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How much money can buy you happiness, and can happiness be engineered?

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There may be a lot of misery in the world, opines Chandran Kukathas, but for many, 'there's gold in them thar hills'. But can happiness be engineered?

Can money buy happiness or engineer it? We've thrown a lot of money at a great many scientists lately trying to answer these questions. Happiness research is big and it's making many people very happy – mostly the people doing the happiness research. Without a doubt, there's money in happiness. You don't have to write a bestseller on it, although it wouldn't hurt.

If you're an academic, there are research grants to study what makes people happy or sad, rises in pay as well as prestige for publishing the results (perhaps in the Journal of Happiness Studies) and speaking fees to be collected travelling the world lecturing on contentment. Paid consultancies to tell governments how to help the public (aka voters) be happier are a bonus. There are now classes to tell you how to become happier by becoming more mindful, less ambitious or better at knowing what you want. Everywhere there are people who are happy to help you. The Internet is awash in books, articles, reports and columns, all produced by people paid to tell us how we can be happier – or at least less miserable.

Corporations recruit certified happiness consultants to help them make their employees happier and more productive. Delivering Happiness, for example, claims to be the world's first coach-sulting company and promises to help you "create a happier culture for a more profitable business". In case you're not getting the message, it adds: "If your culture isn't empowering your team to create their best work, you're losing money." But it's not only corporations who are looking for help.

We humans began worrying about how to be happy when we first started asking questions. Priests and philosophers have been cheerfully employed supplying answers ever since. Nice work if you can get it, although nowadays you'll need a different kind of professional training.

Still, is happiness research good value for money? Will it make us any wiser or happier? And can we trust our leaders to do the job of what the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin, called the "engineers of the human soul"? Sadly, no. It's not that the research is completely wrong. It's just not clear how useful it really is, even if, happily, it gives some of us something to do and others something else to read. So what does the most recent research tell us?

Can money buy happiness?

Keep in mind that nearly all of the recent scientific research is conducted by psychologists, economists and statisticians (but not anthropologists, historians or philosophers) and what they study is subjective well-being. In a nutshell, they study the answers people give to questions such as, 'How happy are you? Very happy, reasonably happy or not that happy?' Or, 'How happy are you on a scale of zero to 10, where 10 is very happy and zero is absolutely miserable?' Not exactly the deepest

questions – somewhat lacking in rigour. Nor quite what the ancient philosophers, from Aristotle to Zhuangzi, had in mind when they explored the idea of a happy life. We'll come back to this.

Here are the main conclusions the research has come up with.

It's mostly in the genes

First, a lot of it's in your head. Or, more precisely, in your genes. On the basis of psychological research on twins, the psychologists David Lykken and Auke Tellegen found that around half of your set point for happiness – the state you'll return to between highs and lows – is inherited. Most researchers agree. Some people are genetically disposed to enjoy a higher level of subjective well-being. Luckily, that leaves 50 per cent somewhat within our control, although whether that's good news may depend on whether you're a 'glass half full' or 'glass half empty' type. (Whether you're happy with your genes too depends on, well, your genes.)

Happiness depends on what happens to us

The second thing the research tells us about happiness is that some of it depends on what happens to us. Here the trouble is that we just don't know how much of our happiness depends on our circumstances. Maybe a little – 10 per cent? Maybe a lot – 40 per cent? There's no agreement on this. Winning the lottery or losing a loved one makes a difference. So might seeing someone not so lovable win the lottery. Or seeing an enemy win the lottery only to lose the ticket. (The pleasure derived from someone else's misfortune, what the Germans call schadenfreude, may be an underappreciated source of happiness.) But just how big a difference it makes remains a puzzle.

Still, none of this really matters, the research tells us, because the effects wear off. Whatever happens to us, we get used to it. From an evolutionary point of view that makes sense. If we didn't have the ability get over misfortune, we'd probably be too sad to have sex (even if anyone wanted to have sad sex with us) and we wouldn't pass on our unhappiness genes. The perpetually miserable are destined to die out.

Unfortunately, we also get over our good fortune. Winning the lottery, gaining a promotion, seeing our team win (or our rival, Evil United, humiliated) brings immediate but rapidly diminishing satisfaction. That's the main reason researchers think that money doesn't buy happiness. We get used to however much we have and soon after a windfall gain, or a gut-churning loss, we readjust to our new circumstances and budgets. If we can have Beluga caviar and Châteauneuf-du-Pape (from some of the finer vineyards and not the other rubbish) every day, it ceases to be special, and we need something more to make us purr. Maybe that's a good thing too. If our ancestors had been happy with water, they might never have invented whisky and we'd have nothing to help us truly drown our sorrows.

Will happiness come from pursuing power?

The third thing the research tells us is that, now that we know the first two things, we should understand that happiness won't come from pursuing power, wealth or prestige. We have a better chance of finding it in doing work we consider meaningful, cultivating relationships with family and friends, and learning to be content with what we have rather than aggrieved because of what we lack.

The secret to finding happiness is to become a little less materialistic, a little more spiritual and a lot more easy-going. There are a few tricks that might help you along the way. For example, if you have money, don't accumulate more possessions but spend it on experiences you'll remember. That will give you more bang for your buck. Try giving more of your money away – you'll do good (provided you aren't donating to a bad cause) and feel good to boot. And lower your expectations. If getting what you want makes you happy, and not getting it makes you unhappy, you can improve your odds by wanting fewer things – especially those things that are hard to get, like those grapes that look so good but are cruelly out of reach.

This is when the happiness research starts to look a bit suspect. Now, it's not that it's telling you anything that's wildly counter-intuitive or particularly new. As many happiness researchers admit with commendable alacrity, it's not a million miles from what philosophers and sages have been saying for a long time. Hasn't the Dalai Lama told us that "we need to learn to want what we have, not to have what we want"? Wasn't that no more than an expression of what the Buddha tried to teach us: that suffering is caused by desire or craving, and happiness comes from the taming of desire? Happiness is freedom from that restless yearning to have our wants satisfied.

But the thing is, when these philosophers and sages offered these answers, they came in a very different package. Why? Well, they actually started with a different approach to the problem. Instead of asking people, how happy are you on a scale of one to 10, they tackled a bigger, more complex question: what makes a life a good life and what makes a person a good person? Or, more plainly, what is happiness?

This story first appeared in September 2020 issue. *Professor Chandran Kukathas is the dean and Lee Kong Chian chair professor of political science at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University*