

Why the pursuit of happiness can be bad for you, and what you should pursue instead

February 22 2022, by Christian Van Nieuwerburgh, Jolanta Burke



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Happiness is one of the most [important goals in life](#). During the pandemic, it trended as the [most searched word](#) on Google. But here's why the pursuit of happiness can be bad for you.

It can make us more self-centered. The active pursuit of [happiness](#) can exacerbate individualistic tendencies to seek out pleasures at the expense of others (breaking up a friendship because it is not fun), society (driving fast may make you happy, but it endangers people's lives) or the environment (keeping the air-conditioning on overnight). Ironically, that self-centredness, apart from not serving others well, also makes people who pursue happiness [more lonely](#). Focused on making ourselves happy, we forget the basic principle of happiness, which is to look outside ourselves for true happiness.

Those who score the highest in any happiness rankings report good social support (for instance, supporting others when in need and in return being offered support), live meaningful lives that allow them to contribute to society (put effort into developing skills that serve others well), experience abundance of positive emotions which are often created in the company of others (we smile [30 times more often in a group](#) than in solitude). This is the irony of the single-minded pursuit of happiness. Focusing on ourselves and wanting to be happier reduces our chances of experiencing happiness.

It can make us realize that we're unhappy. The idea that we should be searching for it can highlight the absence of happiness in our lives. The more we value happiness, the more likely it is that we will be disappointed with our current [situations](#). Even worse, the more desperate we become about finding happiness, the more likely we are to [experience symptoms of depression](#).

It can make us blame ourselves for being unhappy. The implication that we should all be happy and that it is easy to achieve can make us feel like there is something wrong with those who are not happy, [causing further distress](#). Our obsession with happiness has spawned an industry of people and organizations promising quick-fix ways to make us happy. This is just one of the reasons why the narrow focus on "happiness" can

be damaging.

Apart from happiness not being good for the pursuers, it is often inappropriate to talk about happiness when interacting with people suffering extreme poverty, experiencing political injustice, living through devastating conflicts or facing natural disasters. To put it simply, being happy is not a priority in these situations. Advocating for initiatives to increase happiness can lead to people feeling alienated and misunderstood. In traumatic times, exhorting people to "be happy" can come across as tone deaf or lacking in compassion.

Boost your wellbeing instead

If we focus too narrowly on the pursuit of happiness, we are at risk of forgetting about wellbeing, which runs deeper than simple hedonism and includes connections with people, life purpose, a sense of accomplishment and self-worth.

Here are five ways to improve your wellbeing:

1. Ensure that you can meet the [basic needs](#) of yourself and those you care for.
2. Allocate regular time for pleasurable activities, such as a walk, playing a game or watching or listening to something you enjoy.
3. Invest in building and maintaining positive relationships. Meet with friends, keep in contact with [family members](#), nurture your work relationships.
4. Stay connected with what makes your life meaningful. For example, supporting a movement, following a faith or committing fully to your personal or professional role.
5. Make things better for your community by, say, advocating for better services, volunteering in your community, or challenging unfair practices.

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