

## Happy New Year

My sister keeps a little notebook with her at all times. She calls it her “Annoying List.” Anytime someone or something annoys her, she records the mild irritant in her book, laughs about it and then moves on (though she keeps the list forever). She has posted the following, among countless other entries: “People who hold a door open for you when you are still 20 yards away, making you run to fulfill their kindness.” “People who talk to you while they brush their teeth.” “Stickers on individual pieces of fruit.” “Long answering machine messages.” My sister believes that her action, itself pretty quirky, enables the grievance to pass through without lingering on her nerves, protecting her from feeling stressed out.

What do you do when you feel stressed or angry, sad or disappointed? Do you hold onto those thoughts and feelings, re-playing difficult interactions between friends, at work or with your partner? Do these issues keep you up at night? Do they keep you from participating in social events, increasing your time spent alone with a book, a TV or a bottle?

How well do you recognize the sources of stress and dissatisfaction in your life? Are they within your power to change?

Finally, how often do you acknowledge and appreciate positive people, behavior and experiences you encounter? And how easily do you directly address and then forgive those who have purposely or unintentionally offended you?

Your answers to these questions may prove to be among the strongest predictor of your current and future happiness and health. On a larger scale, the sum happiness and social health of a nation can be measured and linked to the quality, tranquility and longevity of the lives of its citizens.

In recent years, the study of happiness and its effects has grown into a new science, one that can inform personal behavior and national policy. As you might suspect, this is no simple science. To begin, how do you define individual or collective happiness so that you can know and measure it when you see or feel it? I found fifteen different academic definitions in the literature. Most researchers agree, however, that happiness represents an enduring or typical emotional state rather than a transitory mood. Are happiness and satisfaction the same? Not necessarily. Perhaps that’s why people younger than 35 tend to be “happier” than those over 75 yet also less satisfied with their lives.

Culture appears to influence the source and meaning of personal and collective happiness. In the U.S., happiness is a goal, one achieved through personal success, self-expression, pride, high self-esteem and a distinct sense of self. In contrast, in Japan, happiness comes from fulfilling the expectations of your family, meeting your social responsibilities, self-discipline, cooperation and friendliness. Japanese are more likely to find happiness than to pursue it.

Can happiness be bought? Do people who live in bigger houses and purchase more toys for themselves live happier, more satisfied lives? The evidence clearly and resoundingly contradicts this commonly held myth. Wealth, beyond the basic comforts of shelter, food and ability to clothe, educate and purchase healthcare for a family, adds little to a person's reported subjective sense of well-being or satisfaction. In fact, materialism as a value seems to work to defeat happiness. Young adults who focus on money, image and fame tend to be more depressed, have less enthusiasm for life and suffer more physical symptoms. Retail therapy just doesn't work to sustain the human spirit. Perhaps that helps us understand why the average happiness scores among citizens of western nations have remained static ever since the end of World War II despite a considerable rise in average incomes.

That may also account for why political leaders of nations, particularly European Union countries, increasingly call for a shift from measuring pure economic growth to promoting the personal growth of citizens. So was born the construct of Gross National Happiness (GNH). A national happiness index was first proposed by the King of Bhutan who was committed to building an economy that would not only produce goods but would also serve Bhutan's culture which is based on Buddhist spiritual values. King Wangchuk insisted that all policies proposed for Bhutan must pass a review based on a GNH impact statement similar to an environmental impact statement required for land development in the U.S. GNH goes beyond the measure of a nation's economic productivity, or Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which simply sums the amount of commerce, no matter whether constructive (making useful things) or remedial and defensive (security, pollution clean-up). In reality, a truer method for determining economic well-being would deduct such costs while adding non-material benefits such as volunteer work and unpaid family and household service. GNH has come into wider use internationally as a composite index of average per capita status on the following measures:

Economic Wellness: e.g. consumer debt, ratio of average income to Consumer Price Index, income distribution;

- Environmental Wellness: things like pollution, noise and traffic;
- Physical Wellness: including infant mortality and chronic disease prevalence;
- Mental Wellness: use of anti-depressants, use of psychotherapy;
- Workplace Wellness: jobless claims, job changes, workplace complaints;
- Social Wellness: discrimination, safety, divorce rates, domestic violence, lawsuits, crime rates;
- Political Wellness: voter participation, individual freedom, foreign conflict.

You can rightly surmise that relative to other nations and their citizens, the U.S. ranks higher in GDP than in GNH.

