



What does it mean to be happy? ALEX JAMES investigates

I was watching something on TV about happiness. It was offered that throughout the week there would be guides for the audience on achieving happiness. Wow, I thought, now there is a guide, a proven route to happiness ... if we follow this advice we are sure to achieve the one obtrusive goal of humankind. I really don't mean to be facetious but do we really know what happiness is? And, if we do, surely it's a completely personal thing.

What is happiness? I think to each of us it is a unique process, the experience of something that activates the feelings described as happy. Happiness is not a continual experience, rather a fleeting sense that passes over us when we are in the right moment to experience it. The sun on my face may in a moment trigger a sense of warmth, wellbeing, calm and contentment ... I may then describe this feeling as happy. We know that for some meditation can bring a peaceful contentment; in fact research shows that meditation leads to increased activity in the brain's prefrontal cortex, which has been found to correlate with the feelings of happiness. There is a striving in us to achieve happiness and sometimes a misconception about what might make us or those around us happy. Maslow talked about the hierarchy

of needs that we all need to have met. These were depicted in a visual way by a pyramid.

FIRST LEVEL Basic Physical Needs

Food, oxygen, fluid – without these we die

SECOND LEVEL Safety

The need to feel safe – protected in our environment

THIRD LEVEL Relationship

The need to give love and receive love and affection. The need to belong and to be accepted

FOURTH LEVEL Esteem Needs

The need to experience self-esteem and esteem of others. The need to feel competent, confident and useful

FIFTH LEVEL Self-Actualisation

Realisation of an individual's potential. The drive towards self-fulfilment and knowledge (Practical Approach to Counselling, Margaret Hough)

These needs must at least be partly met before other levels can be reached.

So, in our search for happiness, we must at least be in a 'good place' in order to be receptive to the experience. I have found that happiness is constantly moving ... I may experience moments of it throughout a period of time. I might also say this about Maslow's theories as with the unpredictability and uncertainty of our everyday lives I may be constantly up and down the pyramid of needs.

I am fortunate that level one is mostly met nowadays. I have a place to live and access to food and water, the air may not be as clean as I might like but generally my basic survival needs are met.

Level two, feeling safe well, yes, I guess pretty much most of the time I feel safe but there are huge areas nowadays about our safety and security where we are dependent on our governments and on fellow human beings for the certainty of this and, sadly, level two has some very grey areas for me.

Level three, relationships, well these too even with those closest to me are not without their ups and downs and my personal life can be variable ... which I believe is probably the truth for most of us.

Level four, esteem ... my self-esteem does



not entirely come from the input of others, some of it is inherent in me, but I have to say that others play a large part in how I perceive myself. When friends and family spend time with me and generously praise my efforts or comment in a positive way about something that I have done or on how I look it immediately places me in a positive field and my self-esteem and confidence are boosted.

Level five, self actualisation Hmm, well, I'd probably like to think that I'm able to experience this when the core conditions are in place but like all feelings, thoughts and experiences they are transient.

I feel it's unrealistic to expect to be constantly happy. Although my happiness might depend on others I am also capable of experiencing moments of happiness alone and not always in the present moment but in memory, by accessing past experiences. This is intriguing – a present experience of happiness evoked by the past, measurable in retrospect, i.e. I may not realise at the time that I am experiencing an event that in future may be reflected upon and seen as a happier time. For example, when my children, twins, were young it was hard work, a lot of the time I was tired. There too much to do, too little time, irritable and although there were happy times life sometimes seemed a drudge.

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Over Christmas I've been watching old films of those times. Not all of my recordings were of special occasions, some were just ordinary events captured because I was playing about with the camera or left it running. This activity of watching the films really evoked huge feelings of happiness and that old adage about things always seeming better when you look back was certainly true.

What a shame that we don't or can't in some way experience the here and now without taking it so for granted and realise that today's experience may be reflected on in time and thought of as happy. Happy right there under our noses ... not a constant state but a sense that ebbs and flows throughout our day. We strive, wrongly, I feel for that constant happiness. It's unrealistic surely to believe that such a state exists. I looked on the internet, just put in happiness and there were hundreds of individual thoughts about it ... guides to it and proverbs. I wonder then how others can give us a guide to achieving happiness – when our needs may be so changeable not only on a daily basis but by the moment. It's such an individualised process. One man's garden, another's wilderness.

I ponder what is happiness? For me it's a state of mind brought forward from within

but not without vulnerability to the impact of others. It was my birthday on Tuesday ... I have been wished happy birthday from my nearest and dearest and been blessed with good company and some thoughtful and beautiful gifts. The wish from others for my happiness has materialised in some lovely moments. Thinking about happiness and what may make us happy and finding those moments of awareness of our own sense of happy is a useful experience. I hope your thoughts are provoked by this month's offering and that you are able to experience and indulge in happy.



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