



Stanford eCorner

The Happiness Paradox

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Happiness drives many of us, but often down the wrong road. How can our desire to please ourselves so often lead us astray? Stanford Graduate School of Business Professor Jennifer Aaker states that happiness has many nuanced definitions between excitement and peacefulness. The way you choose to define it is dependent on demographics, including factors like gender, age, mindset, and culture. Moreover, these perceived feelings of happiness evolve over a lifetime, and inform how one makes decisions.



Transcript

First, the research on happiness. Happiness drives many of us and yet oftentimes down the wrong road, and it's not until later on in our life or an experience that we realize how misdirected we actually were based on our own true beliefs. So let me give you a couple of examples. There's three happiness paradoxes that I want to just seed with you. The first most commonly held belief is that happiness is a single construct. So if I ask you, Jeff, "Jeff, are you happy?" and you say...? Good! And then I ask you--what's your name? Eva? Are you happy? And what would you say? Oh. I think so. You think so? A more contemplative person. I'm not saying that you are not, Jeff. You seem like a very contemplative person.

But the idea there is that when you're thinking of happiness and you're saying 'maybe yes' versus 'definitely yes', that at some level we think we're kind of talking the same language, that I know what you mean and it's probably something similar, comparable to what Jeff means. And yet we find in some recent research with Sep Kamvar and Cassie Mogilner, and there's work by Jeanne Tsai and others, that have focused on these two types. There's really two types of happiness. And one is this happiness where if you ask people what are the first associations that come to mind with 'happy' you might say 'excited' and 'pleasurable' and 'it feels good' and 'I want something desirable', 'it's energizing'. So let's call that 'exciting happiness' for a second. The second type of happiness is associated with a very different set of associations. Let's say I ask Jeff, "What's happiness?" and he says, "It's actually meaningful and peaceful and content, fulfilling, it's simple, maybe even small, but fundamental." And let's call that 'peaceful happiness' for a second. And our contention is that, depending on the gender, depending on the age, depending on the culture, when you ask, "Are you happy?" people are fundamentally giving you the same response--"yes" and "yes"--but having two very different conceptions in their heads. Now, the second paradox is that we often assume happiness to be stable. So you're making a decision--what's your name? Yeah, you.

Comprano. Comprano? Yes. And how old are you? Go for it. We won't tell anyone. And this is not at all on video. Go ahead. Go ahead. Twenty-seven. Twenty-seven. All right.

And you're making decisions, right? You're thinking about jobs or grad schools or houses you might live in, who you might marry or not. And it's based on--this is a little too personal, right? Is this too personal? We'll move away from you shortly. You can hang on. You can do this. So the basic idea there is that you're making decisions based on your current definition of happiness. So if that's excitement happiness, you're going to make decisions based on that; if its peaceful happiness, you're going to make decisions based on that. And they are very different decisions. What's important in this research, though, is that happiness is moving. So, what you're feeling right now at age 27, even though you presume that's the same type of happiness

you'll feel at age 35 and 40, we show that it systematically changes.