

# Are you happy? The meaning of life during COVID-19

April 29 2020, by Alissa Falcone



Finding happiness is a journey. "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves," said Victor Frankl (1905-1977). During COVID-19 find gratitude, stay engaged, communicate, and help others. Credit: Kanya Zillmer '10

How can you be happy during something like the COVID-19 pandemic?

Moreover, how can you teach happiness during these times?

Drexel University's "happy" Athletic Director and Carl R. Pacifico Professor of Neuropsychology Eric Zillmer, PsyD, is teaching a course on happiness this spring quarter in the Pennoni Honors College.

DrexelNow interviewed Zillmer on how to stay happy during COVID-19.

**Q: There are reports that over 45 percent of Americans feel that the coronavirus has negatively affected their mental well-being. Is there anything one can do to cope with the emotional fallout during this challenging time?**

A: Absolutely! But first it is important to understand that almost everyone is feeling the emotional burden of this crisis. This is what a pandemic feels like. It is awful and even people with tremendous resiliency feel out of sorts. So if you are feeling overwhelmed and anxious, it is absolutely normal during this confusing time of uncertainty.

The critical question is: What are you going to do about it?

Research shows that some people may be "broken" by a crisis, while others emerge from stressful experiences even stronger than before. The not-so-secret ingredient is resilience. Resiliency enables people to actually grow through adversity.

**Q: How does one become more resilient?**

A: You have to focus on what you can control in your life. For example,

I can't control the virus, the search for a vaccine or the shortage of PPEs and testing. If you worry about the things you can't control you make a decision to engage in the "flight-fight" response of our autonomic nervous system. You will get anxious and depressed, and may feel apathy and despair—even bitterness.

We know social isolation is very challenging and has been used as a form of punishment in the past. For example, Philly's Eastern State Penitentiary was built entirely on the principle of social isolation using solitary confinement to "reform" prisoners. Even today, we apply [social isolation](#) in less dramatic forms in parenting—for example, time-out or grounding. Social distancing is inherently unpleasant.

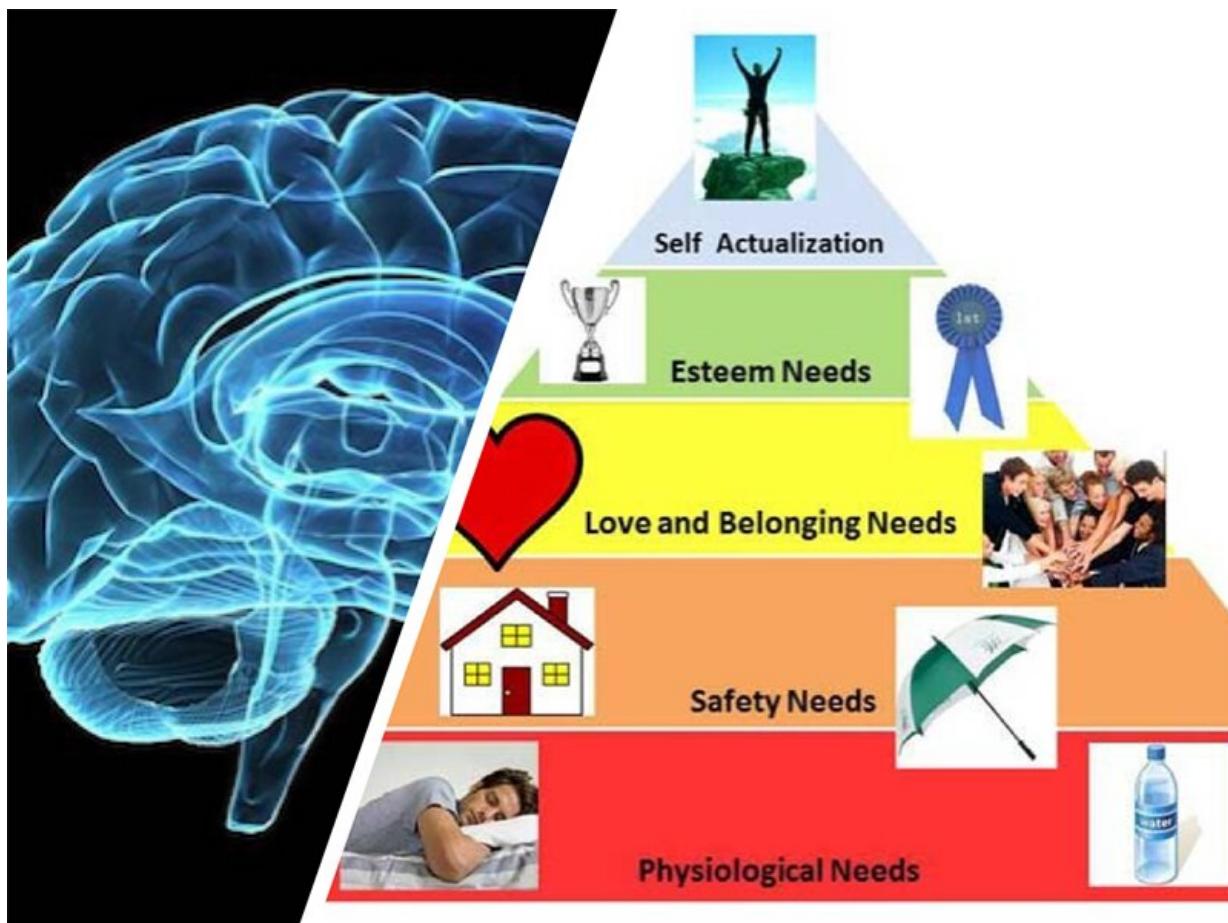
## **Q: What are some of the ingredients of being happy, while one is sheltered at home?**

