

Can You Be Too Happy?

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A compelling new study finds that being a little less content may actually make you more successful.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, how could he have known the way 21st-century Americans would twist around the phrase “pursuit of happiness”? The Founding Fathers certainly weren’t envisioning the billions of dollars that Americans now plunk down every year for shelf upon shelf of self-improvement books, audio tapes and DVDs. Yet that’s what it’s come to: even people who consider themselves pretty happy today are demanding to be happier, and they are paying big bucks for that entitlement.

But is it really a good thing to be ultrahappy? Nobody thrives on sheer misery, of course, but might there be perils in endlessly striving for more and more good cheer and sunny days? Or, put another way: is happiness overrated?

A growing number of psychologists are thinking it might be, and one team in particular has been conducting some large-scale, data-heavy studies to test the point. Shigehiro Oishi, Ed Diener and Richard Lucas decided to compare people who see themselves as being extremely happy with people who describe themselves as being only moderately so. Surprisingly, this had never been done before—at least not this thoroughly. They studied men and women, young and old, students and working people, hundreds of thousands of people from all over the globe. After all the data crunching they came up with some consistent and surprising insights.

For the sake of shorthand, let’s call the two groups the Blissful and the Contented. The psychologists weren’t interested in fleeting moments of ecstasy but rather in stable states of happiness—people’s summary judgments of their own lives. Once they had the Blissful and the Contented sorted out, they looked at various measures of healthy functioning: enduring intimate relationships, education, career and financial success, civic involvement, charity, and so forth. Some of the studies were longitudinal, which means they could see if happiness at one age actually led to healthy functioning much later on.

Not surprisingly, the scientists found that Blissful people were more likely than the merely Contented to have rich and stable intimate relationships. They had predicted this, figuring that people who are less happy about their lives in general would be more motivated to shake things up, which could mean a roaming eye. People who are extremely happy, by contrast, may construct more positive illusions about their partners, which create and sustain enduring relationships, which in turn make people even happier.

But the findings about education and work and financial success were not so intuitive. For example, in one part of the study focusing only on students, the merely Contented were much more conscientious about their schooling: they skipped fewer classes and had better grades. By the time they hit the working world, the merely Contented were more highly educated, and they went on to be more successful in their careers than the Blissful. They also brought home much fatter paychecks. Indeed, in one substudy, college freshmen with the most cheerful dispositions ended up 19 years later, at the age of 37, making about \$8,000 less than their drearier counterparts.

Why would this be? Well, think about it. You know these slightly discontented sorts. The glass is never entirely full to them, and they always want more. They have an edge to them, and this edge may give them the competitive drive to excel in school and on the job. In short, a little bit of discontent sparks success. Call that \$8K the dreariness premium.

The same dynamic may be at work in the political domain. The psychologists found that the Blissful were less politically engaged than the Contented. Civic involvement is usually considered one measure of healthy functioning, so this may seem surprising at first. But again there is a certain logic to it: people who are slightly grumpy probably see the world as imperfect and in need of fixing, so they do something to fix it. Or to look at it the other way around, the positive attitudes and general agreeableness that make some people good partners may make them not so great citizens.

The most surprising finding to come out of these ambitious studies has to do with acts of charity. As reported in the December issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, when the psychologists asked the Blissful and the Contented about volunteer work, they expected to find something akin to political engagement. That is, they figured that volunteers would be motivated by their restlessness and discontent to change a world that badly needed change. But in fact they found the opposite: the Blissful were much more likely than the Contented to give away their time and energy for a cause, to act altruistically. It appears that volunteering is less like work and politics and more like love and intimacy, requiring a kind of selflessness that's not particularly practical.

Remember that what we've been calling the Blissful are not ascended masters. They're just the happiest of us regular folk. And what we're calling the Contented are just that: happier than average. But the psychologists' argument here is that it may be pointless for the Contented to strive for anything more than that. Indeed, it may be detrimental, especially if the quest for a constant state of happiness becomes obsessive, hedonistic thrill seeking. Seeking a perfect state of bliss is still perfectionism, after all, and that kind of seeking rarely makes anyone happy.