



Remember that song from childhood? It was such a no-brainer to belt it out at the top of your six-year-old lungs. Happy was easy as a kid. But as we move into adulthood, we grow less sure about happiness — what it is or even how to find it. Here's what you need to know for a new year that truly sparkles with joy. | *by Sydney Loney*

OH, TO BE HAPPY. BUT HOW, YOU ASK?

It seems it's a question we've all been pondering — and, naturally, we've been turning to the Internet for answers. Just plug “how to be happy” into Google and you'll get about 5,220,000,000 results. Scroll down a little and you'll find “People also ask,” featuring similar, happiness-related questions: “How can I be happy right now?” (for the impatient among us), “How can a person be happy? (for the generalists) and “How can we be happy?” (for those who take a more inclusive approach).

Just how far will those five-billion-plus search results get you in your overall pursuit of happiness? Not very, according to Dr. Dean Burnett, a neuroscientist, author and stand-up comedian in the U.K. “When there are so many people out there offering the solution, the underlying assumption is that you have to be happy all the time and that anything less than that means failure,” he says.

Dr. Burnett's new book, *The Happy Brain* (an entertaining, light-hearted exploration of how the brain experiences happiness), arose out of a general annoyance at all the pseudoscientific self-help stuff that crowds the Internet and oversimplifies this elusive emotion and how best to achieve it. Dr. Burnett worries that our collective obsession with being happy is not only counterproductive because it stresses us out and makes us less happy but also self-destructive. Happiness, he says, becomes more of an ambition than a state of being — a requirement as opposed to an indulgence.

All of this, Dr. Burnett says, puts us at risk of becoming less well-rounded emotional beings. “The brain is capable of so many emotions, and to focus on one at the exclusion of others can lead to emotional incompetence,” he warns. “A full range of emotional experience is necessary for well-being.” Well-being *and* coping. If we don't recognize (and value) sadness, we'll be ill equipped when bad things happen. And, of course, bad things happen. Or, as Dr. Burnett says, “The world is not a soft, playful bubble.”

Even so, he's not suggesting that we abandon the idea of being happy altogether; we just need to recalibrate our approach. For starters, we need to analyze our current obsession and rethink what it means to be happy.

WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

Philosophers from Aristotle through the ages

have mused about having more happiness, but no one has been as preoccupied with the idea as us or pursued it as relentlessly as we have. In January, Yale University even began offering a course devoted to helping students be happier — they had to change lecture halls to accommodate everyone who rushed to enroll (1,200 compared to the 600 that typically constitutes “large” classes at the university).

Laurie Santos, who created the course, says focusing on happier practices can have plenty of benefits beyond how we feel. “Research suggests that becoming happier not only increases our health but also affects how much we help others,” she says. Santos developed the course to address the fact that her undergraduate students seemed “way more unhappy/stressed out/worried about the future” than ever before.

“I was really surprised by the demand,” she says. “I never expected it to turn into the biggest class ever at Yale, but I think the level of interest speaks to the fact that this is a topic that college students want to address. They don't like the culture of stress and overwork they're facing and they want to do something about it.” (But it's not just college students — the general public got wind of it and wanted in, so now it's being offered online to everyone.)

Santos says the course uses the definition of happiness that psychology uses, which is a definition based on subjective well-being. “Subjective well-being has a cognitive component — how we evaluate our lives and our satisfaction with our lives broadly — and an emotional component, which is how many positive versus negative emotions we feel,” she says.

Yet, pinning down a definition of happiness proves tricky when you talk to more than one psychologist. Dr. Randy Paterson, a registered psychologist in Vancouver, has another, slightly more counterintuitive take (his book is, after all, called *How to Be Miserable: 40 Strategies You Already Use*). According to Dr. Paterson, happiness, in general, is the experience of one or another of the positive emotions. “When we ask, ‘Overall, are you happy?’ the question is not whether you experience only the positive end of the spectrum in every moment, as this isn't attainable,” Dr. Paterson says. “A better metric is whether you experience these sensations on a reasonably regular basis, and that can vary by person.”

Dr. Paterson also points out that, while we

have many names for unhappiness (anxiety, disappointment, grief, sadness), we tend to differentiate less when we talk about happiness itself, even though there are just as many names for it (excitement, satisfaction, contentment, love, enjoyment, buoyancy). “It helps to consider the various flavours that happiness comes in and focus on what produces each in oneself,” he says. “One of our biggest problems is that our ideas of happiness have simply become less accurate and less happiness inducing.”

WHY WE THINK WE'RE NOT HAPPY

Are you happy and you (don't) know it? It's possible, says Dr. Paterson. Just because we're not happy every minute doesn't mean we're not actually happy. “We believe that we should feel happy all the time and that feeling uncomfortable emotions is abnormal and says something about our own faultiness,” he says. “But humans are simply not designed for 24-hour happiness.”

We also tend to focus too much on the end goal. “We emphasize our mood rather than what we want to accomplish or contribute in life,” Dr. Paterson says. “Happiness is most often the result of doing something. By focusing directly on its production, we miss out on the actual path.”

Santos believes our biggest misconception about happiness is the idea that we have to change our life circumstances — our salary or the stuff we have or something else about our lives — to be happier. “Instead, research suggests that we can become happier without changing any of our circumstances but rather through our intentional practices,” she says.

Dr. Paterson agrees. “Our culture is motivated to give us inaccurate maps to happiness in the pursuit of profit: ‘If you buy this car, you'll be happy.’ The research is pretty clear that there are few consumer goods that result in a lasting increment in happiness.” Same goes for “success” in general, he adds, where many people believe they can't be happy without a certain income, bank balance, corner office or position. “Clinicians like me often see people who have achieved all of these goals, and happiness is most definitely not in the benefits package.”