A: You have to boost your daily happiness through the four Ms of mental health: movement, mindfulness, mastery and meaningful social relationships, even now during COVID-19. You have to schedule your day. You can actively control what you are putting into your body. Eating healthy is important during this time, as is getting enough sleep. It not only makes you feel great and improves your mood, but it also helps boost your immune system, which is important right now. So use this crisis for cautious optimism by returning to our basics. As Drexel's athletic director I would do a disservice if I would not remind everyone that we have free live exercise classes scheduled on Zoom and Instagram platforms, which are also a great way to schedule your day.

This crisis also allows us to find additional meaning in our lives. Little things all of a sudden become very important. Focus on them and be mindful of how special it is to, for example, have a family meal, spend time with the children or read a book. Also, helping out others,

especially in your community, elevates your own mood. So do not only focus on self-care, but also on helping your local community by shopping for elderly neighbors, ordering take-out food from nearby restaurants and supporting your local businesses financially by buying gift cards.

We can also boost our resilience, which is our single best weapon for dealing with stress, by engaging in actively being grateful for things we do have, and not focusing on what we don't. Of course, one's own health comes to mind and we should be very grateful for that. But for me personally it can be as simple as cataloguing my coffees and selecting different types to drink every day. It is incredible how much joy you can get out of that if you simply allow yourself to appreciate it.



Slide from Zillmer's happiness class. Zillmer suggests that happiness can take place in many different places in the brain, from hard-wired to free will, and parallels a psychological model of happiness developed by Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). Credit: Drexel University

**Q: And what coffee did you drink this morning?**

A: Single source, medium roast, Myanmar honey ... a delightful surprise of crisp apples with a subtle, sweet honey aftertaste.

**Q: What role does social media play?**

A: If there was a reason why social media was invented, it was for COVID-19. We are, in fact, a social species. Communicating and engaging socially are important right now. The various social media platforms allow us to do this.

**Q: Do you participate on social media?**

A: Yes, on Twitter (@GoDragonsAD).

**Q: Can you talk about your happiness class?**

A: When I scheduled the class last year, I did not know that we would be in a pandemic. I understood that our Drexel students, pre-[coronavirus](#), were already trying to balance their lives and wanted to be in charge of their own mental well-being. But now with COVID-19, mental well-being is front and center and it affects all of us. We are all searching to find happiness and meaning in our lives right now. So the class could not

have come at a better time, not only for my students, but also to use as a platform to talk to my colleagues, friends and our community about staying positive during COVID-19.

