

THE PATHS to happiness

Skip the hardwork, and opt for a transcranial magnetic stimulation—could happiness really be that straightforward? Jonathan Marshall chews on a disturbing simplicity.

The pursuit of happiness is high on most people's life agenda. In fact, it is writ large in political manifestos—in the Singapore pledge of allegiance, the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and in Bhutan's case, even as a measurement of progress: "Gross National Happiness". So what actually contributes to happiness?

Clearly, wealth has something to do with it but it is only a fraction of the equation. Researchers, including Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, have shown that on average the more wealthy a nation, the greater the well-being of its citizens. Denmark is at the top of the curve; the USA, a wealthier nation as measured by purchasing power, is not far behind—but it is on the same level as Venezuela—a very much poorer nation. As for Singapore, despite its wealth per capita (11th in the world according to Gallup's researchers), ranks poorly. Singaporeans described themselves as "struggling" significantly more than the citizens of other countries. Money, it seems, is like hygiene: it can protect people from the lows of disease and discontentment, but it cannot take a person or a population to the highs of thriving and well-being. So once we have met the basic factors of life (food, shelter, and health), what are the causes of happiness?

The self-help section in your local bookstore is likely to shed some light of the issue, but it is unlikely to describe more than one of the three paths researchers have found that actually increase well-being. The strategies you will read reflect the ideals and goals of a society oriented to commercial success. Motivational can-do guru Anthony Robbins, life coaches, sport psychologists, and

empowerment groups teach us to identify, visualise, plan, and attain our heart's desires. This might mean acquiring more fame, owning a new BMW, getting that tight body, finding Prince Charming, or improving your immune function. The methods are powerful. In fact, if you do not describe using some of these psychological methods in your application to elite military forces, e.g., the US Navy SEALs, you will be rejected simply because you lack the psychological skills that lead to resilience. While these "go get what you want" methods may help you achieve, gain, and acquire, will they bring you to really high well-being? Apparently not.

Many people follow this path with great success only to find their rich and famous selves sitting on top of their careers and asking, "What is this all for?" Saint Paul, the primary author of the New Testament, described this ennui as a "groaning" for God that cannot be satisfied this side of heaven. The Buddha explained that pain as an inherent dissatisfaction with the unenlightened life. And clinical psychologists call it a mid-life crisis—I had my first one at age 11.

Many people respond by borrowing one of the 19 million copies of the self-help book *The Secret* by Australian television writer and producer Rhonda Byrne, and adopting a minor modification to the same ineffective grind. A few, however, move on.

Profound and pervasive well-being

The second, more mature stage of seeking well-being, is characterised by accepting one's mental and emotional states. People focus on accepting what they have, and changing previously unrealistic expectations. They start to see that discontentment exists in the space between what is, and what they think should be. Many atheists, agnostics, and spiritual practitioners seek progress along this path. Its essence is described well by Reinhold Neibuhr's prayer: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, And the wisdom to know the difference."

According to well-being researcher Dr. Jeffery Martin, director of the Centre for the Study of Non-Symbolic Consciousness, 99 percent of the population is able to improve well-being incrementally using a variation of the standard techniques alluded to above. But, sadly, they rarely arrive at their goal—permanent well-being.

Dr. Martin has interviewed 1,200 people

who perceive themselves to have "arrived". They experience a profound and pervasive state of extraordinary well-being typically brought on by a sudden, dramatic shift. These people report that no matter what situation may arise, they are able to return to a high baseline of wellness very quickly. They do not experience any void or gnawing dissatisfaction with life. As one participant described it, "I now live in a state of sweet stillness, and I would never want to go back."

Neuroscientists at New York University and Yale have scanned the brains of some people in this population and believe their findings substantiate these claims. While describing the most unusual brain examined, one researcher (whom I should not name here as yet) described areas of blue to indicate "silence," ergo, "there are areas of his brain that show 'blue' on our scans. That means silence. He lives in a world of incredible peace, with a feeling of being connected to all things, and in a continuous sense of flow or presence. It's truly remarkable."

This state is characterised by "positive surrender". Unlike the previously described stage, where people are actively trying to let go of the need to control, in this stage, surrender is a natural state of being. One might be excused for thinking this "blue"-brained lot would be lazy, un-achieving, and impractical. In fact many have demanding executive level jobs. They describe conducting their lives as a natural expression of who they are rather than with the goal to achieve something in particular. Jeffrey Walker, ex-Chairman and CEO of CCMP Capital, explained to me that this population makes exceptionally good bankers. One reason may be because their emotions do not interfere with their clarity of thought.

So how can any of us get to this stage? While some people claim they achieved it through spiritual practice, many others describe it suddenly happening to them despite having no particular practice. One person became obsessed with mirrors, the reflection of mirrors within mirrors, and the question of "What is reality if everything can be seen as a reflection?" He found himself questioning the nature of reality and then suddenly... pop! He claims his baseline of well-being profoundly changed forever.

Electric awakening

In an attempt to harness technology to effect this change, Dr. Martin's research privately funded group has created a "happiness hat".

It uses transcranial direct current stimulation to invoke a prolonged state of well-being by sending an electrical signal to the relevant parts of participants' brains. I interviewed one of the first participants, Sally.

She described profound and increasing amounts of joy for the three to four hours following her treatment. "It wasn't giddy. It was deep. I felt an immense, imperturbable peace and joy throughout my body." She went on to explain having a very tricky and potentially painful discussion with her romantic partner during that period. "It was the kind of discussion that might have made me afraid that we were heading toward separation. But I felt such well-being inside, I just wanted to communicate with him in a straightforward way, completely uncensored. It's the kind of thing you would never normally do, but everything just felt so right. I was in a place where what was being said to me could not affect me emotionally or decrease the well-being I was feeling."

Since then a number of people have experienced this electrical impulse with varying degrees of success. According to Dr. Martin, it is likely that sometime between tomorrow and 20 years from now, well-being is going to be available in the zap of a happiness hat. If he is right, the impact on our society will, literally, be mind-boggling. But it may not be the kind of "surrender" one envisioned.

If the job of our governments is to increase the well-being of its populations, should they start investing in electrode-filled hats rather than roads or schools? And if this hat were to be very successful, would we all use it? Some part of me wonders if in fact a cheap road to well-being would be a good thing. It does not seem natural but perhaps that does not matter. The last time I saw Sally I asked for her thoughts. She beamed as she described her experience. She also explained that she and her partner had just bought a home and regardless of the impact on society, she wants another shot at the machine. As I watched her glow with joy as she talked, I could not help but wonder how much had been caused by her experience in the happiness hat and... I wanted to give it a try myself. **GIA**

All confidential identifying information has been anonymised. Jonathan Marshall is Assistant Professor of Leadership Studies at the LKY School. A psychologist and executive coach, he teaches leadership and maintains a consulting, coaching and counselling practice. His email is ✉ jmarshall@nus.edu.sg

In 2010, more than 90 percent of the world's youth, aged 15 to 24, lived in developing countries, and more than half (55 percent) lived in Asia, according to the International Labour Office, Geneva. The realities of ageing societies in developed countries and predominantly youthful societies in developing countries present opportunities and challenges, demanding a mindset change. Post-crisis, the greatest challenge may be to create employment but the issues are myriad. The next issue of *Global-is-Asian* features young leaders, experts and young minds, who will address the issues facing the generation in the wings.

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