

What Does It Take to be Happy?

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Your happiness is intertwined with your outlook on life.

— Anonymous

How many times have you heard that question, “Why can’t I be happy?” How many times have you asked yourself that question? In my practice of clinical psychology, it is a question that I have heard people ask many times over the last 20+ years. It seems like a fair question, so why can’t people be happy?

I believe that there are some serious problems associated with the search for happiness and general contentment. First, over the years, I have become increasingly convinced that as humans, we are not necessarily pre-wired for happiness. Second, we live in a world in which it is easy to develop bad habits that can get in our way of achieving a reasonable degree of happiness and contentment. We learn a lot of “if only’s” — that if only we had a good job, a big house, a nice car, and lots of love, then (and maybe only then) we would be happy. We learn to compare ourselves to our friends, neighbors, even relative strangers, all of those people who seem to have “more” and therefore are better and “happier” than we are. We learn that once we achieve what these people have achieved, then we will be happy. (I always think of the Rolling Stones song *I Can’t Get No Satisfaction* with the lyric (and this is from memory), “But he couldn’t be a man because he didn’t smoke the same cigarettes as me.” Now, to me that could be a part of the conditioning process to think “if only.”)

So happiness, and our pursuit of it, becomes directly related to outside events, achievements, possessions, and other external factors. Therefore, all people who achieve their goals and who have nice cars, big houses, and terrific loving relationships are, of course, happy. Right?

Wrong!

Why isn’t this true?

While a number of external factors do play roles in the human condition, such as economic conditions, environmental stressors, and physical health, the big piece of the puzzle that seems to pull it all together is “**outlook.**”

Let me use an example. I love to fly on airplanes. I know many people don’t, and in fact, many people are quite fearful of flying. When I fly and the airplane encounters significant turbulence, I like to do an experiment. I like to look around and watch how people are reacting. I seem to always notice the same thing: some people appear very anxious and frightened, some seem mildly “uptight,” some seem not to even notice the turbulence, and still others seem to be extremely relaxed.

If we maintain that “things” (turbulence, money, events, other people, etc.) make us feel angry, depressed, or in this case anxious and scared, then why doesn’t turbulence in this example “make” people on the airplane all react with exactly the same emotions? Why don’t all the people feel exactly the same amount of anxiety? How can some people be relaxed and others on the verge of a panic attack?

Outlook.

Let me use a second example from my life. In order to be available to clients, I carry a beeper. One day I was leading group therapy, and my beeper went off. I looked down and was startled to see the emergency code on the beeper, instructing me to immediately call my office. All of a sudden, I felt myself tensing up, breathing more rapidly, and feeling quite uncomfortable. I immediately called my office, only to learn that a piece of furniture I had ordered some months before had arrived.

What do you think happened to my feelings of tension and discomfort? More importantly, what “caused” them in the first place? Was it hearing the beeper go off? Was it seeing the emergency code? And as the other people in the room also heard the beeper and learned from me that it was an emergency code, did each of them feel the same degree of discomfort and tension that I did? What made the difference?

Outlook.

In these examples, things happen and people react. But outlook affects their reactions. Some people are anxious flying through turbulence, others are neutral or even relaxed. My beeper goes off, and I think that something bad has happened and begin to feel uncomfortable. These feelings and reactions are largely caused by the **outlook** and **attitude** of those involved.

When people seek counseling complaining of feeling depressed, anxious, angry, and/or extremely frustrated, or report problems such relationship difficulties, I begin almost immediately teaching them the importance of beliefs, attitudes and self-talk will play as they learn to change what Alcoholics Anonymous calls “stinking thinking.” I teach that how people feel and react in a particular situation (and often, how “happy” they are) is not based on the external factors but is largely the result of how we think, what we believe, and what we tell ourselves about that situation.

Of course, this is nothing new. The idea that happiness comes from within and is based on what we think rather than what we accomplish or what we own is taught in the Book of Proverbs (23:7), where we learn that as a person thinks, so he or she is. Epictetus, a philosopher in the First Century, wrote that people are not disturbed by things, but rather by the views they take of these things. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, we read that *nothing* is either good nor bad, but thinking makes it so.

“Things” such as external events certainly play an important role in triggering our emotional reactions. But since we may have little control over these outside events, why not learn to control

what we can — our outlook and thinking?

What I teach is not “positive thinking.” While it may help in some situations, I am not a big fan of positive thinking, but rather of rational, logical, and non-negative thinking. Positive thinking suggests that when bad things do indeed happen to us — and they will! — we should just “think positively” and simply “feel good” in order to cope with the situation. But when bad things happen to me, I don’t want to necessarily feel good! Rather, I want to feel appropriately, even if this means feeling appropriately bad. When important people in my life have died, I’ve appreciated that I’ve been able to feel intensely sad and to appropriately mourn their deaths. I didn’t want to feel good.