## **Q: How are you structuring the class?**

A: Happiness is actually a field of study known as positive psychology, so it has a broad and defined content area and is well researched. Using the class as a catalyst, we all have an opportunity to examine life in terms of its most essential ingredients. I rely on what I already know, which is neuroscience, sports and clinical psychology. For example, sports are all about conquering adversity. We already use mindfulness, flow and managing anxiety in competitive sports.

## **Q: How do your students like the class?**

A: Well, you would have to ask them. I hope that they feel that I respect and care about them. But I would say, so far so good. This is an important class for me, not only because of the topic, but because it is my first time teaching online. I am very much committed to providing all of my students with a challenging and engaging academic as well as social experience. I have taken many workshops and have been coached to utilize an array of creative digital tools that allow me to keep connected with the students and present information in an interesting way.

During my online classes, I think what is important in online teaching is to make it social as well as cognitive for the students. The Honors Program's seminar format allows all the students to participate and be heard. Especially during this time, I think it is important have our students express their opinions and preferably even put them into an emotional context.





When asked to post a picture that reminded them of Happiness, a majority of Drexel Honors students enrolled in the happiness class selected images with their friends or colleagues, demonstrating how important social contact is to all of us. Shelby posted this picture from work, where she finds meaning and has met some of her best friends. (Credit Shelby Hufnal.)

## **Q: For example?**

A: I try to personalize every homework assignment. For example, I asked my class to post a happy picture on the Blackboard electronic platform. Interestingly, 50 percent of the class posted pics with their friends, 25 percent with their pets and 25 percent landscape motives. And, I started a virtual office hour: "Coffee with the Professor," I call it. Students can stop by virtually, and chat and talk about what is on their mind. I think it has been successful and I personally look forward to it every week.

The class also curated a "happiness" playlist with music that lifts them up and that makes them happy, which can be listened to here.

My students challenged me that happiness is a first-world invention and that we should look at developing nations to also learn from them. And so I contacted a Drexel alumna and former Drexel squash player who lives in Guyana, South America, to ask her what Americans could learn from her country about being happy.

## **Q: Did she provide any tips?**

A: Yes, she wrote back that:

"Guyana is a beautiful country. We have gold, oil, vast untouched amazon forests, sugar, an abundance of organic foods—fish, fruit, rice, rum and the list goes on. We're blessed with the richness of six cultures and have a small population, but we're poor due to the political corruption. But as a result, we live simpler lives that account for a closer sense of community. We have more open spaces with lots of greenery and fresh coastland breezes. Most poor households are small with extended families, so most of our time is spent outside in our yards—chatting with neighbors, maybe playing cricket on the street. I think what the U.S. can learn from Guyana in terms of being happier in the broadest sense is to remember to hold the door open for the person behind you, make an effort to talk to your neighbor, have a meal with your family, go outside for walk in the park, sing, laugh, squabble. And generally, we're happy."

As a neuroscientist, I know that by focusing on what my students are thinking and feeling, I reach more neurological circuitry of my students' brains, thus making a more lasting and meaningful impact on their "classroom" experience.

## **Q: Are there any advantages for teaching online?**

A: There are, in fact, many advantages of teaching online. The synchronous Zoom environment is cool and allows for sophisticated even nuanced interactions. I can also look up experts I know globally and they can simply drop in on the class and share their thoughts on a specific topic. The Blackboard learning platform is a great interactive tool to communicate with your class and allows for timed releases of assignments. But I am also asking my students to use analog sources, like keeping a journal. I believe that this is a great way to manage and label one's emotions. In fact, I am journaling myself for the first time.

## **Q: Would you mind sharing an entry into your happiness journal?**

A: Francesca from my class wrote about her homework assignment, a recent *New York Times* article on happiness during COVID-19, saying, "I think of happiness as a sprint and meaning as a marathon." I thought that was very special and thus I recorded it in my journal.

## **Q: Any final words?**

A: Yes. It was Drexel University founder Anthony J. Drexel himself that said that the world would change and that we will have to change with it. One can find a greater appreciation of life and a deeper sense of spirituality during this crisis, if one is willing to change.

Provided by Drexel University

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