

We women have never had it so good. So why ARE we unhappy?

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There's a dangerous sickness stalking the streets of Britain, invisible as the plague. I see it striking people down all around - boys and girls, men and women alike, whose wistful, pained eyes plead: "What's it all about?"

They've been bitten by the happiness virus - which guarantees a life of dissatisfaction. Because this "illness" isn't simply about *being* happy. This bug eats away at the soul because it tells the victim that he or she has the right to be happy - and that happiness lies just over there, perpetually out of reach.

What's more, it seems that women are affected in greater numbers than men by this affliction.

Before male readers turn the page with a snort, accusing me of crying pity yet again for poor, victimised women, let me assure you this assertion is based on solid academic research.



Women are making themselves unhappy by 'wanting it all'

Two separate American studies have just concluded that women *are* unhappier than men. Meanwhile, here in Britain, research has established that women are ten times more likely to be severely depressed than they were 50 years ago - and twice as likely as men.

What is going on? With so much freedom and so many opportunities, and with women outperforming men throughout the education system, we ought to be the happiest generation in history - not to mention that life gets better all the time for our daughters.

In one of the studies, by American economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, a young woman student shines a beam of light on this paradox.

She told them that her mother's aims in life were relatively simple: she wanted a well-kept house with a beautiful garden, and well-adjusted children who did well at school.

The girl went on: "I sort of want all those things, too. But I also want to have a great career and have an impact on the broader world."

Such sentiments are not at all like the sugar plum Miss World candidate, blessed with great beauty, who tells the TV interviewer portentously that her aim in life is "world peace".

That young woman I quoted is sincere in her longing to make a difference, and no one can blame her for that. Yet to be judged successful in the modern world, she must be seen to succeed within *and* outside the home.

The use of the adjective "well" (as in doing things well, or well-adjusted children) is no longer good enough. Today's woman seeks perfection - and will expend all her heart, mind and soul in chasing it.

Like A many-armed Hindu goddess, she must be multiply dextrous: ordering food from the supermarket online while checking the kids have done their homework, the dog has its food, the garden sprinkler is on, the washing-machine is full and the husband has his kiss (for it goes without saying that you have to be sexy, or off he will pop).

At the same time, she must make sure the right papers are in her briefcase, the laptop and mobile are powered up, the petition against an expansion of the airport is signed, and the parent-teacher evening is safely in the diary - just after she's squeezed in a visit to the hairdresser's to get those roots touched up. Phew!

How can she expect to achieve it all? Yet, charged up by her own high standards - as well as those of the Western world and its insidious media propaganda that forever insists that impossibly slim, beautiful women *can* have it all - she certainly does expect to.

The problem is that this punishing quest for perfection will most likely fail, leaving her with the miserable feeling that she has fallen short.

The result? Run-down batteries or, worse, that complete short-circuiting of the system which is depression.

According to Alan Krueger, an economist at Princeton University in New Jersey, women are far less contented with their lot than they were in the Sixties: meanwhile, men have learned how to relax more and work less.

Interestingly, Krueger identifies having to do unpleasant chores as playing a key part in the unhappiness stakes. Analysing surveys taken since the Sixties, he found that while men are brilliant at dodging chores they don't like, women have simply taken on paid work as well as the housework.

Mr Krueger said: "The most likely explanation for the happiness trends is that women now have a much longer to-do list than they once did, including helping their parents [who are living longer]. They can't possibly get it all done."

I'm afraid it's obvious to me that the woman who regards taking care of her family and keeping an eye on her elderly parents as the sum total of her ambition is bound to be more contented than her sister who wants to "have it all".

It is within that seductive, deceptive "all" that the problem lies.

According to Betsey Stevenson: "Thirty or 40 years ago, women were happier because they probably had narrower ambitions. They compared themselves with each other and

not with men. Now women are more competitive and ambitious. But it seems it doesn't make them any happier."

More than ever, we compare ourselves to other people all the time. Somebody is always more beautiful, slimmer, richer, a better cook; but whereas once we'd have shrugged and accepted our imperfections, the mantra of the modern age is that perfection is possible.

It comes from magazines which give young girls impossible expectations, from TV programmes which feed dreams of celebrity and stardom, from parenting programmes which, though useful, can also make people feel utterly inadequate - and so on.

More than 2,000 self-help books are published each year, all promising an increase in self-esteem if you follow this or that step-by-step programme. Get the happiness habit! Live the life you've dreamed of! Create your own destiny!

Oh, but don't forget to pick up the shopping and cleaning on the way home as well, and be sure to flash your bosom over the meatballs, just like Nigella.

"Are you getting enough happiness?" sang the band Hot Chocolate, asking repeatedly "What's the matter with me?" Most women would say: "I'm just exhausted."

Today, 57 per cent of British women between the ages of 16 and 64 have a full-time job - some because they have to work, some because they want to, and some slaving away all the hours of the day and evening because of a mixture of both.

I've always worked from choice; my own mother went out to work after I reached school age because we needed the money - but she would still be the first to admit that she loved her office jobs; to have stayed home all day would have driven her crazy.

I'm not even sure that the problem hinges on the old "working woman versus homebody" debate. The fact that women have too many choices is more of an issue.

If, as the research suggests, men have learned to cut out the boring bits and relax, then why can't we?

Certain husbands of my acquaintance might murmur that their stressed-out wives are in that state only because they feel they *have* to do it all. Once they merely *wanted* to.

Now, scurrying around like a headless chicken, searching for perfection, has become a habit of mind. Or mindlessness.

Imagine shopping for a new dress. You have something in mind and in the very first shop you see something quite like it. But you don't make the choice because there might be something better.

A few shops later, you come across a fabulous skirt and great top in the right colour and cut, but that's not The Dress. So you take a bus to another part of town and start again. Hours later, you're discontented, disappointed and still surrounded by row upon row of desirable clothes. But not The Dress.

Suddenly, you spot the handbag you've seen in a magazine swinging from the arm of some supermodel. Got to go home with *something*.

So you buy the bag, experience the retail buzz you mistake for happiness, go home... and suddenly feel down. You've spent much time and energy and more money, but where is The Dress? Surely out there somewhere?

I always buy the first dress I see which is more or less fine. I like "fine", because I decided years ago that perfection is impossible this side of Heaven.

I like compromise and being contented; to me, that's happiness. As a mother, I was pleased for my kids to do things OK, not brilliantly.

When they were small, I became aware that, as a writer, I could not always produce my best work without having to take myself away from them, which I was not prepared to do.

I accepted that there is always a shortfall in happiness. There is no more "right" to having happiness in our lives than there is any way of avoiding bereavement.

And, believe me, the moment you accept that you cannot be perfect, ease up on the striving, and expect less of yourself - that's the moment when you may stumble upon happiness.

You may find it comes through bidding farewell to multi-tasking and making a clever costume for your son to wear in the school play instead.

There is, after all, whatever anyone may say, something quite magical about seeing a mother with her small children. It seems to be a moment in a woman's life when she is happier than at any other time.

You may even find joy in simply stopping to notice a pastel sky and realise it's more exquisite than any handbag.

If women have to realise that it's straight-forwardly greedy to want it "all", then *all* of us have to learn that happiness starts when our obsession with "self-help" books combined with an excessive interest in ourselves ends.

Since the beginning of time, wise and happy people have known that the key isn't to be found in mere pleasure, money, achievements or possessions.

The common, angst-ridden question "What is the point of life?" needs to be re-phrased to: "What can I use my life FOR?" That would be a useful first step towards a happier life.