However, if my outlook about their deaths became intensely negative, my sadness might easily change to depression, which will certainly block my pursuit of happiness and effectiveness.

I think of therapy and counseling as education (and more recently as coaching), and what I emphasize in my teaching and coaching is a form of therapy called Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) that was developed in 1955 by a psychologist named Albert Ellis.

When you were young, you learned the ABCs of English that equipped you with the basics for reading, writing, and so on. However, the ABCs needed for happiness, contentment, and coping with various problems are to me just as important as the ABCs of English and offer people the tools for a foundation of healthy, effective management of many problems. So, what are these ABCs?

REBT presents a straightforward set of ABCs (and DEF and Gs) for maximizing happiness and coping with problems. At point A, or Activator, something happens or we may even anticipate something happening or some adversity. The “A” is the actual event, such as a flying through turbulence, getting a new boss, buying a new house, etc. The Activator is a trigger but, believe it or not, it’s not the cause of the emotions we experience.

Feelings such as anxiety, depression, anger, etc. is largely caused by what happens at point B — the Beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, and self-talk. Following an event (Activator), we process the information in our brains. We evaluate, interpret, draw conclusions (which are not always accurate), and create a specific set of beliefs and an outlook about the event. If we’re “stressed out,” unhappy, angry, etc., it is highly likely that our thinking at point B is based on attitudes and beliefs that are unhealthy, distorted, defeating, and even dishonest. In REBT, these are called irrational beliefs, or iBs. In REBT there are four specific types of irrational beliefs that not only block happiness but can lead to significant problems. These include:

(1) Demandingness or absolutistic thinking in which humans elevate themselves to a Godlike position and attempt to create new laws of physics about how people (themselves and others), places, and things, absolutely **MUST, OUGHT, SHOULD, AND HAVE TO BE**. For example, “my new boss **MUST** not treat me this way!” Guess what? The world, people, etc. can be any way it or they choose to be. Demandingness is often associated with anger problems.

(2) “I-can’t-stand-it-itis” creates low frustration tolerance, and intense frustration is a significant

element of personal distress and a happiness blocker. The irrational element here is that just because we don't like something, we conclude that we absolutely can't stand it! But, if we really couldn't stand something, then we would cease to exist. We couldn't stand it if a two-ton block of steel was dropped on us, but has a death certificate ever read: cause of death - got a new boss at work?

(3) Self-rating and “shoulding” on ourselves creates depression and guilt. When faced with stressors, people often put demands on themselves, such as “I must, should be able to handle this well,” and if the coping is not what they expected from themselves, they immediately begin condemning and judging themselves. They conclude that because they failed to manage this event or stress effectively, they are **FAILURES** as human beings. When this starts, there is often a vicious cycle that makes dealing with future stressors even less likely. What makes this irrational? As humans, we are all fallible, imperfect creatures. All really *have* sinned, but because we fall short in some areas, does not mean that we are 100% bad, rotten worms.

(4) Awfulizing, terribleizing, and horribleizing causes anxiety and panic reactions when faced with events. This happiness blocker has its basis in the exaggeration of badness. Bad things do happen, but when we awfulize, we exaggerate this badness and conclude incorrectly that the bad event is not just bad, but 101% bad. Certain things may approach 100% bad, but can anything really be totally bad or 101% bad? Being taken hostage would be tragic and really bad. But, what about being taken hostage and tortured? What about being tortured even more slowly and painfully? No matter how bad something is, by definition, it can always be worse. That's not to minimize the badness of something, but distress occurs and is worsened when we start concluding that it is not only bad but **AWFUL, TERRIBLE, AND HORRIBLE — THE ABSOLUTELY WORSE THING IMAGINABLE!** Much of distress is also related to erroneously anticipating by “what ifing” and concluding that when whatever **DOES** happen, it will be awful! Montaigne is reported to have said, “My life has been filled with many catastrophes, most of which never came true!”

These forms of irrational thinking are largely responsible for the C in the REBT ABCs. C represents the Consequences of the irrational thinking. The “C” is really the reaction we experience and involves both undesirable emotional consequences, the feelings such as anger, anxiety, etc., and undesirable behavioral consequences, such as trying to cope with the stressor by drinking too much, yelling at friends and family, or even avoiding the stressor such as prematurely quitting a job or staying home in bed instead of going for that workout you had planned.

