

Is a Happy Life Different from a Meaningful One?



A scientific controversy about the relationship between meaning and happiness raises fundamental questions about how to live a good life.

BY JILL SUTTIE, JASON MARSH | FEBRUARY 25, 2014

Philosophers, researchers, spiritual leaders—they've all debated what makes life worth living. Is it a life filled with happiness or a life filled with purpose and meaning? Is there even a difference between the two?

Think of the human rights activist who fights oppression but ends up in prison—is she happy? Or the social animal who spends his nights (and some days) jumping from party to party—is that the good life?



These aren't just academic questions. They can help us determine where we should invest our energy to lead the life we want.

Recently some researchers have explored these questions in depth, trying to tease apart the differences between a meaningful life and a happy one. Their research suggests there's more to life than happiness—and even calls into question some previous findings from the field of positive psychology, earning it both a fair amount of press coverage and criticism.

The controversy surrounding it raises big questions about what happiness actually means: While there may be more to life than happiness, there may also be more to “happiness” than pleasure alone.

Five differences between a happy life and a meaningful one

“A happy life and a meaningful life have some differences,” says Roy Baumeister, a Francis Eppes Professor of Psychology at Florida State University. He bases that claim on a paper he published last year in the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, co-authored with researchers at the University of Minnesota and Stanford.

Baumeister and his colleagues surveyed 397 adults, looking for correlations between their levels of happiness, meaning, and various other aspects of their lives: their behavior, moods, relationships, health, stress levels, work lives, creative pursuits, and more.

They found that a meaningful life and a happy life often go hand-in-hand—but not always. And they were curious to learn more about the differences between the two. Their statistical analysis tried to separate out what brought meaning to one’s life but not happiness, and what brought happiness but not meaning.

Their findings suggest that meaning (separate from happiness) is not connected with whether one is healthy, has enough money, or feels comfortable in life, while happiness (separate from meaning) is. More specifically, the researchers identified five major differences between a happy life and a meaningful one.

- **Happy people satisfy their wants and needs, but that seems largely irrelevant to a meaningful life.** Therefore, health, wealth, and ease in life were all related to happiness, but not meaning.
- **Happiness involves being focused on the present, whereas meaningfulness involves thinking more about the past, present, and future—and the relationship between them.** In addition, happiness was seen as fleeting, while meaningfulness seemed to last longer.
- **Meaningfulness is derived from giving to other people; happiness comes from what they give to you.** Although social connections were linked to both happiness and meaning, happiness was connected more to the benefits one receives from social relationships, especially friendships, while meaningfulness was related to what one gives to others—for example, taking care of children. Along these lines, self-described “takers” were happier than self-described “givers,” and

spending time with friends was linked to happiness more than meaning, whereas spending more time with loved ones was linked to meaning but not happiness.

- **Meaningful lives involve stress and challenges.** Higher levels of worry, stress, and anxiety were linked to higher meaningfulness but lower happiness, which suggests that engaging in challenging or difficult situations that are beyond oneself or one's pleasures promotes meaningfulness but not happiness.
- **Self-expression is important to meaning but not happiness.** Doing things to express oneself and caring about personal and cultural identity were linked to a meaningful life but not a happy one. For example, considering oneself to be wise or creative was associated with meaning but not happiness.

One of the more surprising findings from the study was that giving to others was associated with meaning, rather than happiness, while taking from others was related to happiness and not meaning. Though many researchers have found a connection between giving and happiness, Baumeister argues that this connection is due to how one assigns meaning to the act of giving.

“If we just look at helping others, the simple effect is that people who help others are happier,” says Baumeister. But when you eliminate the effects of meaning on happiness and vice versa, he says, “then helping makes people less happy, so that all the effect of helping on happiness comes by way of increasing meaningfulness.”

Baumeister's study raises some provocative questions about research in positive psychology that links kind, helpful—or “pro-social”—activity to happiness and well-being. Yet his research has also touched off a debate about what psychologists—and the rest of us—really mean when we talk about happiness.

What is happiness, anyway?

Researchers, just like other people, have disagreed about the definition of “happiness” and how to measure it.



Some have equated happiness with transient emotional states or even spikes of activity in pleasure centers of the brain, while others have asked people to assess their overall happiness or life satisfaction. Some researchers, like Ed Diener of the University of Illinois, a pioneer in the field of positive psychology, have tried to group together these aspects of happiness under the term “subjective well-being,” which encompasses assessments of positive and negative emotions as well as overall life satisfaction. These differences in definitions of happiness have sometimes led to confusing—or even contradictory—findings.

For instance, in Baumeister’s study, familial relationships—like parenting—tended to be tied to meaning more than happiness. Support for this finding comes from researchers like Robin Simon of Wake Forest University, who looked at happiness levels among 1,400 adults and found that parents generally reported less positive emotion and more negative emotions than people without kids. She concluded that, while parents may report more purpose and meaning than nonparents, they are generally less happy than their childless peers.

This conclusion irks happiness researcher Sonja Lyubormirsky, of the University of California, Riverside, who takes issue with studies that “try too hard to rule out everything related to happiness” from their analysis but still draw conclusions about happiness.

“Imagine everything that you think would be great about parenting, or about being a parent,” says Lyubomirsky. “If you control for that—if you take it out of the equation—then of course parents are going to look a lot less happy.”

