

## *Emotional Well-Being: Finding Joy that Is Complete*

*J. A. Stewart-Sicking*

When I was growing up, I was fascinated by my mother's bookshelf. Though she was then devoted to raising my siblings and me, she was a recovering classics and theology major, and her books were decidedly different from any others my friends' moms had sitting around. There were Latin grammars and Platonic dialogues and books on topics like "nihilism" and the "death of God." They were fascinating and to be honest, when I went to seminary, I cajoled her into giving several of them to my own library. When I was a child, I didn't appreciate how all the books fit together, and frankly, my fascination was more that they were such long books on seemingly straightforward subjects. One in particular stood out, a hefty tome with a title along the lines of *Happiness Here and Hereafter*. I think it was probably a handbook of the ethics of Thomas Aquinas, but as a child, all I could think was that it was really long. Really? You need a five-pound book to tell you about happiness? Doesn't everyone want to be happy? It doesn't seem that difficult to understand—these people need to get outside and play more.

But as I have spent more time studying happiness, it is beginning to seem that a five-pound book on the subject has got to be the abridged version. For something universally sought after and seemingly commonsense, happiness is an unusually difficult idea to comprehend. It seems wise to conclude with prominent psychologists that happiness is a field of study, not a single phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> It is not something that any single perspective can capture. I suppose that this is good news—if happiness were simple, it would hardly be ultimately satisfying. But this complexity makes any discussion of happiness only an invitation into the process of discovery, one that will last until we see God face to face.

## Developing a Psychology of Well-Being

Given the amount of attention that theologians and philosophers, such as those represented on my mother's bookshelf, have given to the nature of happiness, it is odd that modern psychology has considered this topic so late in its history. In fact, serious psychological study of happiness has entered the mainstream only in the past decade.

One reason for this neglect may be due to psychology's links to clinical practice. Since the time of Freud, psychologists and related professionals have spent much of their time observing the ways in which people's minds and emotions can break down. Thus, the focus of research and training tended to be on treating pathology and restoring people to "normal" functioning. But over time, scholars and practitioners realized that treatment wasn't enough.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, beginning in the 1960s, many mental health fields began to adopt a more proactive, preventive stance toward emotional problems. But a more radical change began to emerge at the turn of the millennium, with an article by two prominent psychologists suggesting that social science should move beyond its focus on problems (whether treating or preventing them) to one of "flourishing"<sup>3</sup>—a revolutionary term to hear modern social scientists use. The authors suggested that social science can be an important tool for showing people how to live a good life, experience well-being, and thrive in communities. The movement represented by this article, known as "positive psychology," aims to be the "science of happiness," and it has directed attention to the nature of emotional well-being and the paths to attain it.

### *Hedonic Psychology*

One key stream of research for understanding positive psychology comes out of studies on the interplay between positive and negative emotions. Researchers have noticed that positive emotions (such as joy, attentiveness, confidence, and contentment) are relatively independent of negative emotions (such as fear, sadness, and anger)—that is, positive and negative emotions are triggered by different situations, and things that increase the one (like having friends) do not necessarily decrease the other.<sup>4</sup> Clergy provide an important example of this phenomenon: many clergy report that their work is simultaneously engaging and exhausting.<sup>5</sup> Thus, researchers began to realize that positive and negative feelings<sup>6</sup> might not be opposites, but two distinct phenomena. From this perspective, happiness is having a

balance of positive and negative feelings, and achieving happiness requires efforts both to boost positive emotions and decrease negative ones.

With this knowledge, an entire approach has developed towards emotional well-being, known as the *hedonic* approach<sup>7</sup> due to its focus on maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. The hedonic approach defines emotional well-being as subjective well-being, the experience of relatively high levels of positive emotions and low levels of negative emotions, along with a sense that one's entire life has been well-lived and satisfying. From this perspective, the good life is one spent finding ways to maximize the experience of pleasure and minimize the experience of pain.

