

Why Worry? Find Meaning!

by Emily Esfahani Smith

Happiness is for takers. Meaning is for givers. Guess who feels better?

Button Lady by Lee White

Something interesting has been happening in recent years. Meaning has regained a foothold in our universities, and especially in an unexpected place—the sciences. Many of the “meaning” researchers are working in a field called positive psychology—a discipline that grounds its findings in empirical studies, but also draws on the rich tradition of the humanities. Positive psychology was founded by the University of Pennsylvania’s Martin Seligman, who, after decades of working as a research psychologist, had come to believe that his field was in crisis. He and his colleagues had made great progress with depression, helplessness, and anxiety, but, he realized, helping people overcome their demons is not the same thing as helping them live well.

And so, in 1998, Seligman called on his colleagues to investigate what makes life fulfilling and worth living. Social scientists heeded his call, but most zeroed in on a topic that was both obvious and seemed easy to measure: happiness. Some researchers studied the benefits of happiness. Others studied its causes. Still others investigated how we can increase it in our day-to-day lives. Though positive psychology was founded to study the good life more generally, happiness became the public face of the field. In the late ’80s and early ’90s, several hundred studies about happiness were published each year; by 2014, there were over 10,000. The results of these studies were spread by choirs of celebrities, personal coaches, and motivational speakers, all singing the gospel of happiness. As Rhonda Byrne wrote in *The Secret*, “The shortcut to anything you want in your life is to BE and FEEL happy now!”

And yet the happiness frenzy has failed to deliver on its promise. Though the happiness industry continues to grow, as a society we’re more miserable than ever. Indeed, social scientists have uncovered a sad irony—chasing happiness tends to make people unhappy.

That fact would come as no surprise to students of the humanistic tradition. Philosophers have long questioned the value of happiness alone. “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied,” wrote the 19th-century philosopher John Stuart Mill. To that the 20th-century Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick added: “And although it might be best of all to be Socrates satisfied, having both happiness and depth, we would give up some happiness in order to gain the depth.”

A happiness skeptic, Nozick devised a thought experiment to emphasize his point. Imagine, Nozick said, that you could live in a tank that would “give you any experience you desired.” Like something out of *The Matrix*, “Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain.” He then asked, “Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life’s experiences?”

If happiness is truly life’s end goal, most people would choose to feel happy in the tank. It would be an easy life, where trauma, sadness, and loss are switched off—forever. You could always feel good, maybe even important. Every now and then, you could exit the tank and decide which new experiences you wanted programmed into your head. If you are torn or distressed over the decision to plug in, you shouldn’t be. “What’s a few moments of distress,” Nozick asked, “compared to a lifetime of bliss (if that’s what you choose), and why feel any distress at all if your decision is the best one?”

Yet the reason most of us recoil from the idea of life in the tank, according to Nozick, is that the happiness we find there is empty and unearned. You may feel happy, but you have no real reason to be. You may feel good, but your life isn’t. A person floating in the tank, as Nozick put it, is “an indeterminate blob.”

Before his death in 2002, Nozick worked with Martin Seligman and others to shape the goals and vision of positive psychology. They recognized early on that the happiness-focused research would be alluring and media-friendly, and they wanted to consciously avoid letting the field become what Seligman called “happiology.” Instead, their mission was to shed the light of science on how people can lead deep and fulfilling lives. And over the last few years, that’s precisely what researchers have been doing. One of their chief findings is a distinction between a happy life and a meaningful life.

A Short History of Happiness. . .

Of course this distinction isn’t new. For thousands of years, philosophers have recognized two paths to the good life. The first is hedonia, or what we today call happiness. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristippus, a student of Socrates, considered the pursuit of hedonia the key to living well. “The art of life,” Aristippus wrote, “lies in taking pleasures as they pass, and the keenest pleasures are not intellectual, nor are they always moral.” Several decades later, Epicurus popularized a somewhat similar idea, arguing that the good life is found in pleasure, which he defined as the absence of bodily and mental pain, such as anxiety.

Building on this classic line of thought, Freud would assert that humans “strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so”—and this “pleasure principle,” as he called it, is what “decides the purpose of life,” for most people.

Similarly, many psychologists today assess happiness by asking an individual to reflect on how often he feels positive emotions like pride, enthusiasm, and attentiveness versus how often he feels negative ones like fear, nervousness, and shame. The higher your ratio of positive to negative emotions, the happier you are thought to be.

. . . And of Meaning

Meaning is the other path to the good life, and it’s best understood by turning to the

Greek philosopher Aristotle and his concept of eudaimonia, the ancient Greek word for “human flourishing.” To Aristotle, eudaimonia is not a fleeting positive emotion. Rather, it is something you do. Leading a eudaimonic life, Aristotle argued, requires cultivating the best qualities within you, both morally and intellectually.