So far, so good. Now you have new knowledge and information that show that when events occur at point A, and you experience distress at point C and happiness is blocked, it is not just the event (A), but more importantly it's the interpretations, evaluations, and irrational beliefs and thoughts that occur at point B that result in happiness block and other reactions. That's nice to know, but how do we gain that power and ability to manage our happiness and contentment levels more effectively?

Finding and maintaining true happiness and eliminating problems such as anxiety, anger, depression, and so on means going to point D or Debating and Disputing the truthfulness and soundness of the beliefs at point B. It means taking the beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, self-talk, etc.,

and putting them on trial in a psychological court of law. Believe whatever you want at B, but happiness is a more likely outcome when you maintain beliefs that are truthful, honest, and rational — in other words, just the facts!

When our happiness is blocked it is an excellent time for forceful disputing. When happiness is blocked by feelings such as depression, anger, anxiety, etc., it means, in all likelihood, that irrational, dishonest beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts are active. First step is to detect and identify the specific form of “stinking thinking.” REBT’s direct, straightforward approach makes this easier. For example, if you’re feeling anxious or having panicky feelings, look for awfulizing and “what ifs.” If you’re feeling angry, look for the absolutistic attitudes or demandingness, the musts, oughts, and shoulds. Feeling depressed and guilty, look for global self-rating and “self-directed shoulds.” Finally, feeling intensely frustrated, then look for the “I can’t stand its.”

Once detected, the trial starts with the debating and disputing process. If you’re going to believe something, make sure it is scientifically and realistically sound, that it is logically correct, and that it is helpful in terms of reaching both short-term and long-term goals.

Again, if feeling stressed, anxious, or depressed, the first step is detecting the irrational belief. If feeling anxious about work, it is likely that we are awfulizing, believing that something about work is not only bad, but more than bad — it’s awful, terrible, and 101% bad; the very worst thing imaginable! After applying disputation techniques, we accept that the experience might be bad, but is it really the worst thing that could happen? We might still think it is, but we keep disputing by pointing out that no matter what happened, it could in fact be much worse. Gradually, anxiety and distress is reduced as realistic, honest beliefs replace the irrational beliefs clearing the way for greater contentment and happiness.

Successful disputing clears the path for the rest of the REBT alphabet: E, F, and G. Disputing the irrational beliefs and proving that the belief creating the happiness blocker is unhealthy, defeating, and dishonest, leads to E — the development of rational Effective Beliefs. Effective beliefs include preferring, desiring, wanting attitudes instead of the absolutistic demands (desiring versus requiring), the attitudes of “I can stand it even if I don’t like it,” instead of the “I-can’t-stand-it-itis (think of the jingle, “I don’t like it that’s O.K., I can stand it anyway”), unconditional self-acceptance (USA) instead of self-rating, and recognition that events are indeed bad (some really, really bad), but no matter what, it can really always be worse but never 101% bad.

The Es of good thinking lead to new Fs — desirable, appropriate feelings such as concern, annoyance, sadness, regret, mild frustration, and disappointment. REBT is not a positive thinking approach designed to help people “feel good” in the face of significant negative events. Rather, the goal (which by the way is the G in the REBT ABCDEFG) is to cope as effectively as possible when faced with these events. If people reacted with no emotion whatsoever, there would be no motivation to address the problems associated with the event, and working to find healthy, effective solutions is often quite important.

So, now you know that happiness is not as elusive as some may think. You know that things

may play a role, but do not control our happiness or how we feel. You know that happiness is often blocked by “stinking thinking” that results in feelings of depression, anxiety, panic, anger, and low frustration tolerance. You know that you may be powerless over other people, places, and things, but powerful when it comes to your thinking, feeling, and behavior. Happiness really is an inside job and closely tied to our outlook on life. Is getting rid of irrational thinking that blocks greater happiness simple? Maybe. Is it easy? No way! Habits, including habits of “stinking thinking,” take time to develop, and it takes time to change bad habits to good habits of healthy, rational thinking. It takes work and practice, and then more practice, practice, and practice. But, you can do it! And remember, good thinking really does get good results!

About Ed Nottingham:

Ed Nottingham, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist in TN and MS and a Licensed Marital and Family Therapist in TN, and is a Diplomate in Behavioral and in Clinical Psychology (American Board of Professional Psychology). He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (Division of Independent Practice). Dr. Nottingham is author of *It's Not as Bad as It Seems: A Thinking Straight Approach to Happiness (Revised & Expanded Edition)*. Most of this article is based on material found in his book. This latest edition, with a Foreword by Albert Ellis, Ph.D., is available from iUniverse.com or your local bookstore. For more information on the book, check out the link below, or go to the www.iUniverse.com bookstore and do an author search for Ed Nottingham.

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