

Finding a Happy Life  
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I am afraid of snakes. I grew up in Arizona, and when I was a small child, adults taught me to watch out for rattlesnakes. I saw pictures of rattlesnakes in books and a live rattlesnake at the zoo. When I was about eight years old in Cub Scouts, the scout leader gave us a lecture about how to use a snakebite kit. I remember that it came with a razor blade and a small plunger type device. She instructed us to cut open the wound with a razor blade, to get the blood flowing and then to suck the place with the plunger device. If we did not have a snake bite kit with us, she instructed us to use our mouths to suck out the poison and spit it out on the ground.

I did not see a rattlesnake in the wild until I was in my early 20s. I was working in the desert near Apache Junction, just west of the Superstition Mountains helping install a fence. I saw an enormous rattlesnake as thick around as my arm and about three feet long, slowly moving across a dusty road. The man I was working for yelled at me to get the pole out of his pickup truck. The pole was designed to capture snakes alive. I ran and grabbed the pole. I ran back, but by the time I got there, the snake had disappeared into the desert under brush. We looked for it, because the university paid money for live rattlesnakes, but we never found it again. The rest of the day, building the fence, I kept my eye out for snakes.

When I was a child, adults taught me that a bite from a rattlesnake could be deadly. I needed to be careful when I was out exploring. Never put my hand on a ledge unless I could first look at the top. Never put my hand or my foot in a hole if I could not see into the hole. Adults told me that if I saw a snake, I should get away from it as fast as I could.

Today I love to walk in the woods. I like the feel of a breeze against my skin. I like the feel of the ground beneath my feet. I like the smell of the vegetation, especially the smell after it has rained. I like to get away from automobiles to a place where I can only hear the sounds of birds and insects. I like to look at the colors and patterns of the plants, the flowers and the rocks.

However, as I walk, sometimes I see sticks and I jump. I think they are snakes. In the woods there are many sticks. If I see them all as snakes, I cannot feel happy walking in nature. To have a sense of well-being as I walk along a path, I must develop enough awareness of the world around me so I can distinguish between a harmless stick, and a deadly snake.

While surfing the web for information about happiness, I discovered a St. Louis magazine article about a man named Dr. Robert Cloninger. Dr. Cloninger is a professor of psychology and genetics at the Washington University School of Medicine. He earned his living for many years as a researcher deciphering the genetics, chemistry and symptoms of various addictions and disorders. In recent years he has tried to combine what he has learned about the genetic and chemical causes of depression with what he has learned about philosophy, psychology, spirituality, and meditation to tell us what makes for a happy life.

There are different definitions of the word “happy.” In the book *Stumbling on Happiness* Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert defines happiness as the positive feeling we get when we experience novelty in our lives. The Royal Society Prizes for Science Books awarded *Stumbling on Happiness* the prize for the best science writing for a non specialist audience. Gilbert suggests evolution has designed us to feel happy when we have new experiences. So, for example, we feel happy when travel, or when we read a good book, or see a good movie for the first time. We visit new restaurants, try new dishes. When we experience new things, our bodies secrete the hormone dopamine in the brain and dopamine produces the feeling many of us define as happiness. Dr. Gilbert wrote:

When we have an experience – hearing a particular sonata, making love with a particular person, watching the sunset from a particular window of a particular room – on successive occasions, we quickly began to adapt to it, and experience yields less pleasure each time. Psychologists call this habituation, economists call it declining marginal utility, and the rest of us call it marriage. But human beings have discovered two devices that allow them to combat this tendency: variety and time. One way to beat habituation is to increase the variety of one's experiences [for example we can say to our partner] “hey honey, I have a kinky idea, let's watch the sunset from the kitchen this time”. Another way to beat habituation is to increase the amount of time that separates repetitions of the experience.

However, these positive feelings we have when we travel, when we read a good book, when we see a good movie for the first time, or when we have a new taste experience in a restaurant, Dr. Robert Cloninger calls “temporary pleasures.” He is not against temporary pleasures, in moderation. However, in his work he has seen people become ill from over indulging in temporary pleasures. We lose our jobs, our families, and our health, addicted to the temporary pleasures of new foods, computer games, or pornography, or alcoholic beverages, or drugs. So Dr. Robert Cloninger makes a distinction between temporary pleasures and the happy life.

By *the happy life* Dr. Cloninger means a state of well-being, He defines happiness as “an inner state of calmness, self-awareness, and self-acceptance that arrives when we are physically, mentally, and spiritually integrated.”

After many years of careful scientific work at St. Louis’s Washington University School of Medicine researching the genetics, chemistry and symptoms of various addictions and disorders, Dr. Cloninger came to a very simple conclusion. If we want to be happy, we can start by performing five acts of kindness in a single day and reflect on how we feel before and after we perform these acts. *Do five acts of kindness in a single day* and reflect on how we feel before and after. I tried to imagine some examples of simple acts of kindness.

When I am driving in a car, I try to remember at crowded intersections to let other cars in, and this kindness enhances my sense of well-being.

When I donate blood, and I am sitting at a table afterwards eating my cookie and drinking my juice, I do feel an inner state of calmness and well-being.

When I tell someone thank you for something they have done, I do feel some satisfaction.

