

The Psychology Of Happiness

By Jayaram V



What is happiness?

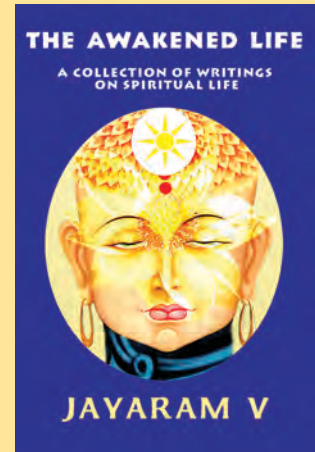
Happiness is a state of mind. You are familiar with it. You know what it means. You also know from experience how to make you or others happy in your own unique ways. Life teaches us many lessons and from them we learn the many possibilities by which we can minimize our sorrows and maximize our happiness and fulfillment.

We may not always succeed in our aims. Yet we live with the conviction that happiness is possible, attainable and repeatable by making adjustments to our thinking and attitude. Our choices and conclusions about happiness may not always be rational or healthy. Yet we know by instinct the situations and the people who may increase our happiness.

Happiness is both long term and short term. We may experience it momentarily from the simple joys and pleasures of life and in retrospect from the sum total of our achievements when we reflect upon them and see how far we fared. Whether it is long term or short term, we know from experience that like everything else in this world, happiness is neither permanent nor continuous.

Whether you are rich or poor, young or old, and whether you live in the most affluent part of the world or not, it is not possible to remain happy always. One moment you are happy and the other moment you are pensive. Even a baby knows if she has to be happy she has to make sure that she gets the right attention from her parents. That is how life is, a great ride that lasts for a lifetime in the rollercoaster of emotions.

Happiness is a positive emotion we experience in the form of joy, fulfillment, inspiration, satisfaction, pleasure, contentment,



encouragement, exhilaration, enthusiasm, pleasantness, delight, enjoyment and so on. When you are happy, you feel good, blessed and on the top of the world. You feel charged with energy and enthusiasm. You live with greater confidence and optimism.

Yet, your capacity for happiness depends upon your overall feelings about yourself and your current life situation. Your happiness will not last for long unless you feel good about yourself and your life in a general sort of way. While happiness is an universal emotion, it has so many layers to it that it is not easy to define. Although we live on the same planet, we live in different worlds.

What is happiness to one may not be happiness to another. When life becomes so hard and challenging, for many people thinking about happiness is a luxury if not pure selfishness. For them life is about making sacrifices, compromises and adjustments, not happiness. Nowadays we are so preoccupied with dally problems and pressing deadlines that for most us happiness means just not having any serious problems in life. Ordinary problems you are going to have anyway.

While such a thinking about happiness is justified from certain perspectives, thinking about happiness from the perspective of problems may not be the right approach.

Our lives are such that we are never really free from problems, except when we are dead or when we enter into deep sleep. Besides, even if we try to focus our minds elsewhere, the media, our friends and the internet make sure that we know what has been going on in the real world in real time. It appears that happiness, which is what most of us want to experience in our lives, does not get as much attention as it

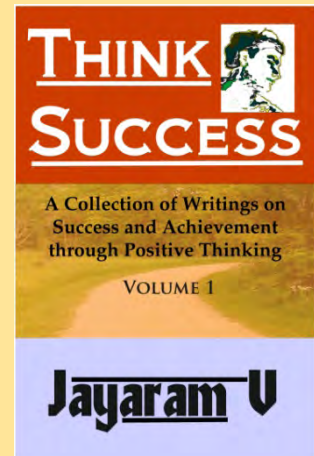
deserves. Most people go through a struggle if you ask them to recall some moments in which they experienced real happiness. They would eventually recall a few experiences, but it is rarely without making an effort.

It is not that these people have not experienced happiness or do not care for it. They might have experienced happiness on many occasions, but they do not remember it because their minds are elsewhere. What happened then is now not a priority. Those events have happened gone. You may think about them occasionally and like to repeat them if possible. But, right now there are so many other issues that you have to resolve, that your mind takes time to refocus and recollect them. It is also probably true that the expectations of experiencing great moments in life is more exciting than the moments themselves. Most people do strive for happiness with their limited means and want to be happy; yet when they are really happy, most of the time, they treat it just like any other experience and file it away in the cupboards of their minds.