Overall, we're just wasting too much of our time and energy worrying about how to be happier. “Virtually everything we do, every decision we make, is designed at some level to manipu-

late our mood in the future,” Dr. Paterson says. “But still, most of us remain unsatisfied with our level of happiness.” Part of the problem, he says, is that our society pushes nonsensical, even destructive, ideas in the guise of trying to help us. “Enthusiasts overstate the case (‘we now know how to be happy; you can be happy all the time’), and others attempt to monetize the topic (‘buy my workshop!’). All of this tends not to be useful and typically leads in the wrong direction or makes people feel worse.”

REINING IN OUR EXPECTATIONS (AND JUST BEING HAPPY)

From getting fit to finding happiness, we inevitably overthink both problem and solution and are easily lured by the idea of the quick fix.

“Once we start thinking about it, our minds automatically focus on limitations, mistakes and negative interactions with others,” says Gordon Flett, Canada Research Chair in Personality and Health and a psychology professor at York University in Toronto. “‘Why aren't I happy?’ is where our thinking goes. People simply become exhausted — cognitively, emotionally and physically.”

“At a time when the biggest health buzzword is ‘mindfulness’, there's a lot to be said for ‘mindlessness,’ Dr. Flett argues. “Happiness has to naturally come out of daily experiences and events,” he says. “Sometimes it is better to be mindless and not think too much to be happier.” For Dr. Flett, happiness is a day that's filled with positive effects, and having the ability to bounce back after a bad day. “Happy people are those who can follow a bad day with a good day,” he says. “They're typically people who find a way to maintain positive moods and find ways to have some level of contentment.”

As for the quick fix, sadly (truly no pun intended) there's no such thing. Dr. Burnett is particularly piqued by those five-billion-plus search results and the impossible promises they offer. Among the page-one results: *Psychology Today* offers “23 Ways to Be Happier”; *Huffington Post* offers 45 (better yet, they're “45 Ways to Be Happy Instantly”); and *Real Simple* gives us a seemingly more reasonable 10. Unfortunately, the truth is neither instant nor simple.

“I'm not very tolerant of all those ‘Five tips for being happy,’” Dr. Burnett says. “It's such a subjective thing that depends on your brain's neural

pathways, on your culture, on how you were brought up, on the things that you're geared toward. And a lot of people are unhappy for good reason, for things that are beyond their control."

Dr. Paterson says that rather than trying to "cheerlead" people about how they can feel better, he has invited depressed people in the past to consider what they would do if they wanted to feel worse. "This they could do with gusto and in the process realized that they were already doing many of these things," he says. "We usually say that mood proceeds from our circumstances, our behaviour and our thoughts, and if these are negative, then our mood will be too. But causality also goes the other way. When we feel low, our motivation is to do precisely what will make it worse in the long run (stay in bed, eat junk food, not exercise, withdraw, think of all the negatives in our lives)."

To find future happiness, Dr. Paterson recommends looking at our past experiences (What has proved fulfilling? What experiences would we be reluctant to have forgone?) but also being open to novelty rather than just repeating past experiences. "We don't know if we'll like ice skating, a new restaurant, a yoga retreat, or visiting Maine, so it's tempting to just do repeats of the past," he says. "But our lives expand when we go beyond our zone of comfort and familiarity, not when we stay within it."

On the whole, Dr. Paterson says he considers himself to be happy. "Yes, I have sick friends, frustrating things happen to IT systems at the clinic, it rains more than I would like in Vancouver and there is often more on my plate than I can handle, but these are aspects of a normal life," he says. He uses the strategies he recommends to clients: consciously reminding himself of positives, having a few things planned in the future to look forward to without entirely living for them, practising gratitude, making decisions based on knowledge of how things have worked in the past rather than on lazy impulses like switching on a television.

"More importantly, I take to heart the idea that happiness is often an outcome of something else, so I need to focus on the 'something else,'" says Dr. Paterson. "What do I want to contribute? How can I spend my time in a way that helps achieve that? If I focus not on happiness but on living my life in a way that is meaningful to me, I don't have to worry much about happiness — it arrives more or less on its own."



IS SOCIAL MEDIA DASHING YOUR HOPES OF HAPPINESS?

According to the 2015-2017 World Happiness Report, Canada is the seventh happiest out of 156 countries (Finland is number one). You'd think we'd be happy with that result, but I bet you're really thinking: What's Finland got that we don't? At least half the population leans toward some form of perfectionism, says Dr. Gordon Flett, Canada Research Chair in Personality and Health, and that leads to comparison — and that leads to the feeling we've fallen short in some way. The implicit understanding, he says, is "If I'm perfect, I have a chance to be happy." And nowhere do we compare ourselves more than on social media. "Social media is the bane of people's happiness," he says. "We have a high need to socially compare, and social media forces comparison on us that we don't necessarily want. We also have a tendency to believe how others describe themselves, which leads to false assessment — and sets us up for greater unhappiness. We need to remember that we're not seeing the full picture — what we're seeing on social media is just a 'highlight reel.'"

Dr. Derrick Wirtz, a senior instructor at the University of British Columbia, is currently in the midst of the Enduring Happiness and Continued Self-Enhancement (ENHANCE) trial, which focuses on helping people make small, habitual changes in their daily lives, such as strengthening relationships by expressing appreciation to others so they can experience greater long-term well-being. He doesn't think we should abandon social media altogether. "We might think other people's lives are happier than ours when we see posts of only their positive moments," he says. "And, yes, our own lives can seem less happy or exciting by comparison. But, on the other hand, social media can foster positive feelings when it's used to build meaningful social relationships and direct contact with friends." *BT*