

# Happiness – The Very Short Introductions Podcast – Ep 62

**Rebecca Parker** 00:07

Welcome back to the Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matter to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

**Dan Haybron** 00:26

Hi, I'm Dan Haybron, Vitali Chair of Philosophy at St. Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri. I'm a philosopher working at the intersection of value theory and psychology, and I've been working on happiness for about 25 years. Now, as you might guess, the title of my Very Short Introduction is Happiness: A Very Short Introduction. So to start off, well, what is happiness? This is a tricky question, probably won't be surprised at that, because the word happiness has so many meanings. But I tried to situate it in thinking about the basic elements of a good life, with a special focus on happiness understood as a state of mind, and its role in the larger scheme of a life worth wanting.

**Dan Haybron** 01:07

What got me thinking about happiness as a researcher was really a combination of two things. First, in my experience, growing up moving back and forth between an island fishing village and a mainland suburb--you can guess which was the happier place--which made clear to me how important place is to our state of mind and functioning, and how deeply dysfunctional our ideas of the good life are. The second thing was in graduate school coming across pioneering work by people like Ed Diener and Daniel Kahneman, psychologists working on the then new science of happiness. I never really thought about my concerns in terms of happiness, but reading that work made me realize that happiness, or the lack of it, was a huge part of the problem I've been thinking about.

**Dan Haybron** 01:55

So now I'd like to just touch on a few points that I think might be of special interest to people about this topic. Obviously, there's a lot you can say about happiness. But the first thing I'd want to point out is that the study of happiness is not just about smiley face feelings, or just positive things. It's really no more about purely positive things than the study of health is. Being happy and healthy are among our goals, but part of that is addressing illness and unhappiness. We've got a massive amount of completely unnecessary unhappiness, resulting from a highly destructive way of life, both to people and the environment, and that's really been the main driver of my research in this area.

**Dan Haybron** 02:38

The second point I'd like to make is that is, just to be aware of researchers telling you that this, or that, is what happiness truly is, and, or just recording findings from studies and that this is, these people are

happy, or these people are not happy, without actually explaining what they mean by it. The meaning of happiness isn't totally subjective, there are better and worse ways to understand happiness. But there's no single correct meaning to the term, so we really, when we talk about it, we just need to be clear about what we're talking about. And in terms of, well, what are the useful things we can use the word happiness to talk about? The most common usage has to do with happiness understood as a state of mind, it's a psychological term.

### **Dan Haybron 03:25**

And there's really two very different things that people tend to mean when they talk about happiness as a state of mind. The first is the state of being satisfied with your life, or life satisfaction. This isn't really about feelings, the way you tend to think of, may think of happiness. It's really a judgment about how well your life measures up relative to what you care about. Is it satisfactory? Are you taking all things together? Are you satisfied with how things are going in your life? This is an important thing to track and to look at, because people care about things other than how they feel and their feelings don't always perfectly track those things. So life satisfaction, attitudes can be important. But they're not as important as you might think. For one thing, we have a lot of latitude and how we could reasonably be satisfied with our life, and it's just an opinion, it's just a judgment. So you might think your life is not going well at all, but still be satisfied with it because, and without making any mistake, simply because you think, "Well, that's good enough. God has given me something that's much better than having not lived. And so even though it's not going well, I'm satisfied with it." So it's important, but we have to be clear about what we mean and what people are telling us when they tell us how satisfied they are with their lives.

### **Dan Haybron 04:46**

The other meaning in the psychological sense that I find actually needs a lot more attention is what we might call emotional well being. And this includes states like serenity, vitality, feel, and feeling happy. But it's not just about feeling happy. It's a complex emotional condition; that and you can think of it as roughly the opposite of anxiety and depression, which are really just pronounced forms of unhappiness. Emotional well being, happiness in that sense, matters a good deal more, I think, than life satisfaction. But it isn't what most research is about. But if you think about it, we're kind of all talking about a mental health crisis these days. And what people are really talking about is things like depression, anxiety, disorders, stress. They're really talking about serious unhappiness in this sense. And, and when you actually look at good measures of emotional well being, including one that my group has recently developed, you find that, actually, the unhappiness items, the negative items, track almost perfectly with standard mental health, depression, and anxiety scales. So one way to actually assess mental health is just to use a good happiness scale in the sense of emotional well being.