### *Eudaimonic Psychology*

As straightforward as this formulation is, many psychologists don't find it satisfying. In their view it doesn't seem to capture all there is to being human. And so some psychologists have turned to ancient philosophy to generate a fuller picture of happiness. From Aristotle, they borrowed the concept of *eudaimonia* to describe the life well-lived.<sup>8</sup> This term is sometimes translated as "happiness," but a better translation might be "human flourishing," able to participate in all the aspects of human life that are truly good. And certainly, this concept goes beyond simple considerations of pleasure and pain to include a focus on thriving and achieving one's potential.

Eudaimonic psychologists noted that without a clear theoretical rationale, hedonic psychology had neglected important aspects of psychological well-being,<sup>9</sup> including relationships with one's self and with others. Thus, the eudaimonic approach used philosophy and developmental psychology to define six aspects of psychological well-being:<sup>10</sup> self-acceptance, positive relations with others that show the ability to love and care, a sense of autonomy, a sense of environmental mastery, a sense of purpose in life, and the experience of personal growth.

These six dimensions suggest ways to do a "happiness audit" to understand our own location on the path to flourishing. Just as we might do a holistic assessment of our physical fitness, we can turn to each of these dimensions to gauge our emotional well-being.<sup>11</sup>

To what extent do we own and accept both the good and bad parts of ourselves? To what extent do we have satisfying and caring relationships with others?

To what extent do we honor our own standards of right and wrong? How well do we manage the complexity of our daily affairs?

To what extent do we have goals and beliefs that shape the direction of our lives? And to what degree are we continually growing and improving?

The answers to these questions can give us a better picture of our emotional well-being and possible areas in which to focus our efforts for improvement.

Combining the eudaimonic and hedonic approaches in research has yielded some intriguing results.<sup>12</sup> While some aspects of psychological well-being are strongly related to subjective well-being, there appears to be a real distinction between a pleasurable life and a meaningful life. For many people, psychological well-being and subjective well-being complement one another, with joyfulness and self-acceptance reinforcing one another, or sadness and lack of purpose, forming a vicious cycle. This is what we might expect. But it is possible for people to compensate for the lack of one type of well-being with the presence of another. For instance, people who are more open to new experiences have shown high levels of psychological well-being, but not subjective well-being—they valued themselves and saw their lives as meaningful, yet still were annoyed, sad, or fearful. And many people fall into one of these mixed categories. Moreover, other studies have found that eudaimonia can trump pleasure in predicting life satisfaction, with one researcher noting that “he who dies with the most toys may or may not win, but he will not do so as happily as one who dies after a life of helping others.”<sup>13</sup> It seems that a life of caring for self and others is intrinsically worthwhile, something that people of faith have long argued.

Combining the perspectives of hedonic and eudaimonic psychology, we can see that there are many ways to understand happiness, and many routes to achieving emotional well-being. But what helps people get there?

## Paths to Happiness

One useful way to think about the factors that affect people’s happiness is to break it down into components:

$$\text{Happiness} = \text{personality set-point (50\%)} + \text{life circumstances (10\%)} \\ + \text{volitional activity (40\%)}.^{14}$$

This equation follows common sense: some level of happiness is built into people’s personalities, but life circumstances and personal choices can also impact it. And since personality is not easily changed, it makes sense

to focus energy on creating circumstances conducive to happiness and in helping people make the most of their situations—but the real challenge is how to distinguish among the three.

### *Who is happy?*

The good news is that repeatedly, research in the hedonic tradition has shown that most people are happy.<sup>15</sup> But it has also identified a large number of characteristics associated with higher subjective well-being.<sup>16</sup> For instance, demographic factors such as age, gender, class, and ethnicity tend to have weak associations with happiness. The number of friends, religiousness, leisure activity, being married, and personality features show more moderate associations. The strongest associations with subjective well-being are with gratitude, optimism, employment, frequency of sexual intercourse, and self-esteem.

