

MONDAY, MAY 10, 2010 09:01 ET

# Screw happiness

**Bombarded by studies about who is content and why, we forget one thing: Dissatisfaction has its own rewards**

BY REBECCA TRAISTER



Salon/iStockphoto

Some weeks ago, while my boyfriend and I ate at a restaurant bar in New Orleans, the bartender repeatedly checked on the progress of our meal by asking, "Is everything perfect?"

It was a service-industry tic for which I could not wholly fault her; there was a vast stretch of my professional life during which, upon meeting me, it was quite likely I would ask you if I could start you off with a signature cocktail or encourage you to join Bath & Body's mailing list for great deals on lotions and scrubs. You gotta say what you gotta say.

But the measurement of our meal against the bar of "perfection" was jarring. By certain criteria, eating a fine meal with a man I love in one of the world's great cities *was* perfect. But only for the split second it took to stop considering that the city was still unpopulated by many who longed to be back in it after Katrina, that I had forgotten to pay a bill and was worried my credit card might not work, that the crab gnocchi was a little under-seasoned. No, of course everything wasn't perfect.

What struck me was the expectation -- not singular to this restaurant or this bartender -- that it should be.

In recent eras -- during which that smiley face icon has moved in and out of fashion -- an American obsession with perfection, and more broadly with happiness, has grown robust. The 1990s saw the **expansion** of the field of positive psychology, research into human contentment and optimism. That burgeoning pursuit has now begun to yield scientific fruit: scads of studies and papers dedicated to exploring, evaluating and then extrapolating from how happy we are as a culture.

When it comes to social science and economics, women lately seem especially prone to having the contentment thermometer thrust at them, and their temperature always seems to register at "**dissatisfied**." A **study** by University of Pennsylvania economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, as well as one by Princeton economist **Alan Krueger**, have shown a **decline in female happiness** in the years since the second wave, a trend that has been **cheerily used** as proof of exactly how unhappy increased social, sexual, professional and economic liberation has made American women. Even those who dare make claim to general life satisfaction are told not to get too comfortable; as Marcus Buckingham, the author of "Find Your Strongest Life: What the Happiest and Most Successful Women Do Differently" gloomily warned any aberrantly chipper chicks in a **piece** last year, "as women get older they get sadder."

But really, how could they not, given the aggressive messages about happiness and how *they must achieve it*, and unhappiness and *how they must avoid it* that are foisted on them from every direction, making them feel like failures if they are not warbling and grinning their way through life?

I spent the better part of my 20s and early 30s being told by **Sylvia Ann Hewlett** that my fertility was evaporating by the millisecond and by **the Rules** women that I'd better snag a husband before my aesthetic value decreased and my clock ticked out. Life without children is not worth living, childless women are told repeatedly, recently (to name but one example) in a **Times of London** story by a mother whose "heart aches for" her feminist friends who wound up

childless, apparently because feminism taught them to eschew motherhood (a line of argument that is patently inaccurate, but whatever). "As they stare into a barren future," Eleanor Mills writes of her ambitious friends, "many singletons wish they'd put some of the focus and drive that has furnished them with sparkling careers, worn-out passports and glamorous social lives into the more mundane business of having a family." Many of her cohort, Mills reports, realize "often too late ... that no job will ever love you back" and, more menacingly, "that the graveyards are full of important executives." (Hear that? You'll be lonely *and* dead, ladies.)

Single for more than seven years, I occasionally would attempt to allay some well-wishers' anxiety about my future solitude by averring that one day I might have a family on my own. But this was always met with vigorous head shakes and furrowed brows. "No, you can't do it by yourself," said one well-meaning married mother. "You'd be miserable."

Apparently, the part of the familial happiness equation in which I might exert some agency -- getting myself knocked up -- was no solution. The key was pure happenstance: meeting a partner with whom I wanted to share my life. But also waiting for the right partner. As a press release informed me just last week, there is a new book called "Last One Down the Aisle Wins" that reminds readers that "60% of women who marry under the age of 25 will end up divorced."

