

Camden Boyd

Ms. Torgersen

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The True Cause of Unhappiness

As a society today, we are finding ourselves more unhappy than any other generation. Many wonder, sometimes on a daily basis, what the cause of our unhappiness could be, and more importantly, how we can become happy again. Happiness is something that scientists have only been researching for a short time, so we are just barely scratching the surface on how happiness works. However, we are discovering new things about happiness every day, which helps us to know just a little bit more about how we can increase our own happiness.

Although many studies provide different culprits for affecting happiness, one thing remains the same: happiness is a choice. Our degree of happiness is influenced by many factors, including materialism, our interactions with others, and mental health problems. It has been proven through numerous scientific studies that more than one thing can affect your unhappiness. I will use data from all over the world to show that each of these things have a large impact on our emotional wellness, as well as ways for you to improve your happiness or even use unhappiness to your advantage.

The unhappiness epidemic encompasses the entire world. After all, everyone has experienced at least some unhappiness in their lives, and the extent of unhappiness is so prevalent and has been so for so long that it is simply considered the way of life by most people— until now. Unhappiness not only destroys days, lives, and relationships, but it also

takes a substantial hit to the world economy. Lastly, unhappiness is steadily increasing, despite increasingly significant improvements to society that were thought to have had much more of an impact on our happiness than they seem to have. This means it is more important than ever to discover what is truly affecting our unhappiness so we can fix it before it gets any worse.

First, materialism can influence our unhappiness. According to research by Tim Kasser, materialism causes unhappiness when we try to fill the hole created by our basic psychological needs by buying more stuff. When we do this, our needs are rarely fulfilled, leaving us feeling empty and unhappy. This, in turn, creates a cycle of materialism and unhappiness, just trying to bring back some kind of happiness lost from previous times and fulfill the needs they were trying to fulfill in the first place. Materialistic people, therefore, “experience low[er] well-being” than their non-materialistic peers. Unfortunately, society often teaches us a different story. Society will tell us that materialism will bring us to a higher quality of life, which only makes the problem worse. When society provides countless heroes and heroines that “are on the whole wealthy, good-looking, and often famous”, we incorrectly and problematically associate happiness and materialism. We are told these people are successful and that we should “strive to imitate and emulate” them (Kasser). Even worse, if our parents are materialistic, we are very likely to follow in their footsteps, thus sucking more people into an already problematic issue. When we make the decision to buy ourselves things in order to fill our happiness void, and we already know that it really isn’t going to help us very much in the long run, we have chosen to be unhappy. We know that these purchases will only bring us temporary happiness or excitement (a few days if we’re lucky), but we choose to make them anyway. And unfortunately, materialism is only the first of many things that cause us unhappiness.

Next, our interactions with others have a very large impact on our happiness levels. As Gupta discusses in his paper, “Moral Interactions”, a “lapse of morality in interactions leads to a loss of happiness” (103). For an interaction to be considered “moral” and bring happiness, it must end in mutual benefit. This interaction’s effects are dependent on both parties. If one party makes the interaction go sour, neither party truly benefits, unhappiness is produced, and the relationship of the two parties deteriorates. Continuing on the same path as with moral interactions, our interactions with others through the use of technology and social media have also shown to have a significant impact on our overall happiness. For example, one study showed that when subjects were randomly selected to give up Facebook for a week, those that “[gave] up Facebook for a week ended that time happier, less lonely and less depressed than those who continued to use Facebook” (Twenge). This finding shows just one example of how online interactions affect us. Additionally, a national survey found that teens that spent more time on the internet, texting, social media, etc were less happy than those who were more active, participating in the community, or even just doing homework. Though it was found that doing a little of these online activities in our weekly routines is actually more beneficial than not doing any at all, excessive repetition of these activities is more harm than good. If our interactions online or in person are immoral, or too much of our time is dedicated to online activities, our happiness will suffer. Additionally, when we interact with others, we choose what kind of impact we have on our relationship with them. If we don’t fulfill our end, or we seek to make something unhappy for the other person, we are choosing to be unhappy because we know we can’t be happy when we act in this way. If the other person in the interaction is to blame, it is in many

cases still our fault for choosing to have the interaction with that person in the first place or for not ending the interaction or relationship sooner than we did.