These findings do not make it clear whether happiness causes these characteristics or the characteristics lead to happiness (e.g., Are happy people more likely to marry, or does marriage make people more likely to be happy?), but it is interesting to note a promising pattern: While many of the smaller effects are in personality and life circumstances beyond one's control, many of the large predictors of happiness are actually things that people can change, such as gratitude or optimism. With this in mind, researchers have focused on the potential for people to increase their own happiness.

## Daily Best Practices

Increasingly, studies of emotional well-being and happiness are recommending that people consider “daily life best practices to optimize functioning and avert significant problems.”<sup>17</sup> The practices they recommend are based on the relationships discussed above and the logic that the best way to impact people's happiness is through focusing on volitional activity.

One promising set of daily practices focuses on developing optimism. Psychologists have long known that people selectively pay attention to the negative—the bad things that happen to us result in more motivation to do something than equally strong positive events.<sup>18</sup> Thus, there is a built-in negativity bias that all human beings have, and a potential benefit for increasing everyone's optimism. The good news is that people can learn optimism through challenging their illogical beliefs that they are responsible for

bad things happening, that they are generally set up to have bad things happen to them, and that there is nothing they can change about the situation.<sup>19</sup>

While these exercises were designed to help people with especially pessimistic and self-defeating beliefs, they can also be used to prevent these beliefs from taking hold in the first place. All it takes is attention to thinking patterns or “self-talk.” For instance, when we find ourselves engaging in pessimistic thinking, we can ask ourselves questions such as:

1. What is the evidence? What evidence supports this idea? What is the evidence against this idea?
2. Is there an alternative explanation?
3. What’s the worst that could happen? Could I live through it? What is the best that could happen? What is the most realistic outcome?
4. What is the effect of my believing this automatic thought? What could be the effect of changing my thinking?
5. What should I do about it?
6. What would I tell \_\_\_\_\_ (a friend) if he or she were in the same situation?<sup>20</sup>

These questions, originally developed for the treatment of depression, are a useful antidote to pessimistic thoughts even in relatively healthy people.

Another set of exercises for promoting emotional well-being revolve around the practice of gratitude. One common feature of negative emotions is that they lead people to think again and again about what is wrong. The practice of being thankful is a very powerful way to short-circuit this cycle—it re-directs cycles of thinking toward positive things and even one’s moral obligations, highlighting ways to find benefits amidst adversity.<sup>21</sup> It is hard think about how much you hate your boss when you are thinking about how grateful you are that you got to take your son to the zoo. And in focusing more and more on the positive aspects of life, gratitude seeks to reverse the built-in negative perception bias without being naïve or self-deceptive. But gratitude takes practice—in identifying non-grateful thoughts, replacing them with grateful thoughts, and translating the feeling of gratitude into action.<sup>22</sup>

### *Happiness-promoting Environments*

While these individual exercises may be helpful in boosting emotional well-being, it is only part of the equation. From a systems perspective, it is also important to foster environments that support happiness.

While there is a great deal of research on the relationship between environmental factors and well-being, for many people, the most important system affecting well-being is the workplace. Not only is employment status strongly associated with emotional well-being, but certain characteristics of the workplace can also have important effects on individual well-being. Healthy workplaces are those in which employees have some autonomy, interpersonal contact, opportunities to use their skills, a variety of tasks, clear and reasonable goals, physical safety, supportive supervision, and adequate rewards for their work.<sup>23</sup> In fact, in CREDO's research with clergy, the most important predictors of vocational satisfaction and well-being were (1) perceived safety to make a mistake, (2) meaningfulness, and (3) the ability to use all of one's gifts. Findings such as these, which focus not only on individual experience, but also on how to promote caring and happy systems, suggest that leaders can draw from a much deeper toolbox when working to foster happiness. And these findings from the workplace can be taken directly into congregational leadership. For instance, it may do more to foster the emotional well-being of clergy and lay leaders to encourage a congregational culture that values humor in the face of mistakes than to focus on any particular problem relationships. And ministries might have more vigor if they are framed in the spiritual meaning of discerning and sharing our gifts. Moreover, this systems focus explicitly encourages leaders to focus on issues of justice and community, issues which can be ignored when focusing solely on individual efforts to promote wellness.