Happiness is...

Before we examine the philosophy and psychology of happiness, let us examine briefly how people perceive happiness in their lives and what beliefs and opinions they usually associate with it. People view and experience happiness in various ways, which are listed below.

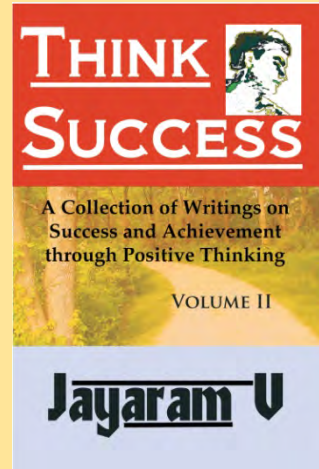
1. Happiness is a pleasant feeling.
2. Happiness is a subjective feeling expressed in various ways.
3. Happiness depends upon the satisfaction of needs.



4. Happiness is linked to the values one follows.
5. Happiness does not mean one is completely free from worries.
6. The way people experience and express happiness is universal.
7. As we grow older we tend to become less happier.
8. Our happiness arises from both intrinsic and extrinsic factors.
9. The body language associated with happiness is common across all cultures and peoples.
10. We may not define happiness clearly, but we know what it means.
11. People differ in their empathy and sensitivity towards the happiness of others.
12. Happiness may arise from our perceptions, memory or even imagination.
13. Expectations reduce happiness.
14. Even animals seem to experience happiness in their own unique ways.
15. When you are happy, you experience the world and relationships differently.

The psychology of happiness

Due to individual difference in their temperament, disposition and attitudes, people vary in their ability to experience different emotions.



Certain factors predispose people to be happy and certain factors predispose them to be depressed and unhappy and such factors may keep changing from time to time in the life of an individual. For example extroverts and introverts may differ in their ability to respond to different situations and experience different emotions.

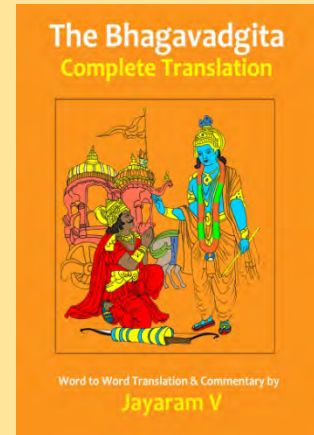
Similarly, healthy people are more predisposed to be happier than people with chronic health problem. Exercising is proven to be effective in uplifting people from temporary depression. Release of certain chemicals into the bloodstream is also found to induce positive emotions in people.

Studies in neuroscience suggest that different areas of the brain are responsible for different emotions such as happiness or depression. These findings indicate that genetic, chemical and biological factors may be behind much of our emotional behavior.

Positive thinking, resilience, religious beliefs, knowledge and education, aesthetic sensibility, extroversion and introversion, self-esteem, and aversion to risk are a few personality traits that are linked to our happiness. In the following discussion we examine the psychology of happiness from different perspectives so that we not only gain a deeper understanding of the subject of happiness but also know the means to sustain it.

The philosophy of happiness

If our actions are in harmony with the established code of conduct and moral norms, we have greater chances of experiencing long lasting and intense happiness. Philosophers like Aristotle, Plato and Thomas Jefferson in the past argued that virtue was imperative for



human happiness.

Immanuel Kant believed that more than virtue, the exercise of will power to achieve good was important and in that pursuit one might have to sacrifice even the desire for happiness. Human beings are not interested in the mere act of living, but living appropriately according to their sense of judgment.

Their sense of propriety and morality may vary, but no one really feels happy for being on the wrong side of life or committing morally depraved actions that degrade human life or dignity. Genuine happiness arises from doing good and being good. there is a definite correlation between altruism and happiness. By nature, we may be conflicted beings, driven by self-interest on the one hand and the need for belongingness and appreciation on the others.

