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Jenice Armstrong: Is 'happy' slipping away for women?



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LADIES, ARE YOU happy?

By that, I mean do you have a genuine sense of well-being and contentment about your life? I ask because there's a disturbing study getting a lot of buzz lately that says women are less happy now than they were four decades ago.

Hold on. It gets worse. Women also reportedly get sadder as they age.

Can somebody pass the Prozac?

Excuse the sarcasm, but you'd think the exact opposite would be true. That's why the feminist movement was waged - to provide women with greater freedom to define their lives on their own terms.

And now we hear that women are less happy than they used to be.

Say it ain't so, Mo.

That's **Maureen Dowd**, the *New York Times* columnist who beat me to this subject last week. Actually, it was the Huffington Post that got the grist mill turning when it announced the hiring of a blogger to write specifically about women and happiness since we're all supposedly miserable.

It seemed to me like there was a whole lot of generalizing going on. I mean, I don't feel sad. Most days I'm pretty happy.

"That's because you don't have kids," a colleague told me.

Children can complicate things, especially for career women juggling child-care responsibilities with everything else. Meanwhile, many who have opted for more traditional roles are being forced back into the workplace to replace salaries lost by laid-off spouses who no longer bring home hefty paychecks.

"We're so busy trying to make everyone else happy that we rarely stop to think of our own happiness quotient," pointed out **Linda Ann Olson**, a spokeswoman for Eastern University in St. Davids.

"Women are always working hard to please their spouses, smooth the way for their children, listen to elderly parents and try to take care of their needs, keep up with demands at work, help as they can at schools and churches and worthwhile organizations, stay connected with friends, be kind to neighbors . . . whew," she wrote in an e-mail. "No wonder we're too tired to worry about being happy. Put it on the list."

Betsey Stevenson, an assistant professor at Penn's Wharton School who co-wrote "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness," says women across the board are less happy than their male counterparts regardless of their economic situation or whether they work outside the home. The same was true for older women as it was for stressed-out teenagers trying to balance academic pressures with social activities.

Interestingly, black women tend to be happier than white females, but African-American women still lag behind black men in terms of happiness.

The findings were culled from previously conducted studies such as the General Social Survey, then analyzed. When I caught up with Stevenson yesterday, she was at her home in Center City with a newborn less than a month old.

Given that women with children complain so often of not being happy, I asked her if that had made her rethink starting a family.

"It did really make me think long and hard about why I did have a child," said Stevenson, 38, over the sounds of her baby fussing. "Perhaps what this is symbolic of is that happiness isn't a total measure of our well being.

"[Before having the baby] I asked women, do you regret this? Do you wish you hadn't done it? Very few people said this is a mistake or it made my life worse . . . I do think my life is richer and more interesting."

That bore itself out in her findings with other women, too. Despite their parental frustrations, "people seem to still prefer having kids."

Happiness seems like the wrong goal.

"One important question is, should we care?" Stevenson said rhetorically. "Have our lives become enriched in other ways?"

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