## **Happiness and Abundant Life**

Many psychologists would end this discussion with the practices we just discussed. But again, we must ask, "Is that all there is?" No discussion of happiness can be complete if it doesn't consider spiritual and theological points of view. In fact, in psychology there is a remarkable momentum to current discussions of happiness: scholars are beginning to quote Aristotle on ethics and recommend daily exercises to achieve true happiness. In many ways, modern positive psychology is reviving the practice of ancient philosophy that devoted itself to practicing a way of life that

could produce true happiness.<sup>24</sup> Christian spirituality came out of this very same soil, adapting ancient philosophy to open human beings toward the divine.<sup>25</sup> Thus, positive psychology's momentum towards developing happiness through practices seems like a perfect example of the theological principle that the natural human quest for happiness will inevitably need an answer in the supernatural wisdom of God's revelation in Christ.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Vision of God*

Given the strong affinity between positive psychology and ancient ethics, especially in the work of Aristotle, it is instructive to look at how the greatest Christian student of Aristotle relates the human quest for happiness to the spiritual quest for beatitude. In book II-I of his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas takes on the issue of happiness directly.<sup>27</sup>

First, he considers whether or not happiness exists in pleasure (which we might call the hedonic psychology hypothesis). He notes that delight is not happiness itself but is accidental to it—a result of resting in the fullness of the Good—and thus it will always accompany true happiness, but is not the same thing. In fact, in this life, delight can become a distraction from the true pursuit of happiness, because we can become stuck enjoying a lesser good—whether it be chocolate, success, or “spiritual” experiences—instead of moving on to something greater.

So what is true happiness? Aquinas suggests that happiness exists in the vision of God—it is that perfection, granted to us by grace, where we can rest in knowing and seeing God face to face, mystically united to God. In this state of blessedness, there is nothing more for us to seek, because we have this highest goal for which we were created. But only the good—those infused with the virtue of love—can see God, for to see God is to love God, which is to love the good. So Aquinas links true happiness with goodness, just as in the beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Matthew 5:8) Happiness is invariably ethical. And while Aquinas notes that perfect and true happiness cannot be had in this life, he contends that a certain participation in this true happiness can be attained, and it is attained through engaging the imperfectly good things of this world led by the virtues, especially faith, hope, and love.

If happiness even in this life involves goodness, then consideration of emotional well-being is in some ways inseparable from consideration of spiritual well-being. And lack of attention to the moral and the spiritual is likely to prevent us from achieving true happiness in this life. Joy is a fruit of the spirit, as Paul would remind us (Galatians 5:22) and there are

several moral and spiritual concerns that can be thwarted by an exclusive focus on emotional well-being. Balanced emotions do not guarantee an attention to justice. Self-acceptance can easily devolve into self-indulgence. The pursuit of delight outside of the greater pursuit of God can lead to gluttony or lustfulness. And gratitude is ultimately directed to God.

### *Worshipful Life*

But Aquinas's account also notes that paying attention to the spirit without care for the senses and body is just as fruitless. Later in his discussion of happiness, he notes that a body is necessary for full happiness, since human beings were created to be embodied.<sup>28</sup> So in pursuing spiritual well-being, we should not neglect emotional well-being—we are not angels, but embodied souls. And when understood within the broader context of a life oriented to life in the Spirit, psychological understandings of emotional well-being are invaluable aids to honoring the body and mind given to us in creation.

So how does emotional well-being fit in? It is part of a whole, and not separate from the abundant life promised to followers of Jesus. For our joy is made complete when we share in Christ's joy, abiding in the Father's love. (John 15:10-11) Somehow, we won't be truly happy unless we are in love with God and share that love with the world. In turn, the emotional well-being that we cultivate bears witness to the glory of the God we love. As Irenaeus of Lyons summarizes these mysteries: "the glory of God is a [human being] fully alive; and the true life of [human beings] consists in beholding God."<sup>29</sup> Emotional well-being is part of a life best described as complete worship,<sup>30</sup> where the embodied human being's true joy comes through glimpses of God in daily life and in responding to them in gratitude.

