

Cultivating happiness often misunderstood, says researcher

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(Medical Xpress)—The paradox of happiness is that chasing it may actually make us less happy, a Stanford researcher says. So how does one find happiness? Effective ways exist, according to new research.

One path to happiness is through concrete, specific [goals](#) of benevolence – like making someone smile or increasing recycling – instead of

following similar but more abstract goals – like making someone happy or saving the environment.

The reason is that when you pursue concretely framed goals, your expectations of success are more likely to be met in reality. On the other hand, broad and abstract goals may bring about happiness' dark side – unrealistic expectations.

Those are the conclusions of a study recently published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* by Jennifer Aaker, a social psychologist and the General Atlantic Professor of Marketing at Stanford Graduate School of Business. Co-authors are Melanie Rudd, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Houston, and Michael Norton, an associate professor of business at Harvard University. Rudd, who studied under Aaker at Stanford as a doctoral student, was the lead author on the study.

As the researchers point out, the pursuit of happiness is one of the most essential quests in life, and happiness is often considered a hallmark of psychological health. But it is more mysterious and complex than most people might imagine – and not always readily achievable.

Aaker said, "Although the desire for [personal happiness](#) may be clear, the path to achieving it is indefinite. One reason for this hazy route to happiness is that although people often think they know what leads to happiness, their predictions about what will make them happy are often inaccurate."

One underappreciated way to increase one's own happiness is to focus on elevating the happiness of others. But, how exactly do you do that? Are some acts of benevolence better able to increase personal happiness than others?

To answer this question, the researchers conducted six experiments involving 543 people from laboratory studies and national survey pools. The level of abstraction of one's "prosocial" goal was the critical factor of interest. Prosocial acts are defined as voluntary behavior intended to benefit someone else.

'Concrete' happiness

The results show that acts designed to improve the well-being of others will lead to greater happiness for givers when these acts are associated with concretely framed, prosocial goals as opposed to abstractly framed prosocial goals – despite people's intuitions to the contrary.

For example, an experiment involving bone marrow transplants focused on the whether giving those who need bone marrow transplants "greater hope" – the abstract goal – or giving those who need [bone marrow transplants](#) a "better chance of finding a donor" – the concrete goal – made a giver more happy.

The answer: Helping someone find a donor resulted in more happiness for the giver. This, the researchers wrote, was driven by givers' perceptions that their actual acts better met their expectations of accomplishing their goal of helping another person.

Discrepancies in expectations and reality

Rudd, Aaker and Norton show that these "happiness effects" are due to smaller gaps between one's expectations of achieving the goal and the actual result when one's goal is framed more concretely. Simply, the more abstract goals are often more unrealistic.

Is prosociality always a good goal to chase? According to this study, the

answer is: It depends. Sometimes people pursue prosociality in a way that is less than optimal.

Rudd explained, "Discrepancies between aspirations and reality can be critical factors that, in extreme cases, may even lead the act of helping to eventually becoming a source of unhappiness."

For example, when people pursue abstract prosocial goals and expect their relentless giving to result in tremendous and rapid change for the better – and it fails to materialize – they can suffer from "helper burnout," which can negatively impact happiness.

But, encouraging givers to "reframe their prosocial goals in more concrete terms" would allow expectations to be better calibrated, increasing personal happiness, the researchers argue.

Givers are likely to experience greater happiness if they frame their prosocial goals in concrete rather than abstract terms, according to the authors.

Business nuances

The results have implications for the world of business. For instance, marketing or products that claim to help consumers achieve abstractly framed goals – like making someone else happy – might not be the best business decision. Instead, it might be wiser to reframe these promised goals in more specific, concrete terms.

Consider, for example, Tom's Shoes. The company promises that if a customer buys a pair of shoes, they will deliver another pair to a child in need.

"Concrete initiatives such as this may be a more realistic way to

accurately set consumers' expectations from the outset and leave them happier in the end," Aaker said.

Boosting happiness

Ultimately, people seek to be happy, and one clear path toward happiness is through prosocial behaviors.

Aaker explained, "A prosocial act can not only boost the happiness of the recipient, but it can boost the happiness of the giver as well."

"However," cautioned Rudd, "not all prosocial goals are created equal."

The researchers hope that future work will yield a deeper understanding of how to harvest happiness – such as by helping others – and how to avoid any unhappiness traps along the way. Sometimes, people pursue happiness ineffectively – as in giving to well-intentioned but broadly defined causes – which may leave them dissatisfied.

As Aaker noted, people often do not realize why they are left feeling unfulfilled – leading them to repeat their mistakes in the future.

But, on the bright side, greater [happiness](#) is just within reach when the goal of giving is realistically focused and viewed through a concrete lens.

More information: The study is available online: [faculty-gsb.stanford.edu/aaker ... ingMostOutGiving.pdf](https://faculty-gsb.stanford.edu/aaker...ingMostOutGiving.pdf)

Provided by Stanford University

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