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Happiness: Is It Real or Just an Illusion?

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The counseling profession was founded on the principles of development and prevention. Although our services have expanded and are needed in the broader community, we cannot forsake that which makes us unique. We need to continue to remind ourselves to concentrate on wellness and helping people find meaning and happiness in their lives.

HAPPINESS

How warm the light! From the glowing bay
The masts like spruce, repose of the ropes
In the morning mist. Where a stream trickles
Into the sea, by a small bridge—a flute.
Farther, under the arch of ancient ruins
You see a few tiny walking figures.
One wears a red kerchief. There are trees,
Ramparts, and mountains at an early hour.
—Czeslaw Milosz (1988)
Washington, DC, 1948

There appear to be more words and terms that describe unhappiness and pain in our languages than words that reference contentment and joy. A civilized world places certain restrictions on what might constitute pleasure and consequent happiness. The need to conform to cultural norms places restrictions on one's ability to express what might be natural urges. This notion is confirmed by those in society who, by breaking the rules, receive immediate gratification that leads to unpleasant consequences.

In our profession, we have a propensity to focus, at least initially, on the client's distress and pathology. How else would we ever generate a clientele if there were not people in pain? Yet, only 2% of the population suffers from depression or bipolar disorder at any time (National Advisory Mental Health Council, 1993, cited in Myers, 2000). However, it is not likely that we would draw clients from this large pool of happy people. Would it not be wonderful if we received calls from people who said, "I'm so contented that I want to pay you to tell you about it." Perhaps. For some of us, it might be distressing, because we are so conditioned to assess and diagnose pathology that we would become depressed. How about

a *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* that provided descriptors of the happy person or family. Not possible. In fact, we go out of our way to accommodate the pathological focus of our profession (Ivey & Ivey, 1998). The closest thing to a positive statement in the *DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) is exemplified in this quote, "Neither deviant behavior (e.g., political, religious, or sexual) nor conflicts that are primarily between the individual and society are mental disorders unless the deviance or conflict is a symptom of a dysfunction of the individual" (pp. xxi-xxii).

IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Sigmund Freud (1949) spoke of the hostilities of culture that restrict one's instinctual desires, while arguing that without cultural impositions, we would resort to "the state of nature, and that is far harder to endure" (p. 26). Culture defends us against nature. Culture relieves one of the pressures of nature, for left alone, we may be consumed by nature. So where do we find happiness in a world that places so many restrictions on natural desires? One example is found in the arts, where one's fantasies can be realized through generally acceptable media. Religion also provides us a refuge from nature.

The terminology used in the profession can be modified to emphasize the uniqueness of the individual with influence from culture and gender. For example, using terms such as personality styles (Ivey & Ivey, 1998) in place of disorders focuses on the characteristics of the individual rather than an imposed external evaluation. It is only when carried to extremes that we need to become concerned, yet it can still be defined as one's personality style, for disposition and behavior may very well be a logical response to developmental history (Ivey & Ivey, 1998). With such a positive focus, it becomes easier to emphasize the client's strengths rather than deficits. This explains much of the success of solution-focused, brief, and narrative therapy.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), in their introduction to a special issue of the *American Psychologist*, state,

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, content-



ment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. (p. 5)

However, we cannot be fooled into thinking that we can impose happiness on people, for happiness by definition is a state of mind, something that cannot be imposed. We apply terms such as empowerment, encouragement, and strength bombardment in an attempt to shift the power from outside the person to within. We try to fool people into thinking that they have power over nature. This is the clinical use of defense mechanisms. Instead the counselor's task, according to Ivey and Ivey (1998), "is to unravel the developmental history and logic underlying personal style and to help the client write a new, more positive narrative with accompanying behavioral change" (p. 339). Ivey and Ivey go on to say that "each personality style has a positive, survival function" (p. 340).

TERMINOLOGY

Earlier, it was indicated that we have more terms to describe unhappiness than happiness, but perhaps, this is because we have suppressed those positive terms in favor of pathological definitions. Each of the following pairs of terms demonstrates how we can convert a negative pathology focus to one of hope and optimism: trepidation to tranquility, agitation to serenity, distress to relief, despair to joy, sullenness to playfulness, sadness to happiness, pessimism to optimism, pain to pleasure, languish to well-being, misery to euphoria. You can add your own.