Of course, I struggle with stress, which makes me irritable. Feeling stress, I am not always in the mood to let someone into traffic when I am driving my car. Knowing this, Dr. Cloninger teaches a simple meditation exercise of quieting the mind that he calls *silence of the mind*, although if you are driving a car you need to pull over to a safe stop before trying it.

First breath in through your nose and then out through your mouth slowly. Repeat this three times.

I will say the instructions again and give you a chance to follow them: Three times Breath in through your nose and then out through your mouth slowly.

Next, close your eyes and concentrate your attention on a single word, like hope, peace, faith, joy, or love. The word Love is particularly helpful in overcoming fears and leading to calmness. Let go of all criticism and struggles. Gently bring your attention back to the words love. Enjoy the peace and quiet.

Doctor Cloninger uses the example of a parent trying to fix dinner. In the example the parent is upset and frustrated when her young child starts making demands. She yells at the child and sends him to his room. She feels unhappy. Dr. Cloninger suggests that the next time this happens, the parent calm her mind by taking three deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Then he suggests she think of the word love for a few moments. When we are calm, being kind and cooperative is easier for us. In the example of the parent fixing dinner, when she calmly reflexes on the events she realizes that she is upset because she would like help with fixing the meal. She realizes that her child is making demands, not because the child is bad, but because the child wants attention. When she is calm, she can let go of fighting and blaming.

Cooperativeness, gives us genuine, lasting satisfaction and well-being. Robert Cloninger says we learn cooperativeness by calming our minds becoming self-aware and doing kind acts.

In the same way, we learn self-directedness by calming our minds and observing what triggers our fears and anxieties. This is where the Doctor uses the example of the snake and the stick. For some of us seeing a stick in the woods is enough to trigger our fear of snakes, and to disrupt our feeling of well-being. We have many things that can trigger our fear and anxiety.

A frown on the face of our spouse or partner can trigger our fear.

A screaming demand from a child can trigger our anxiety.

A comment by our boss at work can trigger our worry.

A critical comment by teacher can upset us.

Sometimes these are real dangers, real snakes, but often they are just sticks in a forest, they trigger our fear and anxiety but they are not really dangerous.

Dr. Cloninger says that to be happy we need to be calm and self-aware so that when we walk through the forests of our lives, we can distinguish between the sticks and the snakes. If we are not calm, we see every stick as a potential snake. We live in fear, reacting aggressively and defensively because we see danger, threats everywhere. Of course, for survival we need to keep our distance from real snakes. Yet much of the time sticks that look like snakes trigger our feelings of fear and anxiety. If we can be calm, and separate the many harmless sticks from the occasional dangerous snakes, we are on the path to a happy life.

If we can be calm and enjoy the world instead of experiencing it as filled with snakes, we can learn self-transcendence. Dr. Cloninger believes self-transcendence is necessary for a happy life. He defines self-transcendence as a feeling that we are a part of something with no limits or boundaries in time and space. He has an exercise to help us achieve this feeling.

We start by picking a time when we have about half an hour free. In the exercise we awaken our senses in the order they naturally develop, touch, taste, smell, hearing, and vision.

First we touch something. We think about its texture. Is it cool or warm? Is it hard, or rough?

Then, we taste something. Is it savory? Is it sweet? Is it salty? Is it sour?

Next we smell the scent of the air. Is it aromatic? Is it fragrant? Is it perfumed? Does it smell spicy?

Then, we listen to the sounds around us. Are they harmonious sounds? Are they melodious? Are they rhythmic? Are they base sounds or are they high-pitched?

Finally, we look at the shapes and colors of various objects. We look at the glass, and the wood and the flowers.

Our senses are gateways connecting us with everything else.

Dr. Cloninger believes in doing this exercise each day, or if we have a great deal of stress, three times a day. He says we will develop moments of great joy when we suddenly have a clear, deep feeling of oneness with all that exists, a feeling of transcendence. We will feel so connected that we experience everything as part of one living process. We will feel so connected to the people around us, it will feel like no separation exists between us.

So this is a brief summary of one theory of happiness.

We grow in happiness by calming our minds and doing kind acts.

We grow in happiness by separating the sticks from the snakes, by calming our minds and observing what triggers our fears and anxieties.

We grow in happiness by calming our minds and thinking about our senses in the order they naturally develop: touch, taste, smell, hearing, and vision.

As I said, I am afraid of snakes. Still, over the years I have learned that when I can calm myself I can distinguish sticks from snakes. It turns out that there are very few real snakes. When I let go of the things that trigger my fears, when take three deep breaths to help me become calm, I can distinguish between imaginary danger and real danger. Then I can have a feeling of well-being and happiness.

I will let the Doctor have the last word. He said:

In this culture we tend to think in terms of transient pleasure instead of lasting satisfaction. And when you are striving to maximize your pleasure, you may do things selfishly. There's also this sense that down deep within ourselves, there's only darkness and misery, so we need to suppress it. Our basic nature is wisdom and love. A happy life is rooted in people constantly discovering more about themselves so they are letting go of all fights and selfish desires. The goal is not to be perfect, but to live without fear.

Source:

Cloninger, C. Robert, *Feeling Good, The Science of Well-Being*, Oxford University Press, 2004.