### **Dan Haybron 06:06**

Now, there's an older sense of the word happiness, going back to its roots as a term for good fortune, a good hap. And so it's really about thriving or doing well or self interest, or what benefits a person. And this is what researchers often call well being. Well being isn't a great word; it's one reason why people sometimes use happiness, for this broader sense of your life going well for you. Now, most philosophers think being happy in the psychological sense, is just one aspect of well being. Although I should add that we don't all agree about this. So for instance, if you feel great, but only because you're completely deluded about what your life is really like, like in *The Matrix*, or say, your spouse secretly

hates you behind your back, then it isn't clear that you're doing well. And most people don't envy someone in that kind of situation. Something that seem to benefit us like success in our projects, actually having loving relationships and so forth beyond how they make us feel. But now we can step back still further and think not just about what benefits us but more broadly, what sorts of life should we want, what makes for a good life in the broadest sense, so that you could look back on your life at the end and be justified in affirming it. A slaveholder might, for instance, be happy and even flourishing as most people reckon it, and we have some data suggesting that is actually possible. And, and because they live in a society that accepts certain kinds of immorality, and that's still a terrible live, it's not a good life. And few people, at least, what we've looked at, consider that a good life. So perhaps the most important thing in life is not to be happy, or to do well, but to be a morally decent person.

**Dan Haybron 07:57**

I'd add that it's also important to live well and non moral ways, for instance, doing worthwhile things well, being good at your trade, appreciating beauty and excellence, and so on. A favorite example of mine for this as there's a lovely short film about a Barcelona lawyer, who quit his profession to become a shoemaker. And now his life is centered on the beauty and excellence of his craft. And for him, his guiding value, above all, is beauty. That's a way of living well, that is not just about being morally good and it's not just about self interest.

**Dan Haybron 08:32**

But now here's the thing. All the stuff that matters in life, thriving, being morally good, and otherwise acting well tends to be good for happiness, too, at least as best we can tell. Human needs are complicated. We need good relationships, a healthy outlook, including concern for others, something interesting and worthwhile to do, a sense of security, including enough time to have some breathing space, and the things that make us happy also tend to be elements of a good life generally. Setting aside cases like, you know, where people are bad to out group members like slaveholders, jerks are usually aren't very happy. So the upshot is that the different elements of a good life tend to go together. Not always, of course, but if you want to be happy, then pursuing a genuinely good life is likely to be your best bet.

**Dan Haybron 09:20**

And one last point. I didn't discuss this so much in that book, but the basic sources of happiness tend to depend a lot on the people and the places around us. The pursuit of happiness is partly, maybe mainly, a group project. It's something we have to do together. Just to take one example, by building communities that bring people together rather than separate us, which is kind of what we've been doing in the United States for many decades now. And you can meditate and do gratitude exercises and other positive psychology exercises till the cows come home, and I recommend both of those things, but by themselves, they're not going to cure loneliness; you need other people for that. In general, you can do a lot to do better even in a toxic environment, but if we don't change the toxic environment, our prospects for happiness aren't going to be as good as they should be.

**Dan Haybron 10:12**

So now wrapping up, I hope you found this interesting, especially if you're among the many people who have a reasonable dose of skepticism about the rise of interest in happiness and books about

happiness, and so forth. Like any important subject matter, you'll find plenty of use to disagree with, but also, I hope, see the value in better understanding the place of happiness and a good life, and finding more sensible ways of living more responsible to each other, to the rest of life, more rewarding, and less marred by pointless unhappiness and suffering. Thank you.

**Rebecca Parker** 10:45

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