

Meaning Is Healthier Than Happiness

Emily Esfahani Smith [The Atlantic](#) (2013)

FOR AT LEAST the last decade, the happiness craze has been building. In the last three months alone, over 1,000 books on happiness were released on Amazon, including *Happy Money*, *Happy-People-Pills-For-All*, and, for those just starting out, *Happiness for Beginners*.

One of the consistent claims of books like these is that happiness is associated with all sorts of good life outcomes, including—most promisingly—good health. Many studies have noted the connection between a happy mind and a healthy body—the happier you are, the better health outcomes we seem to have. In a meta-analysis (overview) of 150 studies on this topic, researchers put it like this: “Inductions of well-being lead to healthy functioning, and inductions of ill-being lead to compromised health.”

But a new study, just published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) challenges the rosy picture. Happiness may not be as good for the body as researchers thought. It might even be bad.

Of course, it’s important to first define happiness. A few months ago, I wrote a piece called “*There’s More to Life Than Being Happy*” about a psychology study that dug into what happiness really means to people. It specifically explored the difference between a meaningful life and a happy life.

It seems strange that there would be a difference at all. But the researchers, who looked at a large

sample of people over a month-long period, found that happiness is associated with selfish “taking” behavior and that having a sense of meaning in life is associated with selfless “giving” behavior.

“Happiness without meaning characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desire are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided,” the authors of the study wrote. “If anything, pure happiness is linked to not helping others in need.” While being happy is about feeling good, meaning is derived from contributing to others or to society in a bigger way. As Roy Baumeister, one of the researchers, told me, “Partly what we do as human beings is to take care of others and contribute to others. This makes life meaningful but it does not necessarily make us happy.”

The new PNAS study also sheds light on the difference between meaning and happiness, but on the biological level. Barbara Fredrickson, a psychological researcher who specializes in positive emotions at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and Steve Cole, a genetics and psychiatric researcher at UCLA, examined the self-reported levels of happiness and meaning in 80 research subjects.

Happiness was defined, as in the earlier study, by feeling good. The researchers measured happiness by asking subjects questions like “How often did you feel happy?” “How often did you feel interested in life?” and “How often did you feel satis-

fied?” The more strongly people endorsed these measures of “hedonic well-being,” or pleasure, the higher they scored on happiness.

Meaning was defined as an orientation to something bigger than the self. They measured meaning by asking questions like “How often did you feel that your life has a sense of direction or meaning to it?”, “How often did you feel that you had something to contribute to society?”, and “How often did you feel that you belonged to a community/social group?” The more people endorsed these measures of “eudaimonic well-being”—or, simply put, virtue—the more meaning they felt in life.

After noting the sense of meaning and happiness that each subject had, Fredrickson and Cole, with their research colleagues, looked at the ways certain genes expressed themselves in each of the participants. Like neuroscientists who use fMRI scanning to determine how regions in the brain respond to different stimuli, Cole and Fredrickson are interested in how the body, at the genetic level, responds to feelings of happiness and meaning.

Cole’s past work has linked various kinds of chronic adversity to a particular gene expression pattern. When people feel lonely, are grieving the loss of a loved one, or are struggling to make ends meet, their bodies go into threat mode. This triggers the activation of a stress-related gene pattern that has two features: an increase in the activity of pro-inflammatory genes and a decrease in the activity of genes involved in anti-viral responses.

“You have a forward-looking immune system,” Fredrickson told me, “If you have a long track record of adversity, it prepares you for bacterial infections. For our ancestors, loneliness and adversity were associated with bacterial infections from wounds with predators and fights with conspecifics.” On the other hand, if you are doing well and having a lot of healthy social connections, your immune system shifts forward to prepare you for viruses, which you’re more likely to contract if you’re interacting with a lot of people.

What does this have to do with happiness?

Cole and Fredrickson found that people who are happy but have little to no sense of meaning in their lives—proverbially, simply here for the party—have the same gene expression patterns as people who are responding to and enduring chronic adversity. That is, the bodies of these happy people are preparing them for bacterial threats by activating the pro-inflammatory response. Chronic inflammation is, of course, associated with major illnesses like heart disease and various cancers.

“Empty positive emotions”—like the kind people experience during manic episodes or artificially induced euphoria from alcohol and drugs—“are about as good for you for as adversity,” says Fre-

drickson.

It’s important to understand that for many people, a sense of meaning and happiness in life overlap; many people score jointly high (or jointly low) on the happiness and meaning measures in the study. But for many others, there is a dissonance—they feel that they are low on happiness and high on meaning or that their lives are very high in happiness, but low in meaning. This last group, which has the gene expression pattern associated with adversity, formed a whopping 75 percent of study participants. Only one quarter of the study participants had what the researchers call “eudaimonic predominance”—that is, their sense of meaning outpaced their feelings of happiness.

This is too bad given the more beneficial gene expression pattern associated with meaningfulness. People whose levels of happiness and meaning line up, and people who have a strong sense of meaning but are not necessarily happy, showed a deactivation of the adversity stress response. Their bodies were not preparing them for the bacterial infections that we get when we are alone or in trouble, but for the viral infections we get when surrounded by a lot of other people.

Fredrickson’s past research, described in her two books, *Positivity* and *Love 2.0*, has mapped the

benefits of positive emotions in individuals. She has found that positive emotions broaden a person’s perspective and buffers people against adversity. So it was surprising to her that hedonistic well-being, which is associated with positive emotions and pleasure, did so badly in this study compared with eudaimonic well-being.

“It’s not the amount of hedonic happiness that’s a problem,” Fredrickson tells me, “It’s that it’s not matched by eudaimonic well-being. It’s great when both are in step. But if you have more hedonic well-being than would be expected, that’s when this [gene] pattern that’s akin to adversity emerged.”

The terms hedonism and eudaimonism bring to mind the great philosophical debate, which has shaped Western civilization for over 2,000 years, about the nature of the good life. Does happiness lie in feeling good, as hedonists think, or in doing and being good, as Aristotle and his intellectual descendants, the virtue ethicists, think? From the evidence of this study, it seems that feeling good is not enough. People need meaning to thrive. In the words of Carl Jung, “The least of things with a meaning is worth more in life than the greatest of things without it.” Jung’s wisdom certainly seems to apply to our bodies, if not also to our hearts and our minds. [d](#)