I totally cleared that hurdle -- by a decade -- but was never short of scolds who assured me that, no, wait a minute, I shouldn't be waiting one extra second to find my mate; in fact, my single status was not only not circumstantial, it was very much my own fault. This winter, Lori Gottlieb published "**Marry Him**," her paean to settling for a man (something she herself, in the spirit of Phyllis Schlafly and Caitlin Flanagan, has so far neglected to do) because having children on your own (which Gottlieb did do) will make you wish that you had a man -- any man! -- to keep you company and help raise them. Gottlieb has the logic water torture down to an art: pursuing something close to happiness by attempting to find someone who makes you happy will likely result in unhappiness.

Now, about to marry someone -- someone who makes me happy -- I'm hearing different stories, about how impossible marriage is, how monogamy is not natural, how **sex will soon be a thing of the past**. I read memoirs full of infidelity and surprise estrangement by **Julie Metz** and **Isabel Gillies** and **Laura Munson**; Sandra Tsing-Loh's vision of marriage as an **emotional labor camp**, Laurie Abraham's **novelistic chronicle** of ennui and dishonesty in a couples therapy group. These are compelling stories, great yarns. But **last week** I got an e-mail about how married women are jealous of their single counterparts. (Apparently marriage curtails a woman's freedom to "dance to Abba in her high heels and Spanx before going out.")

Should my boyfriend and I decide to have kids, I know what's around the corner. The spigot of concern for all the saddies without daddies or babies will dry up, in its place will gush warnings I've already heard directed at pregnant female friends: Your **career will fall by the wayside**, you'll **never have sex again**, the **domestic inequities** of your partnership will be laid bare; childbirth will **destroy your body**, your **libido** and your physical appeal.

Because, naturally enough, the same studies showing that liberated women are unhappier since feminism also tell us that **women with kids are less happy** than women without them, and less happy than the **men they share them with**. Also, women are less happy in marriage than men are. And women are less happy 40 years after the second wave than men are. So, in short: have babies young so as not to imperil your fertility; do not marry early or you'll be at higher risk for divorce; get married to an appropriate guy as soon as possible so as to guarantee companionship; don't forget to have kids! And also, don't have kids!

The irony is that all the behaviors that provoke the head shaking -- seeking love, concentrating on career and economic independence, having children, not having children, continuing to work after motherhood -- are the very things we choose to do in pursuit of satisfaction for ourselves, not to mention to support ourselves. Stop doing those spoiled things that bring you fulfillment or you'll never find fulfillment!

You know what I think? It's all bullshit. Not just the trend stories and the self-help stuff, but the laser focus on happiness itself. I say this as someone who has grown steadily happier as I've aged, but I think I would have said it even

more emphatically earlier in my life: I'm just not sure that "happiness" is supposed to be the stable human condition, and I think it's punishing that we're constantly being pushed to achieve it.

I felt the suffocating pressure to feel happiness most acutely in my 20s, when my parents made their hope for me clear: We just want you to be happy, they'd say. And listen, I am deeply aware and grateful that they *weren't* saying, "We want you to settle down" or "Find a more lucrative profession." Their hopes for me were noble and generous. But I remember knowing at the time that "happy" was the one thing I could not be at that particular point. I could pay the rent, do my job, try not to get too drunk or go home with anyone dangerous, meet nice people, attempt to cobble together the foundation of an adult life that might hold something -- Work? Home? Friends? Money? Marriage? Kids? -- that might one day yield something closer to contentment. But at that point, I could not be happy, at least not on a regular basis. I was too filled with fear -- about future, about money, about loneliness.

When I described these years at a **recent luncheon** about happiness, at which Naomi Wolf talked about her **More magazine piece** about the connections between dissatisfaction and feminism, **Gretchen Rubin**, the author of the book "The Happiness Project" (a memoir of a year spent testing various prescriptions for happiness), suggested that I might have strived in that stretch of life not to be happy, but to be *happier*.