There is a higher nature in each of us that prompts us to perform good actions, which not only define our character and elevate our self-esteem but also lead to our individual and common good. We learn from history, from our religions and from our own observation that happiness arising from evil and negative actions is temporary and in the long run will lead to sorrow and suffering. From this perspective, we reach the universal moral norm that it is better to be poor and righteous rather than rich and evil. This is the moral aspect of happiness.

Social dimension of happiness

There is a social dimension to happiness. We learn early in life from our parents and peers that our happiness should not lead to the misery of others or increase their misery. A robber may feel happy by stealing from another. A hunter may feel happy after hunting a few



wild animals and making trophies out of their heads. Spiritually, it is best described in Hinduism as tamasic happiness, or evil happiness, that will be short lived with worst karmic results.

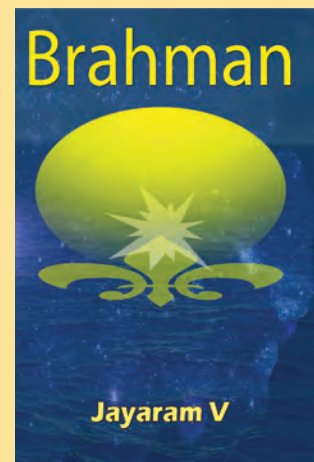
True joy arises from helping others, and being helpful. We also feel happy and at peace, when we care for others. This social dimension of happiness should never be ignored. The US constitution guarantees its citizens life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These three are interconnected. There is nothing depressing for a human being than having no freedom, living in fear and submission and feeling oppressed by the weight of authority.

This, in brief, is the social aspect of happiness.

Wealth and happiness

There is a material side to happiness. Wealth may not make you happy, but if you are disposed to happiness, wealth may increase your chances of happiness. Wealth does not mean material wealth. If you have the wealth of a talent or skill and if you make use of it abundantly in your life, you will experience greater satisfaction than when you do not find opportunities to use it.

Happiness stems from the abundance of having things, reaching goals, making use of your talents, achieving success, having good health, doing a job that you like, having the freedom to enjoy life, having opportunities to achieve excellence, perfecting your skills, earning name and fame, holding leadership positions of power and authority, enjoying a higher status in society, having a good net worth or assured income, and having fulfilling relationships with friends and family.



Generally, people are happy when they have an opportunity to be themselves, express themselves and actualize their potentials, talents, dreams and aspirations. When they live in countries that provide them with such opportunities to reach their personal goals and earn recognition for their individual talents and skills, they experience greater fulfillment and inner happiness than when such conditions are absent or limited.

A world of scarcity is a world of misery. Movies and literature may glorify scarcity and poverty and demonize wealth in support of certain deluded agendas, but the human heart knows in which direction lies its happiness. This is the material aspect of success.

Spirituality and happiness

Now, as to the spiritual side of happiness, the general belief is that spiritual people are somewhat serious about life and not very fun loving. This is a fallacious belief. While material success brings us happiness, it can be cemented further with spiritual effort. Our scriptures suggest that happiness can be experienced in the form of peace and stability by contentment, giving and remaining centered in our spiritual selves. People who attend to their spiritual needs and cultivate a certain spiritual attitude early in their lives are generally happy and peaceful.

We learn from our spiritual masters that more important than happiness, which is fleeting, is overcoming the afflictions and modifications of the mind, which is usually accomplished by practicing detachment, renunciation, moderation, balance, sameness, discretion, purity, restraint, discipline, honesty, non-covetousness, resolve, concentration, meditation and devotion. Spirituality demands



sincere and austere effort. Not everyone can stand up to its challenges. People have to discover their own spirituality.

Some find peace in the company of Nature, some in helping others, some in saving the wild animals, some in providing shelter, some in volunteering, some in being themselves, some in yoga, some in the service to God and some in avoiding the company of the worldly. It depends upon individual temperament as to whether one want to balance one's material desires with spiritual aspirations or devote oneself fully to spiritual life. This is the spiritual aspect of happiness.

