

Coping with College Series

Sustaining Happiness

By Allyson Hawkins

Have you ever wondered what would make you truly happy? Or why some people are so much happier than others? Well, psychologists do and they have come up with some interesting findings about what things contribute to happiness and what factors diminish happiness. Here's a partial list.

It's not money. This research is clear. If you want to increase your happiness, limit the time you spend trying to make money. Study after study has shown that once basic needs are met, money has very little impact on how happy people are. Wealthy kids score the lowest on measures of happiness. Lottery winners' reports of happiness actually decrease after the big win. Happiness has not increased over time, although our national wealth has.

Many people intuitively know this, yet our behavior often says something different. Our culture's focus on materialism is so strong that it's hard not to start thinking that a new car, DVD player, or outfit will really make us happy. But more possessions rarely make us happier for long. It's called habituating. The more you have, the more you want. Expectations continue to grow so the car, house, computer that seemed so wonderful yesterday now seems unsatisfying. And an emphasis on making money leaves little time for the things that do sustain happiness.

It's also not about looks. Physical attractiveness is a poor predictor of students' life satisfaction. Yet think about how much time and energy college students put into looking good. Want to increase your happiness, stop obsessing about your outside.

And stop obsessing about consumer choices. Today we have over 100 kinds of toothpaste. But this abundance of choice does not make people happier; it leaves most of us feeling overwhelmed. With so many options for consumer goods, recreation, vocational possibilities, it's difficult for most people to stop questioning whether they made the right choice. This overabundance increases people's anxiety and leads people to feel incompetent.

So what does make people happier? Many things, but being connected to family and friends is critical. The happiest college students consistently report strong relationships with friends and family. You want to be happy –keep in contact with people who love you. If your relationships seem lacking, find out why. Ask a friend for feedback on your interpersonal skills, or join a group at Student Counseling Services and improve your relationships.

Don't define happiness as peak experiences. It's the ordinary things that matter. Psychologists are finding that happier people don't have frequent moments of extreme happiness; happy people experience moderate pleasure more frequently. Don't go for ecstasy; go for enjoying ordinary moments.

Find work and recreation that you love. People are happiest when they are absorbed in a mindful challenge. If you haven't found a major or career that absorbs you, drop by the Career Center and find out why. People who see their employment as a "calling" have higher life satisfaction than those who think of it as a job or a career.

Life is too short to waste. Find out what makes you happy and go for it.