Fredrickson (1998) describes four distinct categories of positive emotions: joy, interest, contentment, and love. He refers to these as emotional families because other emotions are encompassed within each category. He groups these emotions as follows:

Joy, which he equates with happiness, includes such high-arousal positive emotions as amusement, mirth, exhilaration, elation, and gladness. Fredrickson (1998) says that "joy creates the urge to play and be playful in the broadest sense of the word, encompassing not only physical and social play, but also intellectual and artistic play . . . broadening an individual's thought-action repertoire" (p. 305). Lazarus (1991, p. 89, cited in Fredrickson, 1998), offered a behavioral definition of joy, which he termed free activation: "It is in part aimless, unasked-for readiness to engage in whatever interaction presents itself and in part readiness to engage in enjoyments" (p. 304).

Interest is equated with curiosity, intrigue, excitement, or wonder. Fredrickson (1998) also references the term *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), which is defined as "the enjoyment experienced when a person's perceived skills match the perceived challenges of a particular activity" (p. 305).

Contentment is a low-arousal emotion equated with tranquility and serenity. It is represented by a sense of relief or the ceasing of vigilance. Fredrickson (1998) says that contentment "creates the urge to savor and integrate recent events and experiences creating a new sense of self and a new world view" (p. 306).

Love is experienced in many ways: through romance, attachment, companionship, caregiving, and so on. Fredrickson (1998) says that, "Over time . . . the interactions inspired by love no doubt help to build and strengthen social bonds and attachment." He believes that "love experiences are made up of many positive emotions, including interests, joy and contentment . . . love represents a fusion of other specific positive emotions . . . the interactions inspired by love no doubt help to build and strengthen social bonds and attachment" (p. 306).

Fredrickson (1998) says that "the often incidental effect of a positive emotion is an increment in durable personal resources that can be drawn on later in other contexts and in other emotional states" (p. 307). In other words, we can stockpile positive emotions and call on them at later times as needed. Furthermore, when there is a sharing of positive emotions, be it a smile or a joyful event, a sense of bonding occurs among those involved. This is particularly observable among family members.

Optimism is embodied in most people. In their striving for success through goal-directed approaches to life, people overcome many obstacles and tend to thrive on hope (for a detailed discussion of hope and how it differs from optimism, see Snyder, 1995; Snyder, Cheavens, & Sympson, 1997). Some would call this resilience or thriving; others might refer to it as perseverance. However, according to Peterson (2000), the average person perceives that he or she is at less risk of problems than the norm. Of course, this is not possible. Nevertheless, look at the number of people who spend a dollar on a lottery ticket, knowing their chances of winning are 1 in 76 million or who spend hours in front of the TV watching someone else attempt to win a million dollars. This optimism is recognized as "an evolved psychological mechanism" (Lykken, 1999), which prevents one from harboring thoughts of one's demise, for positive expectations can be self-fulfilling. Freud (1949) stated it this way: "The secret of their strength is the strength of these wishes" (p. 52). Or, better yet, the power of the Lake Wobegon effect. Peterson (2000), on the other hand, has determined that children can be taught early to be optimistic through cognitive behavior approaches and modeling, thus making subsequent episodes of depression less likely.

OBSERVING HAPPINESS

If you want to find out if people are depressed, ask them. Likewise, if you want to find out if people are happy, ask them. When asked, people who are attached to another person report that they are happier. Married people are reportedly happier and at less risk of depression than unmarried or divorced people, but even less happy than the latter are those in unhappy marriages (Myers, 2000). According to Myers, "Age, gender, and income (assuming people have enough to afford life's necessities) give little clue to someone's happiness" (p. 65). Although materialism is often equated with the level of happiness, this is not necessarily the case. In a study by Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider (in press), it was found that "children of the lowest socioeconomic strata generally report the highest happiness, and upper middle-class children generally report the least happiness" (p. 823).

The pursuit of happiness has been espoused by authorities throughout the ages, from Aristotle to Locke. In fact, the Declaration of Independence of the United States includes reference to such pursuits. We need to "be able to help document what kinds of families result in children who flourish, what work settings support the greatest satisfaction among workers, what policies result in the strongest civic engagement, and how people's lives can be most worth living" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5).

CONCLUSION

The counseling profession was founded on the principles of development and prevention. However, we seem to be focusing more of our attention on pathology and remedial activities. Although our services have expanded and are needed in the broader community, we cannot forsake that which makes us unique. Perhaps, we need to continue to remind ourselves to concentrate on wellness and helping people find meaning and happiness.

There are cultural issues that need to be considered when addressing the symptoms of happiness, for pleasure for some

cultures may be considered inappropriate and, therefore, lead to discomfort and guilt. However, determining what the individual or family does to maintain a semblance of joy, interest, contentment, and love in their lives should be of utmost concern for counselors.

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