Religions and happiness

Religions may make people either happy or miserable. It depends upon how they look to their religions, what they learn from it, where they focus their attention and how they use their knowledge and principles of religion for their growth and development. Each religion has higher and lower aspects. Depending upon their beliefs and attitudes and the area of attention, religions may become a major source of happiness or misery. They may lead to light and wisdom or to darkness and ignorance. They may lead to misery and suffering if people use them to promote persecutions and discrimination of individuals, caste and class divisions or unjustly invest certain groups and individuals with moral and temporal authority to punish others in the name of God and divine justice.

Therefore, we can safely conclude that religions do not guarantee happiness, unless they are used for righteous and just causes. With right knowledge and temperament, people can derive peace and happiness from their religions. Even those who do not believe in organized religions may achieve the same level of peace and



happiness by developing a personal philosophy of their own based upon their knowledge and experiences and use it to cushion them from the disappointments and setbacks. Fear and anxiety are major obstacles to peace and happiness. They can deal with these afflictions with the help of religion.

In other words, you should sacrifice your selfish happiness in the larger interests of your spiritual liberation. In short, when properly used, religions can improve the quality of people's lives and help them experience peace and security. This is the religious aspect of happiness.

Happiness here and hereafter

The scriptures of various religions suggest that happiness is not possible here but only hereafter. They depict the earth, the mortal world, as the most miserable and sinful place in the creation of God where demons await at every turn to taint the souls with evil desires.

It is the preparatory ground, not the final destiny. You may even consider it a testing ground. It is not what it seems to be because everything is a trap, even happiness. What you consider material success may be actually a sinful compromise since material success is hard to win without sacrificing moral values.

Living in such a miserable and depressing world, filled with sin and evil, here we are entitled to experience rare moments of divine rapture that we may find on a lasting basis only in the immortal heaven. One of the Upanishads goes to the extent of explaining that the bliss of being in the company of God is a billion times more intense than that of a carnal pleasure.



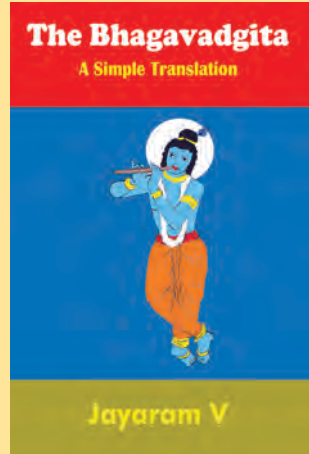
Thus, in one way or another, every religion conveys the same implicit message that the purpose of your life here is to exercise restraint and prepare yourself for your life after death, dealing with the demons of your own mind and postponing your pleasures and natural urges until the end, rather than pursuing pleasures for pleasure sake. They warn you that trying to find happiness in this world is like chasing a mirage because everything here is impermanent, unstable and fuels our desire for having more of the same.

Therefore, neither wealth nor success guarantees true happiness but detachment with them. True happiness comes only at the expense of an arduous effort, at the end of a long and grueling struggle, when you have suffered enough and sacrificed enough. To qualify for the immortal life in the highest heaven you should have carried in your heart the embers of agony, learned the lessons of your life out of such suffering and perfected yourself on the path to liberation, letting go of everything including your preference for comfort and happiness.

Circumstances and happiness

Recent research in happiness suggest that certain conditions predispose people to happiness. For example people are found to be happiest when they are with their friends rather than with their spouses or children. Similarly, research indicates that money is not most powerful factor in influencing people's sense of wellbeing. Instead there are others factors like a good night sleep, helping others, being appreciated, feeling useful, finding a purpose, which tend to make people feel good about themselves and their accomplishments.

Abraham Maslow suggested that satisfaction of needs leads to



happiness and especially satisfaction of self-actualization needs leads to "peak experiences" characterized by uplifting, empowering and ego-transcending emotions such as euphoria, bliss, feelings of self-worthiness and even the mystical experience of feeling oneness with the world or the universe. Our happiness also depends upon how we frame our experience or interpret them.