If the health of a nation equals the sum quality of life of its citizens, then what can each of us do to secure our individual happiness? Yes, folks who exercise regularly, practice meditation, eat right and otherwise control their stress levels tend to live longer and have fewer heart attacks and strokes. But aren't there any shortcuts or magic bullets, ones that cost less and have fewer side effects than taking medications to counter the physical toll of our lifestyles? Actually, yes there are easier, cheaper, more reliable and much more satisfying sources of happiness and, consequently, health. They are called

friends. Get together with them, or if you can't, just think about them and you will boost your immune system, and help fend off colds, other infections and inflammatory processes (including heart disease), extending the quality and duration of your life. Conversely, isolation kills. Study after study, all around the world among people of every age and income confirm the healthful power of social networks – the old-fashioned kind of deeply felt, reciprocated connection. The jury is still out on internet amity as an effective virus for spreading happiness and health. A few examples of the power of healthy relationships: nurses who developed breast cancer were four times as likely to die from their disease if they had fewer than ten friends, close relatives or living children. Neither distance nor frequency of contact mattered. Interestingly, having a spouse or participating in religious or community activities did not correlate with increased survival rates. And yes, even men benefit from friendship. A Swedish study of middle-aged guys found that having friends and being a non-smoker provided equal protection against developing or dying from heart disease. In fact, although research has focused extensively on the impact of families and marriage on health, friendship has a bigger effect on psychological well-being.

Choosing your friends wisely does seem to promote your own well-being. As Oscar Wilde once claimed: "Show me your friends and I will tell you who you are." Physically, your risk for obesity increases by 60% if your friends gain weight. When it comes to your emotional state, you depend not only on your own actions and choices, but on the behavior and outlook of others. Having a close friend who is happy makes you 15% more likely to be happy yourself. More distant connection to happy people still boosts your own state to a lesser degree (you get a 5% lift from your neighbor's sister's friend). The wonderful mystery of the effect of strangers sheds light on the association between healthy communities and the well-being of its individual members.

As you might by now also suspect, your own outlook on life strongly affects your health (and your friendships!). People with positive emotional traits, or temperament - those who tend to be lively, cheerful and calm – resist colds more successfully than do people who are often tense, sad, depressed, angry or hostile. Many studies of outlook, personality and health have been conducted with nuns since most of their lifestyle variables are fairly uniform. Results? 90% of the most cheerful quartile were alive at age 85 while only 34% of the least cheerful lived to that age. Amazingly, 54% of those with positive personalities were still gracing their communities at the ripe old age of 94 years while all but 11% of the downers had succumbed to the burdens of living. Did you display a genuinely cheerful smile in your high school yearbook photo? If so, you were more likely to marry, stay married and experience more personal well-being over the next thirty years. Optimists, in general, are rewarded with a 19% longer lifespan than self-declared pessimists. Lab studies confirm that pessimism, depression and anger all work to depress the immune system while increasing production of an inflammatory protein linked to coronary artery disease. What's more, while they're alive, happy individuals not only feel good, they tend to be more creative, integrative, flexible and open thinkers.

One sure way to help yourself grow happier, healthier, more creative and perceptive is to practice feeling and acknowledging gratitude. Indeed, developing a grateful attitude may be the single most effective way to increase your happiness and health. In its purest form, gratitude is the acknowledgment of a gift we received that we did nothing to earn or deserve - good fortune that came our way through luck, accident or other people's grace. Students and adults who kept a "gratitude journal" for three

weeks, logging 3-5 examples a week of people or occurrences they appreciated, measured 25% higher on life satisfaction compared to their own baseline and to groups of people who were either directed to keep lists of their aggravations or to simply list their activities (without assigning positive or negative value to them). Subjects who noted their gratitude also exercised more, drank less alcohol and family and friends noticed they were nicer to be around during the study period. Interestingly, the good effects continued for months afterward. The students even improved their performance on cognitive tests and tests of problem-solving skills. Along with practicing healthier habits and having better relationships, the grateful turned more optimistic and ultimately lived longer.

This Christmas, I am going to give my sister a hug, a big affectionate smile and a new journal for her to take notes whenever she catches herself feeling grateful. By this time next year, I bet she'll have had fewer sick days, started exercising, cut her medications and kissed a frog just for the hell of it. Maybe, too, she will realize that I love her even though I don't call.

To you, dear reader, I wish all the blessings of the holidays along with one suggestion for the New Year:

If you need to climb a hill (real or metaphoric) and want to make it feel less steep, bring a friend.