

# Happiness is Overrated

By Tony Schwarz

Some years ago, I spent time with a guy who I typically greeted in the most ordinary way: "How are you?" I'd ask.

"I'm WON-DER-FUL," he'd respond, rapturously, and every time I asked. Talk about a conversation stopper. What do you say back to that?

Suffice to say this wasn't a guy with whom I was eager to share a long meal. Here's the paradox: "Happy" people are some of the duller people I know. And yet happiness is the state to which so many of us doggedly aspire.

When I looked up "happiness" on Amazon this morning there were 18,751 books with that word in the title. Here are a few from the past several years: Happy, Happier, The Happiness Project, The Happiness Advantage, The Happiness Hypothesis, The Happiness Makeover, The How of Happiness, Stumbling on Happiness, Delivering Happiness, Exploring Happiness, Raising Happiness, Authentic Happiness, Zen and the Art of Happiness, and the tenth anniversary edition of The Art of Happiness, by his Holiness, the Dalai Lama. I'm loath to rain on this parade, but dare I suggest that happiness isn't all it's cracked up to be?

I'm thinking about a CEO with whom I once worked at a large, prominent company. This man was happy all the time — relentlessly, oppressively, suffocatingly, and ultimately, I came to believe, blindly content. He used happiness (and certainty) both as a defense against the far more complex and nuanced reality of the world around him, and as a weapon to bludgeon others into following his preferences.

At the same time, he fiercely resisted bad news, disappointment, doubt, and even the most basic level of introspection. He was a modern Pangloss: "All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds."

What this executive failed to see was the unhappiness that his exuberant smugness and certainty created in others, and how it eventually began to drag his company down.

As Jung suggested, where there is light, there is always shadow — whether we choose to notice it or not.

Paradoxically, when we seek happiness as the ultimate state, we're destined to be disappointed. Absent unhappiness, how would we even recognize it? If we're fortunate, happiness is a place we visit from time to time rather than inhabit permanently. As a steady state, it has the limits of any steady state: it's not especially interesting or dynamic.

To seek happiness as a permanent state derives from two primitive evolutionary impulses: avoiding pain (which we associate with danger and the risk of death) and seeking gratification (which helps ensure that our genes get passed on). But it also turns out that pain and discomfort are critical to growth, and that achieving excellence depends on the capacity to delay gratification.

When we're living fully, what we feel is engaged and immersed, challenged and focused, curious and passionate. Happiness — or more specifically, satisfaction — is something we mostly feel retrospectively, as a payoff on our investment. And then, before very long, we move on to the next challenge.

Pain necessarily comes with the territory. We can't grow without subjecting ourselves to stress. Think about strength training. You push your biceps or your triceps past your comfort zone, to the point of exhaustion. It's difficult, and even painful in the short term, but the eventual reward is that you get stronger, which is satisfying.

It's the same process that occurs in getting better at anything, whether it's learning an instrument, playing a sport, parenting a child, programming a computer, or struggling to understand a difficult concept. Ask any great performer to describe the key to excellence, and they'll invariably tell you it's practice. But they'll also tell you that practice is the most difficult and the least enjoyable activity they do.

I'm no fan of suffering for its own sake, or of despair, or depression. They're unpleasant states. When we're feeling them, it's hard on us, and often hard on others.

It's not about choosing up sides. It's about learning to embrace our own opposites. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins finds a perfect example in James Stockdale, the highest-ranking naval officer held as a prisoner of war during Vietnam.

Over seven years, Stockdale was tortured repeatedly, held in solitary confinement and given no reason to believe he would ever make it out alive. His saving grace was the ability to embrace both optimism and realism concurrently — something Collins named "the Stockdale Paradox."

As Stockdale himself explained it, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end — which you can never afford to lose — with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

There are many circumstances in our lives for which it makes no sense to be happy. That's true if you're in danger, if someone you love is suffering or dies, or when you fall short of a goal you've worked hard to achieve.

We also live in a world in which millions of people suffer from hunger, disease, unemployment and lack of opportunity, inequality, and unfairness. Their despair must also be at least partly ours.

Give me the sort of people who grapple with these complexities and contradictions rather than a lot of people who don't, any day of the week. The result will be a richer, more compassionate world that keeps evolving for the better.

Express your joy, savor your good fortune and enjoy your life, but also feel your disappointments, acknowledge your shortcomings, and never settle for happiness.

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