So happiness here is inextricably linked with happiness hereafter. Emotional well-being is to be cultivated precisely because it is in service to spiritual ends, and both are necessary for the life abundant. So cultivate daily practices for emotional well-being and think about the ways in which you can pursue the many facets of well-being in your own life and in those of others. And as you do this, become open through these practices to the true source of joy. For then, your joy will be complete.



## Notes

1. Martin E. P. Seligman and others. 2005. Positive psychology progress: empirical validation of interventions, *American Psychologist* 60 no. (5) 410–421.
2. Robert K. Conyne, *Preventive Counseling: Helping People to Become Empowered in Systems and Settings (2nd Ed.)* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004) 236.
3. Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. 2000. Positive psychology: an introduction *American Psychologist* 55: 1, 5–14.
4. David Watson, Positive affectivity: the disposition to experience pleasurable emotional states, C. R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 106–119. In *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, eds.
5. Leslie J. Francis, P. Kaldor, M. Robbins, and K. Castle. 2005. Happy but exhausted? work-related psychological health among clergy. *Pastoral Science*, 24, 101–120.
6. N. Bradburn, *The Structure of Psychological Well-being* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).
7. Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan. 2008. “Hedonia, eudaimonia, and well-being: an introduction,” 1989. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9. 1, 1–11.
8. C. Ryff. Happiness is everything, or is it?: explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 1069–1081.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Extended descriptions of these six dimensions can be found in Carol D. Ryff and Corey L. Keyes. 1995. The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, 719–727.
12. Corey L. M. Keyes, Dov Shmotkin and Carol D. Ryff. 2002. Optimizing well-being: the empirical encounter of two traditions, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 6, 1007–1022.
13. Ibid., 7.9
14. Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon M. Sheldon and David Schkade. 2005. Pursuing happiness: the architecture of sustainable change, *Review of General Psychology*, 9.(2), 111–131. The percentages are based on the amount of variation in happiness that each factor tends to account for in empirical studies.
15. Ed Diener and Carol Diener. 1996. Most people are happy. *Psychological Science* 7, (3), 181–185.
16. *Peterson's Primer in Positive Psychology*, 386, 92 gives a useful table summarizing this research. It is worth noting that these results are derived from the more dominant hedonic approach. Eudaimonic psychology has tended to focus on demographic and social factors and less on those areas in which personal volition comes into play.
17. Conyne, *Preventive Counseling*, 36.
18. Tiffany A. Ito and John T. Cacioppo, The psychophysiology of utility appraisals In *Well-being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, eds. Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener and Norbert Schwarz, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 470–488.
19. Aaron T. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy of Depression* (New York: Guilford Press, 1979) calls this set of beliefs the “depressive triad” for its commonality among those struggling with clinical depression.
20. Judith S. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 109.

21. Robert A. Emmons and Charles M. Shelton, *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, eds. C. R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 459–471.
22. Ibid.
23. Peter Warr, “Well-being and the Workplace” in *Well-being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, eds. Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener and Norbert Schwarz (New York, NY, US: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 392–412.
24. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* [Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique.], ed. Arnold Ira Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).
25. Ibid.
26. This is a guiding principle of Aquinas and much of Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox theology. Reformed and Lutheran theologians tend to be suspicious of any claims that human knowledge could know anything that could prepare for or point to the revelation of God in Christ. But one doesn’t need to accept secular psychology as *preparatio evangelica* to see that it will inevitably need to engage questions of spirituality and life’s ultimate meaning that Christianity has strong claims about from revelation.
27. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Dominicans of the English Province, 1st complete American ed. (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947).
28. Ibid., II–I.Q4.5.
29. Irenaeus of Lyons, “Against Heresies” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, eds. Alexander Roberts and others (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1900), IV.XX.7.
30. Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum*, Pbk. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991).