

James L. Holly, M.D.

The Foundation of Health: Happiness

By James L. Holly, MD

Your Life Your Health

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Southeast Texas Medical Associates, as part of its mission statement, wishes to be a source of health and medical education for our friends and neighbors in Southeast Texas. While all health care providers focus on the treatment of illnesses, more and more health professionals, including those at SETMA, are focusing on preventive health issues. At SETMA, we teach our patients about diet, exercise, and other preventive health and "health maintenance" opportunities.

This commitment has led me to think about things which impact our lives in a beneficial, all of which are confirmed by or explained by science. This is how we have come to our topic today.

From the world of music, we got the cliché "Don't worry - Be happy". This is a simple but catchy phrase which has more meaning than first appears. If one thinks a little deeper, this title is profound.

Since ancient times, the health benefits of a positive attitude have been recognized. Aristotle, the great teacher and philosopher of the Greeks, said, "The key for a long life is happiness but for a great life is honor". For the sake of this article, let's just concentrate on phrase, "The key for a long life is happiness."

In his book, *If Aristotle Ran General Motors*, philosopher and business consultant, Tom Morris, discussed Aristotle's concept of "happiness." He quoted a modern interpretation of that concept when he said, "Happiness is not a station that you arrive at, but a manner of traveling." (Margaret Lee Runbeck) Another Greek philosopher understood that happiness did not derive from money, fame or idleness. He said, ""Many who seem to be struggling with adversity are happy; many, amid great affluence, are utterly miserable." (Publius Cornelius Tacitus)

I believe Aristotle recognized the same principle as many people after him: "People who are content and happy in life tend to live longer than people who aren't." And, happiness does not come from simply having no problems in your life and/or from being in perfect health.

For health care providers, this simple observation is profound, because it establishes that one of the most important factors in longevity is "happiness."

Having said this, like a physicist in his lab, or a mathematician on his computer, one can devise a formula for maintaining, regaining or sustaining your life and health. It is a scientific fact that people who are positive in their attitude and who have a purpose for life - those people who are "happy" -- live "well-er" than chronically sad and negative people. We also know that healthy people live longer than unhealthy people - now that's a profound comment, don't you think?

Therefore, our formula for a long life would go like this: Happiness + Life = Health. Interestingly, the elements of this formula can be interchanged in various different ways, but the result is pretty much the same. The inference of this formula is the same as what Aristotle and others said a couple of thousand years ago, i.e., "Happy people tend be healthier and consequently live longer."

In order to understand what happiness is, we may look at many definitions, or you can have your own. As a man of science, happiness is an objective thing. Whatever definition you use, they are all tied together or attached together like beads on a chain and the chain is called "Desire."

"Desire" is probably the single most important emotion for humanity. It is undoubtedly the single biggest factor that has shaped history. It made us come out of the caves and it someday will take us to the distant stars. Happiness, in its crudest form, is a "Desire to live." Happiness gives us the strength, vitality and flexibility to pursue life with vigor. Happiness is also addictive, because once you experience it, you are hooked. You will strive to be happy again. And if your decisions make you face difficulties, that will not affect your happiness.

Often people mistakenly think that happiness is synonymous with pleasure. Morris discussed this and said, "It's the view that happiness is pleasure that's behind the nearly frantic modern quest for money and things." He then quotes John Steinbeck who said, "Money's easy to make, if it's money you want. But with few exceptions people don't want money. They want luxury and they want love and they want admiration."

Aristotle once judged that the equating of happiness with pleasure is a view fit for grazing cattle but not human beings. Albert Einstein echoed Aristotle when he said, "In this sense I have never looked upon ease and happiness as ends in themselves - such an ethical basis, I call more proper for a herd of swine."

Finally, Morris arrives at the "real" definition of happiness, "Happiness is participation in something fulfilling." In his essay *De Finibus*, the Roman statesman and practical philosopher, Cicero, proclaimed, "The soul ever yearns to be doing something." And, the modern philosopher of recreation and entertainment, Walt Disney said, "I've always been bored with just making money. I've wanted to do things. I wanted to build things. Get something going. I'm not like some people who worship money as something you've got to have piled up in a big pile somewhere. I've only thought of money in one way, and that is to do something with

it...I don't think there is a thing that I own that I will ever get the benefit of, except through doing things with it."

Morris concludes with the statement, "Happiness never exists in passivity. It is in fact a dynamic phenomenon of participation in something that brings fulfillment. At its best, it is accompanied by pleasure and a good measure of inner peace...And one of the greatest pleasures in life is active fulfillment from a job well done."

There is no doubt, people, content and happy in their life, tend take better care of themselves. They eat better, exercise more and take appropriate recommendations from professionals, when needed. It's not a coincidence, according to Ian Gregory, who has written one of the most respected books on psychiatry, that suicide incidence is the highest among people that have "depression" and demographically among men that are widowed or otherwise single in their 60s and up. Needless to say unhappiness would be highest in the list of the things that are common among both.

If according to our formula "happiness is health," it should be evident that health does not come from a pill bottle, or a jog around the block, or even low- fat meal with a diet coke. It comes from the desire to exist purposefully, which is conducive to longevity. And, in the larger scheme of things all the afore- mentioned steps, i.e. diet, exercise vitamins, etc., play their role. Health initiatives are tools in our hands which like Michelangelo help us transform a useless block of stone into breathtaking statues.

But even Michelangelo affirmed our belief that pleasure and idleness do not bring happiness. He said, "It is only well with me when I have a chisel in my hand." And, my friends, life is the most precious and the most beautiful statue time has ever witnessed.

Let's talk about a few scientific facts that support our theory about happiness, health and a long life. Neurochemicals analysis and brain mapping have shown that our emotions are controlled in the middle part of the brain, known as the Hippocampus area. Interestingly enough, these areas are loosely divided into "Reward and punishment areas." Needless to say, stimulating the reward areas makes us happy and stimulation of the punishment area gives us sorrow and pain.

The neurochemicals which play a major role in this process are called "Endorphins." Endorphins play a pivotal role in the reward areas, as well as pain control areas of the brain. Happy people have higher levels of endorphins. The brains in happy people are more active with a lesser degree of neurochemical imbalance and with more appropriate electrical rhythms.

So what is the chicken and what is the egg? Do happy people produce more endorphins or do people that have more endorphins become happy. My belief is simple. Our Creator would not have gone through all this trouble, if living organisms are not able to influence these areas.

How can we increase our "endorphins?" How can we "endorphin-ize" ourselves? Since Happiness is one of the most important factors in the health and longevity of life, then let's endorphin-ize ourselves. The major way we do that is with purposeful activity. Whether that is exercise, or participating in an exciting business, or building a family or home - not a house, -- but a home, humans are happier when they are busy, active and productive.

It's also worth knowing that happiness is contagious. One happy person makes a couple of other people happy, too. Nothing makes me happier than to see a couple of smiling faces walk into my clinic. And, if they don't walk in with one, my goal is to see that they leave with one. That's the prescription of health - being happy and making others happy. It beats hands down writing prescriptions for antibiotics and aspirin.

So use laughter as your medicine. Give that medicine to other people. Happiness has no copy rights, no patents and definitely no shelf life. In fact, there is no reported case of "happy overdose." Do not use happiness sparingly but definitely use it in the affected areas of your life and in the affected areas of the lives of others. You can use it with an empty stomach, or with a full one.

You can believe what I am talking about because, after all "It's just what the doctor ordered."