



December 13, 2021

## Happiness Is...

...five different crayons? Playing a drum in your own school band? Which line from that song first popped into your head? Here is a question to consider: “If I could craft the perfect day of my happiness – MINE, no one else’s – how would that look?” Never mind what would put you in good graces with others. What is your true happiness?

As a result of societal or family impact, many people see happiness this way: If you work hard, you will become successful, and once you become successful, *then* you’ll be happy. According to Shawn Achor in his book *The Happiness Advantage*, there is plenty of research proving the relationship between success and happiness works the other way around. Science shows that happiness is the precursor to success, not the result. Consequently, that happiness and optimism end up fueling performance and achievement. Achor calls this *The Happiness Advantage*.

The human brain is constantly creating and revising mental maps for use in navigating this complex world. On each mental map formed after a crisis or trauma, there are three mental path options:

- One that keeps circling around our current situation, creating no change and forcing us to end up where we start
- One that leads us toward further negative consequences where we are far worse off after the negative event
- One that leads us from setback to a place where we are even stronger and more capable than before

According to Achor, scientists once thought happiness was almost completely hereditary, dictated by a “set point”. Now it is known that we have more control over our emotional well-being than previously thought. With effort, we can raise that baseline permanently so that even when emotions are going up and down, they are doing so at a higher level.

In a state of chronic stress, we tend to form incomplete mental maps. Ironically, the path we have trouble seeing is often the most positive and productive one. In fact, we often stop looking for it due to a sense of hopelessness. Therein lies the difference between those who are crippled by setbacks and those who rise above them.

Daniel Gilbert, author of *Stumbling on Happiness*, offers many studies that show adversities, no matter what they are, simply do not hit us as hard as we think they will. Just knowing this quirk in our psyche – that the fear of consequence is always worse than the consequence itself – can help us move toward a more optimistic outlook.

These are among things that contribute to human happiness: Pursuing meaningful goals, scanning the world for opportunities, cultivating a grateful mindset, and nurturing social relationships. Suggestions from Achor to facilitate those principles are:

- Find something to look forward to and anticipate future pleasures
- Do conscious acts of kindness, deliberately with planning, for friends and strangers
- Infuse positivity into your surroundings – make things how you like them
- Spend time outside and put activity/exercise into your day
- Spend money, not on “stuff” but experiences, especially with other people
- Use your signature strength – whatever you’re good at – in a new way each day

What is your happiness? Maybe it’s time to consider how you might work your way toward it and embrace changes associated with it!

Happiness is...

“...being alone every now and then. And happiness is coming home again. Happiness is morning and evening, daytime and nighttime too. For happiness is anyone and anything at all that’s loved by you.” (*Lyrics by Clark Gesner - You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*)

Find resources for managing stress and creating a resilient attitude at [ruralwellness.unl.edu](http://ruralwellness.unl.edu).