Eudaimonia is an active life, a life in which you do your job and contribute to society, a life in which you are involved in your community, a life, above all, in which you realize your potential, rather than squander your talents. Psychologists have picked up on Aristotle’s distinction. If hedonia is defined as “feeling good,” they argue, then eudaimonia is defined as “being and doing good”—and as “seeking to use and develop the best in oneself” in a way that fits with “one’s deeper principles.”

It’s difficult, of course, to measure a concept like meaning in the lab, but, according to psychologists, when people say that their lives have meaning, it’s because three conditions have been satisfied:

They evaluate their lives as significant and worthwhile—as part of something bigger.

They believe their lives are coherent and make sense.

They feel their lives are driven by a sense of purpose.

Which Is Better?

In 2013, a team of psychologists led by Florida State University’s Roy Baumeister set out to discover the differences between a life of happiness and a life of meaning. They asked nearly 400 Americans aged 18 to 78 whether they were happy and whether they thought their lives were meaningful. The social scientists examined their responses alongside other variables, like their stress levels and spending patterns, and whether or not they had children. What they discovered is that while the meaningful life and the happy life overlap in certain ways and feed off each other, they have “some substantially different roots.”

Baumeister and his team found that the happy life is an easy life, one in which we feel good much of the time and experience little stress or worry. It was also associated with good physical health and the ability to buy the things that we need and want. So far, so expected. What was surprising, however, was that happiness was linked to selfish behavior.

“Happiness without meaning,” the researchers wrote, “characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desires are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided.” In other words, the life of a “taker.”

Leading a meaningful life, by contrast, corresponded with being a “giver,” and its defining feature was connecting and contributing to something beyond the self. Having more meaning in life was correlated with activities like buying presents for others, taking care of children, and even arguing, which researchers said was an indication of having convictions and ideals you are willing to fight for. Because these activities require investing in something bigger, the meaningful life was linked to higher levels of worrying, stress, and anxiety than the happy life. Having children, for instance, was a hallmark of the meaningful life, but it has been famously associated with lower levels of happiness, a finding that held true for the parents in this study.

Meaning and happiness, in other words, can be at odds. Yet research has shown that meaningful endeavors can also give rise to a deeper form of well-being down the road. That was the conclusion of a 2010 study by Veronika Huta of the University of Ottawa and Richard Ryan of the University of Rochester. Huta and Ryan instructed a group of college students to pursue either meaning or happiness over a 10-day period by doing at least one activity each day to increase eudaimonia or hedonia, respectively. At the end of each day, the study participants reported to the researchers about the activities they'd chosen to undertake. Some of the most popular ones they reported in the meaning condition included forgiving a friend, studying, thinking about one's values, and helping or cheering up another person. Those in the happiness condition, by contrast, listed activities like sleeping in, playing games, going shopping, and eating sweets.

After the study's completion, the researchers checked in with the participants to see how it had affected their well-being. What they found was that students in the happiness condition experienced more positive feelings, and fewer negative ones, immediately after the study. But three months later, the mood boost had faded. The second group of students—those who focused on meaning—did not feel as happy right after the experiment, though they did rate their lives as more meaningful. Yet three months later, the picture was different. The students who had pursued meaning said they felt more “enriched,” “inspired,” and “part of something greater than myself.” They also reported fewer negative moods. Over the long term, it seemed, pursuing meaning actually boosted psychological health.

Such results aren't really news, of course. In 1873, John Stuart Mill observed, “Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.”

And yet this new research reflects a broader shift in our culture. Across the country—and around the world—educators, business leaders, doctors, politicians, and ordinary people are turning away from the gospel of happiness to focus on meaning. As I followed these meaning seekers on their journeys for my book *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life that Matters*, I found that their lives all had some important qualities in common, offering an insight that the research is now confirming: There are sources of meaning all around us, and by tapping into them, we can all lead richer and more satisfying lives—and help others do the same. More often than not, these paragons of meaning were living humble lives. Many of them had struggled in their pursuit of meaning. Yet their primary goal was making the world better for others.

A great Sufi once said that if a dervish takes only the first step on the path of loving-kindness and goes no farther, then he has contributed to humanity by devoting himself to others—and it's the same with those focused on living meaningful lives. They transform the world, in big and small ways, through their pursuit of noble goals and ideals. Indeed, just as new scientific findings have brought us back to the wisdom of the humanities, writing this book has affirmed the lessons I learned as a child living for a time in a Sufi meetinghouse. Though the dervishes led seemingly normal lives as lawyers, construction workers, engineers, and parents, they adopted a meaning mindset that imbued everything they did with significance—whether it was helping to clean up a dinner spread or singing the poetry of Rumi and Attar and living by its wisdom.

For the dervishes, the pursuit of personal happiness was completely beside the point.

Rather, they focused constantly on how they could make themselves useful to others, how they could help other people feel happier and more whole, and how they could connect to something larger. They crafted lives that mattered—which leaves just one question for the rest of us: How can we do the same?