Finding Happiness through Suffering

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Happiness, how sweet the sound! It's an inalienable right, a worthy life goal, and the yearning of every soul, yet oftentimes it leads to pain and ruin. Like moths flinging themselves into a flaming fire, many have ruined their lives in hot pursuit of happiness.

Just consider the recent tearful confession by NBA superstar Kobe Bryant. Facing a sexual assault charge, he said during a recent press conference: "I am innocent of the charge. I've made a mistake of adultery! I am very sorry."

Or, consider the high-flying CEOs who ended up behind bars. Their lifetime struggle to ascend to the pinnacle of success only resulted in a terrible fall and a broken dream.

These are not isolated cases. Down through the ages, many people have found sorrow and pain in chasing after their dreams of happiness and fulfillment. Their bodies are strewn all over the roadways to paradise.

Why is happiness so illusive and intractable? Why is it that after thousands of psychological studies on this topic, most people still find happiness an empty promise? Why have progress and prosperity not translated into an increase in happiness and quality of life? How do we explain this paradox?

One hypothesis is that perhaps most people have been looking for happiness in all the wrong places, and they don't really know what it looks like. They might not even recognize it when happiness lands on their lap like a butterfly.

Is there a perfect picture of happiness?

What does perfect happiness look like? The ecstasy of winning the World Cup? The bliss of finding true love? The delight of listening to the glorious music of Beethoven? Indeed, happiness has many faces, but these only tell part of the story.

A widely accepted view of happiness is that a perfect picture of happiness would be something like the sum total of all the following elements.

- Moments of pleasure and enjoyment
- Positive feelings and thoughts
- Absence of negative feelings and thoughts

- Fully healthy and functioning
- Positive relationships
- Positive expectations of the future
- Positive actions
- Success and achievement
- Positive self-concept
- Positive assessment of one's life
- Virtues and strengths
- True love and good sex
- Humor and laughter
- Meaning and purpose

But wait a minute. Is there anyone who fits the above description? Could anyone find perfect happiness by possessing an abundance of the above elements? Is it realistic to go through life on cloud nine?

Unless I am proven wrong by empirical research, I would say "NO" to all the above questions. My negative answers are based on the observation of two general patterns:

(1) Life is always a mixture of happiness and suffering. No one is immune from pain and we all live under the shadow of suffering and death,

(2) There is often a complex and dynamic relationship between happiness and suffering. There is a Chinese saying: "the extreme form of happiness produces sorrow." Just as happiness may lead to suffering, so does suffering lead to happiness.

In sum, there are no perfect pictures of happiness, no clear-cut unalloyed joy. A complete understanding of happiness needs to take into account the above two principles, which have not received much research attention.

Let us now consider the following scenarios:

- Who can understand the joy of a father, who after years of grieving, welcomes the return of his prodigal son?
- Who can experience the happiness of a mother, who hears the first cry of her newborn baby after many hours of labor?
- Who can feel the relief and elation after unbearable anxiety of waiting for the results of medical tests, which declare the patient free of a dreaded incurable disease?

- Who can fathom the blessing of a believer whose faith has been purified and made more fruitful through suffering?
- Who can sense the serenity of someone who has learned to accept the calamity that has befallen him?
- Who can grasp the rejoicing of Apostle Paul who was condemned to a dungeon waiting for execution for preaching the gospel?

These are pictures of a very different kind of happiness, born of adversity and pain. Just as pessimism and optimism can coexist to produce tragic optimism, so sorrow and joy can mingle to produce happiness. It seems that life has a way of bestowing the precious gift of joy to those who suffer; such grace of happiness deserves to be studied scientifically.

Happiness is therefore like a tapestry of many colors. What makes a particular tapestry a picture of mature happiness is not the overabundance of bright colors, but the contrast between darkness and light, which helps create a sense of hope and joy in the midst of sorrow.

Different approaches to happiness and suffering

There are different approaches to happiness. The Western approach focuses on positive feelings, positive actions, and positive lives. It seeks to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Suffering is considered a foreign, hostile intrusion into our happy existence. However, when suffering can no longer be avoided, then one tries to trump suffering through positive psychology. The Western approach works best in a culture of progress, affluence and hope.

The Eastern approach focuses on wisdom, patience, detachment and serenity. It seeks to develop and master our inner lives so that we can transcend suffering. The transformation of suffering is achieved through wisdom and enlightenment. The Eastern approach works best in a culture of suffering and endurance.

The existential approach focuses on responsibility, choice and actions in the midst of chaos, absurdity and sufferings. It seeks to overcome suffering and absurdity through an courageous act of acceptance. For example, <u>happiness is pushing a heavy rock uphill over and over again</u>, in spite of the absurdity and futility of this exercise. This approach works best in a culture of meaninglessness and despair.