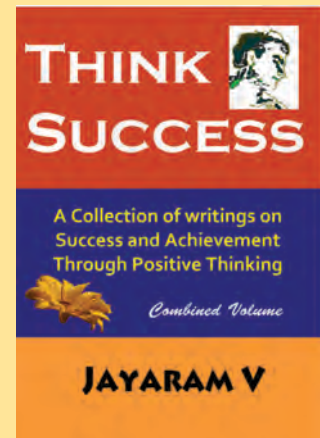
Love and happiness

Love and happiness do not necessarily go together. Those who are in love may experience happiness in the presence of their lovers. But they may also suffer from bouts of depression if they are separated from each other or if some barriers exist between them which prevent their union. Like other human emotions love also deteriorates overtime. The love creates suffering rather than happiness. Authentic happiness comes from being free rather than being bound. If you are seeking happiness out of love relationships you must be prepared for disappointments and setbacks. If you can learn to love others without expectations and without attachment, which is very difficult for ordinary people, then you have better chances of experiencing happiness in your lover relationships.

Success and happiness

The general belief is that if you are successful, you are happier. The truth is the pursuit of success may not augur well for your happiness unless you learn to balance both. Success demands change and change demands compromise and adjustment. Therefore, to achieve success you may have to make certain choices and sacrifices which may reduced you happiness.

For many success means willingness to work for long hours, coping



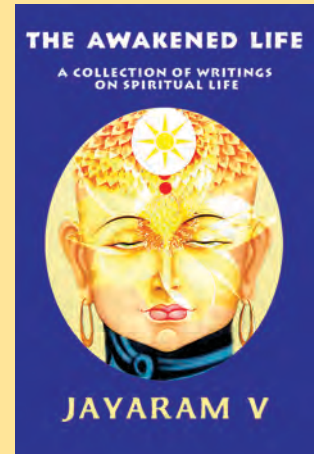
with professional jealousy and constant scrutiny, denying yourself that precious vacation opportunity or missing quality time with your friends and family. These can be potential happiness busters. While these are the problems one has to resolve while striving for success, more problems may crop up after one becomes successful. Standing on the peak of a pyramid is more stressful than climbing and reaching it.

Thus, success may actually prove counterproductive for the ill prepared. Successful people have to deal with the attention that comes with success. Many people wilt under the constant gaze of publicity and media glare. Therefore, if you are aiming for success and you want to be happy, normal and peaceful, you have to cultivate a healthy mindset where you can remain in control of your life and actions and avoid the side effects of success.

Happiness is not the sole aim of human life

There is more to life than the mere pursuit of happiness because true happiness depends upon many factors. Human beings are not happy by just being happy. They want to achieve and accomplish more. They want to lead meaningful lives, with pride and dignity, and be liked, loved and respected.

They want to lead a life that defines them, elevates them in the esteem of others and contributes to their overall wellbeing. And these demand immense sacrifices on their part, including the sacrifice of happiness itself. Therefore while happiness is important, it is not what human life is all about. Human beings regard life both as an opportunity to experience the richness and diversity of life as well as to accomplish certain important goals they cherish in their hearts as



self-actualizing.

The end result of all such accomplishment, they presume, would be happiness. Thus, people experience happiness for a variety of reasons, including even negative ones, like the defeat or the demise of an enemy or the incarceration of a serial killer.

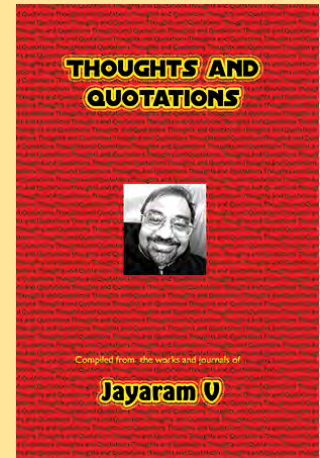
Reasons for unhappiness

It is important to know that unhappiness is not the exact opposite of happiness. The absence of one may not trigger the other. Sometimes, they may also coexist. In most cases people alternate between them. They are essentially two different emotions experienced by us under different circumstances. However, knowing what makes us unhappy, we can develop effective strategies either to cope with our unhappiness or minimize its possibility so that our chances of experiencing happiness increase.

Some of the factors which lead to unhappiness are: chronic physical and mental illness, comparison, negative self-talk, conflicts, abusive relationships, unhealthy habits, failure, criticism, disapproval, jealousy, hostile environment, fear and anxiety and lack of meaning and purpose in life.

Happiness in giving and serving

While happiness is an important component of life, we know from experience that we do not live by happiness alone and we have other aims to accomplish to experience fulfillment, for which we have to sacrifice happiness, like people who go abroad for higher wages leaving their families behinds, people who volunteer to live in economically backward countries to render community service, or



people who choose to visit war torn areas to report about the conditions there. At some stage in the lives, these people transcend their own need for happiness and learn to make sacrifices for the welfare of the others.

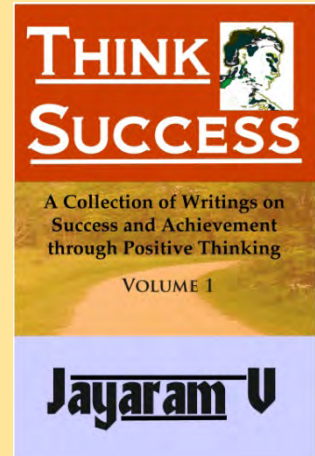
And research indicates that those who serve others derives more happiness and satisfaction in their lives than those who live solely for themselves.

Measuring happiness

About two hundred years ago, a British philosopher felt that it was possible to measure happiness and quantify it by taking into consideration certain factors such as its intensity, duration, speed, certainty, purity, consequences and so on. John Stuart Mill and Francis Edgeworth followed in his footsteps and tried to improve upon his methods of quantifying happiness.

While it may be possible today to measure the intensity of a feeling or emotion by studying the brain impulses, and responses, we are still far away from devising universally acceptable methods of measuring happiness. We may intrinsically know how happy we are and by observing with certain sensitivity how happy others are and use that information to compare and contrast; but still that knowledge would be inadequate to quantify happiness on a scale.

Our happiness may range from very unhappy to very happy, with several grades of happiness or unhappiness in between. We may use this information to devise questionnaires and survey forms and ask people to answer whether in a particular situation they are very happy, happy, somewhat happy, not happy and very unhappy.



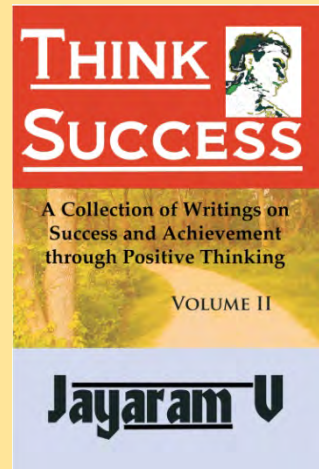
And we may answer them to arrive at some logical conclusions. Using a similar method Ed Deiner devised a Satisfaction with life Scale to determine a person's satisfaction in subjective terms and identify the areas of dissatisfaction. In this method a participant has to answer few simple questions stating whether he strongly agrees, agrees, slightly agrees, neither agrees nor disagrees, disagrees or strongly disagrees with a particular statement concerning his life.

The Subjective Happiness Scale, as the name indicates, uses a simple questionnaire asking the participants to rate themselves on a scale from one to seven how they would regard themselves in terms of their happiness. While these studies may be inadequate, it becomes unmistakably clear to an observer that happiness is better measured in a subjective state and in subjective terms rather than by an outsider in an objective state.

Such studies are imperative to identify chronically depressed patients and help them find meaning and purpose in their lives. Unhappy people tend to fall into deeper states of unhappiness if they are not helped in time to recover from their negative thinking.

Methods that try to quantify happiness may be inadequate, but they do enable researchers and counselors to gauge the emotional states of their patients. Such measurements also help ordinary individuals to become cognizant of their emotional states and work for their emotional wellbeing.

Any study of happiness based upon certain criteria is useful only in a limited sense since it is not an exact science. Besides, happiness is too complex a mental state to fit into a definitive model of quantification and statistical analysis. Yet, it would be better if individuals strive to



become familiar with their own feelings and emotional states.

Authentic happiness

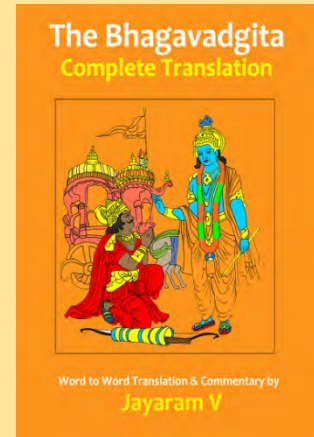
Authentic happiness comes from within, not from without it. It is an intrinsic quality that does not depend upon external circumstances to sustain itself. The following points regarding happiness are worth reflecting.

1. Happiness is not the chief aim of human life. From the perspective of science it is survival; from the perspective of philosophy it is finding purpose and meaning; and from the perspective of scriptures it is happiness in afterlife. Real and lasting happiness is an ideal that remain elusive for almost everyone.

2. Happiness is relative to your desires and expectations. Therefore there is no simple formula as to what makes everyone happy.

3. Happiness cannot be faked. We may keep smiling at people and situations with a plastic smile, but beyond a limit we betray our true emotions through involuntary words and actions.

4. Depression is the most glaring problem of human life. By the time you have finished reading this article at least 10 people would have committed suicide in various parts of the world and twice that number would have actually thought of ending their lives. According to the study done by World Health Organization one person dies every 45 seconds because of suicide.5. If you know anyone who is not happy, try to bring some cheer into that person's life with your generosity. Research shows that we become happier when we make others happy.



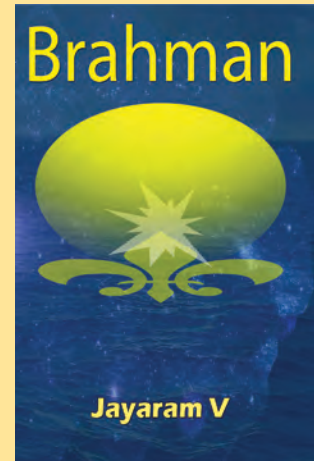
Six ways to boost happiness

The Rough Guide to Psychology by Dr. Christian Jarett, suggests the following six research or "evidence based ways to boost your happiness."

1. Smile. Even an artificial smile seems to lead to happier mood in many people.
2. Don't have kids. Parents on average are less happy than non-parents.
3. Become a political activist. Activism of some kind seems to make students happier and energized.
4. Be grateful. Counting our blessings, expressing thanks, showing gratitude and focusing on what is working for us tend to increase our happiness
5. Engage in repeatedly enjoyable activities. Engaging in activities that boost our happiness in small doses was found effective to achieve long lasting well-being.
6. Mix with happy people. Studies show that happiness increases when we mix frequently with people who are happy.

The principles of happiness

Psychologist Martin Seligman suggested that human beings are happier when they PERMA, the acronym he gave for the following five conditions: Pleasure, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments. In my experience, the following factors have the ability to increase one's potential for happiness and opportunities for



happiness.

Self-knowledge: Knowing what you need, what makes you happy, how to make yourself happy etc.

Purpose: Having a purpose in life that is worth living for

Vision: Having a vision that gives you the ability to view your problems and circumstances with right attitude and from right perspective.

Control: Being able to make decisions about your life and destiny that empower you and make you feel good about yourself. Staying in control of your thoughts and emotions.

Belongingness: Having people around you who genuinely care for you and stand by you when you need them the most. Letting others know that you need them and care for them.

Attitude: Having the ability to adjust your expectations and focus on things that give you cause for happiness, even in unfavorable circumstances.

Discipline: The ability to stay the course, sticking to the plan, remaining committed to your goals and principles.

Balance: Ability to control your passions, emotions, desires and expectations

Health: Making your health one of your long term priorities with adequate rest, exercise, proper diet etc.

Environment: Creating an environment that is conducive to your



wellbeing.

Family: Knowing that your happiness depends to a great extent upon the overall happiness of your family.

Profession: Knowing that your profession plays an important role in your life and happiness.

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