In a recent study, she and her colleagues measured happiness levels and meaning in parents, both in a “global” way—having them assess their overall happiness and life satisfaction—and while engaged in their daily activities. Results showed that, in general, parents were happier and more satisfied with their lives than non-parents, and parents found both pleasure and meaning in childcare activities, even in the very moments when they were engaged in those activities.

“Being a parent leads to all of these good things: It gives you meaning in life, it gives you goals to pursue, it can make you feel more connected in your relationships,” says Lyubomirsky. “You can’t really talk about happiness without including all of them.”

Lyubomirsky feels that researchers who try to separate meaning and happiness may be on the wrong track, because meaning and happiness are inseparably intertwined.

“When you feel happy, and you take out the meaning part of happiness, it’s not really happiness,” she says.

Yet this is basically how Baumeister and his colleagues defined happiness for the purpose of their study. So although the study referred to “happiness,” says Lyubomirsky, perhaps it was actually looking at something more like “hedonic pleasure”—the part of happiness that involves feeling good without the part that involves deeper life satisfaction.

Is there happiness without pleasure?

But is it ever helpful to separate out meaning from pleasure?

Some researchers have taken to doing that by looking at what they call “eudaimonic happiness,” or the happiness that comes from meaningful pursuits, and “hedonic happiness”—the happiness that comes from pleasure or goal fulfillment.

A recent study by Steven Cole of the UCLA School of Medicine, and Barbara Fredrickson of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, found that people who reported more eudaimonic happiness had stronger immune system function than those who reported more hedonic happiness, suggesting that a life of meaning may be better for our health than a life seeking pleasure.

Similarly, a 2008 article published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, found several positive health effects associated with eudaimonic happiness, including less reactivity to stress, less insulin resistance (which means less chance of developing diabetes), higher HDL (“good”) cholesterol levels, better sleep, and brain activity patterns that have been linked to decreased levels of depression.

But happiness researcher Elizabeth Dunn thinks the distinction between eudaimonic and hedonic happiness is murky.



“I think it’s a distinction that intuitively makes a lot of sense but doesn’t actually hold up under the lens of science,” says Dunn, an associate professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia.

Dunn has authored numerous studies showing that giving to others increases happiness, both in the moment, as measured by positive emotions alone, and in terms of overall life satisfaction. In a recently published paper, she and her colleagues surveyed data from several countries and found supporting evidence for this connection, including findings that showed subjects randomly assigned to buy items for charity reported higher levels of positive emotion—a measure of hedonic happiness—than participants assigned to buy the same items for themselves, even when the spending did not build or strengthen social ties.

“I think my own work really supports the idea that eudaimonic and hedonic well-being are surprisingly similar and aren’t as different as one might expect,” says Dunn. “To say that there’s one pathway to meaning, and that it’s different than the pathway to pleasure, is false.”

Like Lyubomirsky, she insists that meaning and happiness go hand-in-hand. She points to the work of researchers who've found that positive emotions can help establish deeper social ties—which many argue is the most meaningful part of life—and to University of Missouri psychologist Laura King's research, which found that feeling positive emotions helps people see the “big picture” and notice patterns, which can help one aim for more meaningful pursuits and interpret one's experience as meaningful.

In addition, she argues that the measurements used to distinguish eudaimonic from hedonic happiness are too highly correlated to separate out in this way—statistically speaking, doing so can make your results unreliable.

As University of Pennsylvania psychologist James Coyne—according to Dunn, a statistical “hardhead”—wrote in a 2013 blog post, trying to distinguish eudaimonic well-being by controlling for hedonic well-being and other factors leaves you with something that's not really eudaimonia at all. He compares it to taking a photo of siblings who look alike, removing everything that makes them resemble each other, and then still calling the photos representative of the siblings.

“If we were talking about people, we probably couldn't even recognize a family resemblance between the two,” he writes.

In other words, just because it's statistically possible to remove the influence of one variable on another doesn't mean that what you end up with is something meaningfully distinct.

“If you parcel out meaning from happiness, the happiness factor may go away,” says Dunn. “But, in terms of people’s daily experience, is it actually the case that people face genuine tradeoffs between happiness and meaning? I don’t think so.”

Can you have it all?

Baumeister, though, clearly believes it is useful to make distinctions between meaning and happiness—in part to encourage more people to seek meaningful pursuits in life whether or not doing so makes them feel happy. Still, he recognizes that the two are closely tied.

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“Having a meaningful life contributes to being happy and being happy may also contribute to finding life more meaningful,” he says. “I think that there’s evidence for both of those.”

But one piece of warning: If you are aiming strictly for a life of hedonic pleasure, you may be on the wrong path to finding happiness. “For centuries, traditional wisdom has been that simply seeking pleasure for its own sake doesn’t really make you happy in the long run,” he says.

In fact, seeking happiness without meaning would probably be a stressful, aggravating, and annoying proposition, argues Baumeister.

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Instead, when aspiring to a well-lived life, it might make more sense to look for things you find meaningful—deep relationships, altruism, and purposeful self-expression, for example—than to look for pleasure alone... even if pleasure augments one’s sense of meaning, as King suggests.

“Work toward long-term goals; do things that society holds in high regard—for achievement or moral reasons,” he says. “You draw meaning from a larger context, so you need to look beyond yourself to find the purpose in what you’re doing.”

Chances are that you’ll also find pleasure—and happiness—along the way.

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