Rubin's tips for increased good cheer are often straightforward: **Make the bed**. (Ironically, one of the first numbing duties **Betty Friedan lists** as provoking in American women "a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction" in 1963.) **Sing in the morning**. Rubin's recommendations seem sometimes best suited to people who are already in a position of moderate satisfaction: people who get out of bed in the morning, either to report for remunerated employment or to start consuming the day's worth of bonbons, who are in possession of crisp white sheets to pull tight across their beds. But they remind me pleasantly of a therapist I went to in my 20s during a period of depression. She was precisely the kind of counselor an over-thinker like me needed. She did not linger too long on how I *felt* or what I *thought* about how I felt, sensing perhaps that I posed these navel-gazing questions to myself roughly every second of every day leading up to our appointments. Instead, she listened sympathetically to my tale of woe and told me, "Eat more salmon. It will make you happier." I did, and it (or something, more likely time) did.

When I ate more salmon, it (or time) pulled me from despair to not-despair, and that was great. The not-despair was, in fact, as great as "happiness." I was making it through, getting by. I didn't need satisfaction or contentment or anything approaching perfection. I was proud to be waking up in the morning and going to work, enjoying the intermittent flashing pleasures of a laugh with friends or a drink with colleagues. I can't imagine that sunrise singing would have boosted me any closer to ecstasy. Then again, perhaps this is exactly what Rubin was prescribing for me at that lunch: the baby steps that inched me toward *happier*, if not happy.

And fair enough. But the thing is, "not happy" has its own rewards.

Unhappiness is propellant; disappointment and dismay prompt us to work for a better grade, to ask for a promotion or seek a new job, to search for a more affordable or comfortable abode, to go out at night and meet someone new, to try to get pregnant or decide not to have another kid. More specifically, the elements of life that make us sad or upset or bored show us what we do not want; they give shape and specificity to what it is we *do* want and perhaps the motivation to work toward it. That which leaves us empty prompts us to find what we want to fill us up, whether it results in picking up a phone to talk to a friend or picking up and moving to Bali.

In archetypal American rags-to-riches stories, the dissatisfactions of poverty and degradation are what provoke heroes to make their giant forward leaps. In my far more privileged experience, fear, humiliation and error provided me with the fuel, the desire and the ambition to move away from where I was and toward something else, something that quite often turned out to be better. For that transformative power, I give unhappiness a lot of credit.

But I would submit also that sometimes dissatisfied is just how life is. And that that's all right. That's one of the reasons that I recently devoured Emily Gould's **much-maligned memoir** "And the Heart Says Whatever," appreciating her

willingness to let her youthful unhappiness lie still, to look unblinkingly at the unpleasantness of her days and often of herself and perhaps recognize that unpleasantness as a stew from which her specific ambitions evolved, but more often to simply describe it as it was: life.

Here is what I have deduced so far both from my experiences and from the hissed warnings of those who propel me toward their idea of happiness and simultaneously warn me it will never really be attainable: There will be peaks -- falling in love, seeing new places, enjoying whatever form a family takes, drinking a beer on a warm night, seeing a baseball team win a long coveted pennant. And there will be valleys -- divorces and illnesses, joblessness and money trouble, watching those you love in pain, a ninth inning playoff loss. In those valleys, I'm not sure that it's happiness we first strive for, but rather the power to not get stuck, to move toward just slightly higher ground. A spot within view of a peak will often do just as nicely as a seat atop it.

There is no formula for life satisfaction, no recipe that doesn't produce lumps of discontent or frustration. This is not the same observation as the backlash-tastic chestnut about the foolishness of "wanting it all," an insidious phrase designed to make women sound like covetous and unrealistic divas. The women I know have not sought it *all*; we have simply pursued more than previous generations permitted.

Some of the avenues open in the 21st century bring women joy, some bring its opposite; often they just mean more hours worked, fewer hours slept, new sets of fears and anxieties alongside new opportunities for accomplishment, pleasure and pride -- in other words, the range of feeling and experience that comprise a typical day, a week, a year, a life. It is this daily, varied reality that makes me wish we could stop using happiness, or perfection, as the yardstick by which we evaluate our lives, and that we could stop gravely shaking our heads at every instance that a woman fails to measure up.

---

-- By Rebecca Traister