Finally, mental illness is known to cause unhappiness, especially illnesses like depression and anxiety. In fact, according to Richard Layard, “Mental health problems are the biggest causes of misery” (Main). Studies have shown that mental illness negatively affects everyone regardless of their situations, even after accounting for other known causes like unemployment and poverty. Layard’s work has also shown that mental illness has a larger impact on productivity than physical health does on the workforce. It has been shown that mental illness’ reach is also extremely large and all-encompassing. Furthermore, mental illness causes a huge negative impact on the economy and our citizens. Layard also calculates that “if these mental health issues were treated, it would increase [Britain’s] GDP by four percent”. According to The Fairfax-Lateral Economics Index, the annual wellbeing cost of mental illness in Australia is \$214 billion, roughly 12% of Australia’s annual economic output (Wade)! With an estimated 10% of primary and secondary students in the U.S. and Great Britain being diagnosed with mental illness, its effect is far-reaching (Main). Mental illness’ history of being ignored by economics (who had instead focused on physical ailments) means there are many uninformed people that will continue to suffer until they are given the treatment they need. When we seek medical attention to help with our mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, whether through therapy, medication, or both, we are choosing to try to live as happily as possible. If we are able to cure or reduce these problems, we can be happier. When we choose to ignore them or refuse help, they can only make things worse.

Some may say that happiness isn't a choice. They argue that devastating or traumatic experiences will bring sadness and pain whether you want to feel this way or not. As such, feelings aren't a choice because we have no control over them or our circumstances. You can't change how you feel with a simple "be happy" or "think happy thoughts" because that's not how feelings work. To put it all simply, our feelings cannot be changed, no matter what we try to do to change them.

While it is true that bad and sad things happen to people, and it may be very difficult to change or reduce the effects of the unhappy feelings we get as a result, it is not impossible to do so. It might not necessarily be easy or convenient, but there is a way we can at least be a little happier when these situations happen. It has to do a lot with your outlook on the situation and how you allow (or make) yourself feel when they happen, and we also have to be willing to allow ourselves to feel less sad, angry, or depressed. If you change what you allow to influence your happiness, you will also change what influences your thoughts and feelings in your everyday life. For example, when 60 people were surveyed in my study regarding what affected their happiness, they identified many factors whose influence on them could easily have been managed, such as their friends and family, interactions, the opinions of others, and their income. Reducing or removing such influences altogether would undoubtedly allow for more control of your happiness, and as such, making your happiness your choice.

As noted throughout many of the articles and papers I researched, the study of happiness is still very new, and more research needs to be done on the topic if we want to truly know how happiness works and what affects it. It is clear, however, that something truly does need to be done; unhappiness and the ailments that are affecting it are directly responsible for a significant

hit to the US and global GDP, and the economy as a whole. If the nations of the world were to ensure research surrounding unhappiness, mental illness, and other problematic factors, many people could be helped and economies would see improvements as a result. Countries could also make more of an effort to try to reduce the impact factors have on unhappiness through awareness campaigns and sooner diagnoses for people with mental illness and other issues that are directly affecting their lives and happiness. Reducing impacts will most definitely improve the economy and overall satisfaction.

Unfortunately, chances are still quite high that, even with this increase in funding and support, we will still have to experience unhappiness in our lives. Besides, if there is no unhappiness, how will we know what happiness is, or any emotion for that matter? Something that we can do no matter the state of the world around us is to *utilize* our unhappiness. This may sound backwards, especially considering what we just discussed earlier, but there really are benefits to unhappiness. Manu Joseph notes his article, “The Careful Use of Unhappiness”, that unhappiness works hand in hand with ambition, creating a restlessness that inspires us to be hardworking and successful. It is also extremely profitable in the arts, allowing us to tell stories and create characters that couldn’t have existed without it. With unhappiness comes change, and change brings with it a possibility for a brighter future— for you and the world around you, too.

In conclusion, happiness is a choice, but it can also be impacted by many factors, including materialism, the morality of interactions, and mental illness. Though much research is still needed to fully understand how happiness works, we have already learned many things so far. Unhappiness affects people at a large and far-reaching scale, including the world economy

and other aspects. Lastly, we must remember that there are great things that we can do with our unhappiness; it's us that decides what we do with it.

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