value system by which to live life” and “knowing that things change and accepting this”

long-term happiness. Research findings suggest that active leisure pursuits such as hobbies are more effective than passive activities like watching television.1

Cognitive activities: 66.7% referred to cognitive activities (attitudes). Though few people spoke of gratitude (8.5%) and forgiveness (6.5%), many spoke of two new categories we called philosophy of life (48.3%) and social values (38.8%). Examples of ingredients we placed in the philosophy of life category included “having a personal belief and value system by which to live life” and “knowing that things change and accepting this”.

This category suggests that people believe that how they approach the living of their lives has an important role in their happiness. Examples from the social values category included “honesty”, “respect”, “tolerance” and “be non-judgmental”. If social relationships are a cornerstone of our happiness perhaps our social values provide a roadmap to navigate the joys, complexities and difficulties that our relationships confront us with.

Volitional activities: 32.3% of people mentioned volitional activities in their happiness recipes and most of these spoke of goals & meaning in life (30.3%). Having goals and a sense of meaning complements the role of social values and our philosophy of living by providing us with motivation and direction to pursue the things that are most important to us.

So what is the recipe for long-term happiness?

Combining past research with the findings of our study the following may be a recipe for long-lasting happiness. Happy people are those who 1) are actively involved in a number of close relationships and practise their social values in these relationships, 2) do not overrate the importance of circumstances or spend undue energy striving for circumstantial change, 3) enjoy satisfying and preferably active leisure pursuits, 4) actively and intelligently pursue (behavioural) activities and (cognitive) attitudes that are intrinsically rewarding and in line with their broader sense of purpose, and 5) have a general philosophy of living that helps them to navigate life’s complexities. Within this framework, I believe that each individual’s recipe for long-term happiness will be different. There are common themes but a happiness recipe is a personal creation drawn from our values and the things that give our life meaning.

My concluding thought is that the best happiness recipes change and evolve through our lives. Does this period in your life require an extra dash of physical activity, a focus on developing your tools for coping with adversity, or devoting time and energy to an important relationship? Consider again your personal recipe for long-term happiness… What ingredient would you like to spend your energy on now? What small step could you take towards achieving this? Happy cooking 😊

References:


