

[Arts » Magazine](#)

An enigma called happiness

GEETA PADMANABHAN



From the mundane to the metaphysical, it may mean different things to different people. But everyone has a happiness code... So, what's your story? -GEETA PADMANABHAN

This story is worth a retell. The king is ill and the medicine men don't know why. Someone suggests that the king wear a crown and be dispatched to find a happy man. It is a long and arduous search, no one is willing to claim he is happy. The soldiers stop him and ask, "Are you happy?" they ask. The man smiles and nods. "Will you give your shirt to the ailing king?" He replies, "But I don't have a shirt."

Here is one chase in which we are united: the pursuit of happiness. Never mind it is intangible, impermanent and elusive. In the street, different guys have different interpretations of what it is. The American Declaration of Independence lists the pursuit of happiness as an "unalienable right", endowed by the Creator. Bhutan measures its wealth in terms of a per-capita happiness index.

You can't buy happiness, but you can at least inherit it, said British and Australian researchers, after studying a thousand identical twins. Their Eureka! on happiness is: Genes control half the personality traits that make people happy, while factors such as environment are responsible for the rest of our well-being.

A skill?

The researchers identified common genes in identical twins that result in certain personality traits and predispose people to be happy.

hardworking and conscientious people tend to be happier, the researchers reported in *Psychological Science*. “We have determined by genetics as well as our upbringing,” says Deepak Chopra, the digital age guru. Happiness is usually riding a bike. Being happy is a skill anyone can acquire.

An army hospital in Arizona, US, is planning to introduce Hasya (laughter) Yoga to the veterans returning from Iraq. Weil, Director, Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine and an Indian-American doctor Gulshan Sethi. The medicos have the potential to treat Iraq war veterans suffering from post-traumatic syndrome. In faraway Estonia, Internet entrepreneur “Happiness Bank”. Here people can earn virtual money on their accounts by doing good deeds for those in need.

So what is this thing called happiness? Is it smelling roses (personal) or making affordable wheelchairs (public)? Does it come from cues? Responses range from the mundane to the metaphysical, from finding solutions to finding one's calling. To top it all off, they are not. Happiness seems unpredictable, inconsistent, even irrational.

Let's settle an old debate. Does money bring happiness? The answer, however, begins with the theory known as the Easterlin Paradox. An economist, argued that economic growth didn't necessarily lead to personal satisfaction. As proof, he quoted the example of Japan. Between 1950 and 70, Japan saw an unprecedented boom in economy. But the percentage of people who claim to be happy, it seemed, were wealthier, but no happier.

Once basic necessities were met, additional income didn't make you proportionately happier, Easterlin said. Why not? Money doesn't come from what you earn. Above the “necessities” mark, wealth sinks into a comparison pool. You own a Blackberry and a car. With vaguely spiritual undertones, this theory became an instant classic. Money can't buy happiness. But now, Easterlin's paradox is being challenged.

Money does bring happiness, argue economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers. There may be no guarantees, but it has hit the world, public opinion surveys have shown “income does matter”. They cite Gallup polls to confirm that life satisfaction is linked to income.

But, affluence by itself doesn't guarantee a sense of well-being. Those syringe-and-scalpel-induced smiles on page three are often followed by insecurities and disappointments. High incidence of heart disease and diabetes are results of affluence as much as the things that make us really happy, like short commutes, time with kids, an evening with life-long friends, a book that brings joy, have no price tag. A job and home is not a pretty thing. You need cash to travel, for better health amenities, for research, for leisure, for a life that remains elusive. Is happiness connected to contentment?

Critical balance

“Yes,” says Dr. Zareena, Asst. Professor, Madras School of Economics. “We all want economic growth, but does absolute happiness come from it? With a good income, you can fulfil both short-term and long-term wishes, but lasting happiness comes from a balance between material and non-material. From being surrounded by a loving family. Happiness goes beyond planning and achieving targets.”

To a lot of us, it's simply the everyday miracle of finding the cell phone (car keys?), the file on a packed computer disc, the distance by, walking barefoot on dewy grass, helping without expecting a reward. A dad said, “Happiness is a clear MRI tumour.” Question is: do you recognise the smell of first rain, the steal of morning sunshine, and the embrace of an evening breeze?

“Happiness is not a permanent state of being,” says a young mom, looking at her sleeping kid. “We can't say, now that we have these happy moments. We are not primed to feel continuous satisfaction.” Happiness is also connected to the time you spend. A teen happy as a teen (aargh!) will look completely silly at thirty. Should we link our happiness to planning for a future?

Ok, happiness comes from within. You tap the source of happiness and use it to still the demons within. Happiness is about entertaining your whims. Lasting enjoyment comes from living life with zest, pursuing your career, love, friendship and making choices. You can choose to brood and be angry or find the brighter side and be happy with what you have. To reach that state, you need more than enough relationships, more than enough physical, emotional and mental resources. You are at peace with your body (action) and spirit (conscience) vibrate in unison.

Remember Randy Pausch? At 46, (wife and three pre-school kids) he learned he was terminally ill with pancreatic cancer. On the Internet by more than 10 million people, he had a few months to live. Randy decided not to be bitter or angry. He decided to live each moment as a gift.

Whatever you do, see that your happiness does not come from hurting others. When worries lash, say, “even this will pass.” Find your humour. Recognise that bubble in you that swells when you're sharing a laugh with a kid. Then you will be the one who is laughing.

Keywords: [Happiness](#), [Psychological Science](#)