# Can pursuing happiness make you unhappy?

March 12 2018



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People generally like to feel happy, but achieving a state of happiness takes time and effort. Researchers have now found that people who pursue happiness often feel like they do not have enough time in the day, and this paradoxically makes them feel unhappy. Aekyoung Kim of Rutgers University in the US and Sam Maglio of the University of

Toronto Scarborough in Canada have investigated this effect in a study in the journal *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, which is published by Springer and is an official journal of the Psychonomic Society.

Kim and Maglio conducted four studies in which they investigated how the pursuit of happiness as well as the state of being happy influenced people's perception of time. Pursuing happiness caused the participants to think of time as scarce.

In the studies, some participants were either instructed to list things that would make them happier or asked to try to make themselves feel happy while watching a dull movie about building bridges, thus demonstrating happiness as goal pursuit. The other participants came to think of happiness as a goal that they had already accomplished, achieved by watching a slapstick comedy (rather than the bridge movie) or listing items showing that they are already happy. Afterwards, all participants reported how much free time they felt they had.

The researchers' main findings showed that a person's perception of time scarcity is influenced by their pursuit of (often unattainable) happiness. The feeling that time was scarce lessened for participants who maintained that they had attained their goal of being happy to some degree.

"Time seems to vanish amid the pursuit of happiness, but only when seen as a goal requiring continued pursuit," explain the researchers. "This finding adds depth to the growing body of work suggesting that the pursuit of happiness can ironically undermine well-being." According to the researchers, the findings imply that while happiness can impair positive emotions, it need not necessarily do so. Instead, if someone believes they have achieved happiness, they are left with the time to appreciate this, for instance by keeping a gratitude journal. The research further underscores that people have different concepts about happiness,

which in turn may well influence how they perceive the time they have to achieve happiness.

"Because engaging in experiences and savoring the associated feelings requires more time compared with merely, for instance, buying material goods, feeling a lack of time also leads people to prefer material possessions rather than enjoying leisure experiences," the researchers continue, who say that feeling pressed for time often also makes people less willing to spend time helping others or volunteering. "By encouraging people to worry less about pursuing happiness as a never-ending goal, successful interventions might just end up giving them more time and, in turn, more happiness."

The two researchers believe that given the influence that time availability has on people's decision-making and well-being, it remains essential to understand when, why, and how they perceive and use their time differently in their pursuit of happiness and other goals.

**More information:** Aekyoung Kim et al, Vanishing time in the pursuit of happiness, *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* (2018). DOI: 10.3758/s13423-018-1436-7

Provided by Springer