The Christian approach focuses on finding happiness and life through embracing suffering and death, as exemplified by Christ on the cross, and taught by Christ in his

Sermon on the Mount. Happiness is not the absence of suffering, but the surrendering of suffering to God as an offering. This approach works best in a culture of faith and love.

All four approaches recognize that the pursuit of happiness necessarily involves coming to terms with the reality of suffering, although they address the problem of suffering from very different cultural, religious and philosophical perspectives.

In view of the prevalence and universality of suffering, it may be more fruitful for both researchers and lay people to ask: How could we find happiness in and through suffering? To ask this question is to turn the pursuit of happiness on its head, because we no longer view suffering as an enemy or obstacle, but welcome it as an important ally or partner in the enterprise of happiness. This radically new view of happiness can have significant implications for psychological research and clinical practice.

Pathways to mature, authentic happiness

Happiness born of adversity is mature, because it requires not only a certain level of personal maturity and wisdom, but also the capacity to endure suffering.
Unlike hedonic pleasures, mature happiness is able to insulate itself from changing circumstances and fluctuating moods. It may even transcend genetically determined happiness set point.

Mature happiness is best characterized by serenity, patience, contentment, and tragic optimism. It embraces both positive and negative affects and appreciates the bittersweet nature of most life experiences.

Mature happiness is authentic in the sense that it is consistent with a person's core values and beliefs and it reflects one's character and virtues. Such happiness flows from the authenticity of personhood — the subject matter of humanistic/existential psychology.

In contrast to the dichotomy of positive versus negative psychology, and the bipolar view of happiness versus suffering, a mature positive psychology is based on the integration of opposites, such as tragic optimism and sweet sorrow. The dialectics of duality represents a promising approach to happiness research.

For those who are tired of chasing after the illusion of happiness, here are three proven pathways to mature, authentic happiness:

(1) **Pursuit of personal meaning.** As Viktor Frankl and many other existential psychologists have pointed out, happiness will elude us when we make it the aim of our lives, but it comes in through the back door, when we devote our ourselves to pursuing what is meaningful.

Dr. Frankl has also affirmed that positive meaning can be found even in the most horrible situations. Affirmation of meaning provides foundation for both tragic optimism and mature happiness. I have identified seven areas in which one may find meaning and happiness: achievement, relationship, intimacy, self-acceptance, self-transcendence, religion/spirituality, and fair treatment. The quest for meaning can be costly and risky, but only through this process can one discover what makes life worth living in the face of suffering and death.

(2) **Detachment from the world.** Learn to loosen our grip on the world for a higher calling. Apostle Paul claims that "whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4: 7, 8). Because of this detachment, Paul was able to say: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Phillippians 4: 12) (The Bible, New International Version).

Buddhism also teaches the need of detachment from desires and the world in order to be free from suffering. Detachment is achieved through wisdom and enlightenment. Generally, when we adopt a detached, transcendental view of life, success or failure, loss or gain will have less an impact on our inner life. We need to learn how to let go in order to discover the gift of joy. Elsewhere, I have pointed out the beauty of the transcendental life in trying circumstances.

(3) **Appreciation of the present.** In spite of difficult situations and pains, we can cultivate a sense of appreciation of the present moments. For example, Frankl was transported to a sacred realm of beauty and joy, when he witnessed the beautiful sunset against the bleak background of Nazi death camp.

Breathing in the cool fresh air of a summer evening, watching the silent starry sky, listening to the quiet rhythms of solitude, or enjoying the sweet communion with God in times of sorrow are just some of the examples of pleasant moments in the midst of trials and tribulations.

Appreciation implies acceptance of an unpleasant reality but affirms its potential for good. Appreciation of the present also includes a sense of gratitude. When we focus on what we already have rather than what we don't have, and when we count our blessing rather than problems, the dark night of complaint will turn into a morning of praise.

The mature positive psychology of happiness

Individuals who have developed these three qualities of personal meaning, detachment and appreciation may not make it to the list of 100 most happy people, if we take a snapshot of randomly selected individuals, with currently available tests of happiness. However, they are more likely to make the list, if we sample individuals among the "sufferers" from areas ravaged by poverty, disease, war and natural disasters; more importantly, we need to develop more appropriate tests of mature happiness.

Many people have given up on happiness, because their lives are full of suffering and problems. But do not despair – mature, authentic happiness can only be found in such troubling circumstances. It is through suffering that many have found enduring happiness and become fully alive. It is through weaknesses and losses that many have discovered their true identify and authenticity. Stars shine most brightly in the darkest night. That is why mature positive psychology appeals to the broken hearted, the oppressed and the disfranchised.