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Does Trying to Be Happy Make Us Unhappy?
by Adam Grant

As we muddle through our days, the quest for happiness looms large. In the U.S., citizens are granted three inalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The kingdom of Bhutan created a national index to measure happiness. But what if searching for happiness actually prevents us from finding it? There's reason to believe that the quest for happiness might be a recipe for misery.

In a series of new studies led by psychologist Iris Mauss, the more value people placed on happiness, the less happy they became. I saw it happen to Tom, a savant who speaks half a dozen languages, from Chinese to Welsh. In college, Tom declared a major in computer science, but found it dissatisfying. He became obsessed with happiness, longing for a career and a culture that would provide the perfect match for his interests and values. Within two years of graduating from college, he had bounced from working at the United Nations to an internet startup in New York, applied for jobs as a supermarket manager, consultant and venture capitalist, and considered moving to Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Colombia, or Canada.

These careers and countries didn't fulfill him. After another year, he was doing standup comedy, contemplating a move to London to pursue an advanced degree in education, philosophy of science, management, or psychology. But none of these paths made him happy. Dissatisfied with his own lack of progress toward happiness, he created an online tool to help people develop more productive habits. That wasn't satisfying either, so he moved to Beijing. He lasted two years there, but didn't find the right cultural fit, so he moved to Germany and considered starting a college dorm for adults and a bar for nerds. In the next two years, he was off to Montreal and Pittsburgh, then back to Germany working on a website to help couples spend more quality time together. Still not happy, he abandoned that plan and returned to Beijing to sell office furniture. One year and two more moves across two continents later, he admitted to his friends, "I'm harder to find than Carmen San Diego."

Tom made four mistakes that are all too common on the road to happiness. The first blunder was in trying to figure out if he was happy. When we pursue happiness, our goal is to experience more joy and contentment. To find out if we're making progress, we need to compare our past happiness to our current happiness. This creates a problem: the moment we make that comparison, we shift from an experiencing mode to an evaluating mode. Consider several decades of research by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on flow, a state of complete absorption in an activity. Think of being engrossed in a Harry Potter book, playing a sport you love, or catching up with a good friend you haven't seen

in years. You're in the zone: you're so immersed in the task that you lose track of time and the outside world.

Csikszentmihalyi finds that when people are in a flow state, they don't report being happy, as they're too busy concentrating on the activity or conversation. But afterward, looking back, they describe flow as the optimal emotional experience. By looking everywhere for happiness, Tom disrupted his ability to find flow. He was so busy assessing each new job and country that he never fully engaged in his projects and relationships. Instead, he became depressed and entered a vicious cycle documented by psychologists Katariina Salmela-Aro and Jari-Erik Nurmi: depression leads people to evaluate their daily projects as less enjoyable, and ruminating about why they're not fun makes the depression worse.

The second error was in overestimating the impact of life circumstances on happiness. As psychologist Dan Gilbert explains in Stumbling on Happiness, we tend to overestimate the emotional impact of positive life events. We think a great roommate or a major promotion will make us happier, overlooking the fact that we'll adapt to the new circumstances. For example, in a classic study, winning the lottery didn't appear to yield lasting gains in happiness. Each time Tom moved to a new job and country, he was initially excited to be running on a new treadmill, but within a matter of months, the reality of the daily grind set in: he was still running on a treadmill.

The third misstep was in pursuing happiness alone. Happiness is an individual state, so when we look for it, it's only natural to focus on ourselves. Yet a wealth of evidence consistently shows that self-focused attention undermines happiness and causes depression. In one study, Mauss and colleagues demonstrated that the greater the value people placed on happiness, the more lonely they felt every day for the next two weeks. In another experiment, they randomly assigned people to value happiness, and found that it backfired: these people reported feeling lonelier and also had a progesterone drop in their saliva, a hormonal response linked to loneliness. As Tom changed jobs and countries alone, he left behind the people who made him happy.

The final mistake was in looking for intense happiness. When we want to be happy, we look for strong positive emotions like joy, elation, enthusiasm, and excitement. Unfortunately, research shows that this isn't the best path to happiness. Research led by the psychologist Ed Diener reveals that happiness is driven by the frequency, not the intensity, of positive emotions. When we aim for intense positive emotions, we evaluate our experiences against a higher standard, which makes it easier to be disappointed. Indeed, Mauss and her colleagues found that when people were explicitly searching for happiness, they experienced less joy in watching a figure skater win a gold medal. They were disappointed that the event wasn't even more jubilating. And even if they themselves had won the gold medal, it probably wouldn't have helped. Studies indicate that an intense positive experience leads us to frame ordinary experiences as less positive. Once you've landed a gold medal or won the lottery, it's hard to take pleasure in finding a great parking spot or winning a video game. Tom was looking so hard for the perfect job and the ideal country that he failed to appreciate an interesting task and a great restaurant.

Today, for the first time in more than a decade, Tom reports beingâ€Š—â€Šand appears to beâ€Š—â€Šhappy. Instead of pursuing happiness alone, he fell in love and got married. Rather than evaluating his happiness daily and hunting for his dream job, he's finding flow and experiencing daily satisfaction in helping his wife set up a company. He's no longer bouncing around from one continent to another, following the advice of psychologists Ken

Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky: “Change your actions, not your circumstances.”

In Obliquity, John Kay argues that the best things in life can only be pursued indirectly. I believe this is true for happiness: if you truly want to experience joy or meaning, you need to shift your attention away from joy or meaning, and toward projects and relationships that bring joy and meaning as byproducts. As the great philosopher John Stuart Mill once wrote, “Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness.”

If you’re too focused on chasing happiness, you might end up chasing it away.