

True happiness isn't about being happy all the time

10 January 2018, by Lowri Dowthwaite



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Over the past two decades, the positive psychology movement has brightened up psychological research with its science of happiness, human potential and flourishing. It argues that psychologists should not only investigate mental illness but also [what makes life worth living](#).

The founding father of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, [describes happiness](#) as experiencing frequent positive emotions, such as joy, excitement and contentment, combined with deeper [feelings](#) of meaning and purpose. It implies a positive mindset in the present and an optimistic outlook for the future. Importantly, [happiness](#) experts have argued that happiness is not a stable, unchangeable trait but something flexible that we can work on and ultimately strive towards.

I have been running happiness workshops for the last four years based on the evidence from the above field of psychology. The workshops are fun and I have earned a reputation as "Mrs Happy", but the last thing I would want anyone to believe is that I am happy all the time. Striving for a happy life is one thing, but striving to be happy all the time is unrealistic.

Recent [research](#) indicates that psychological flexibility is the key to greater happiness and well-being. For example, being open to emotional [experiences](#) and the ability to tolerate periods of discomfort can allow us to move towards a richer, more meaningful existence.

Studies have [demonstrated](#) that the way we respond to the circumstances of our lives has more influence on our happiness than the events themselves. Experiencing stress, sadness and anxiety in the short term doesn't mean we can't be happy in the long term.

Two paths to happiness

Philosophically speaking there are two paths to feeling happy, the hedonistic and the eudaimonic. Hedonists take the view that in order to live a happy life we must [maximise pleasure and avoid pain](#). This view is about satisfying human appetites and desires, but it is often short lived.

In contrast, the eudaimonic approach takes the long view. It argues that we should live authentically and for the greater good. We should pursue meaning and potential through kindness, justice, honesty and courage.

If we see happiness in the hedonistic sense, then we have to continue to seek out new pleasures and experiences in order to "top up" our happiness. We will also try to minimise unpleasant and [painful feelings](#) in order to keep our mood high.

If we take the eudaimonic approach, however, we strive for meaning, using our strengths to contribute to something greater than ourselves. This may involve unpleasant experiences and emotions at times, but often leads to [deeper levels of joy and contentment](#). So leading a happy life is not about avoiding hard times; it is about being able to respond to adversity in a way that allows you to grow from the experience.

Growing from adversity

[Research shows](#) that experiencing adversity can actually be good for us, depending on how we respond to it. Tolerating distress can [make us more resilient](#) and lead us to take action in our lives, such as changing jobs or overcoming hardship.

In [studies of people facing trauma](#), many describe their experience as a catalyst for profound change and transformation, leading to a phenomenon known as "post-traumatic growth". Often when people have faced difficulty, illness or loss, they describe their lives as happier and more meaningful as a result.

Unlike feeling happy, which is a transient state, leading a happier [life](#) is about individual growth through finding meaning. It is about accepting our humanity with all its ups and downs, enjoying the positive emotions, and harnessing painful feelings in order to reach our full potential.

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