In pursuit of happiness

There is a lot more to leading a happy life than finding pleasure and avoiding pain, and perhaps that is what makes us human, says **Michael Steger**

HUMANS have long wondered how to achieve happiness. We have come up with many answers to this question, but unfortunately they often conflict. One ancient dichotomy is particularly important to modern happiness research. Aristotle argued that happiness lay in maximising one's personal excellence or "virtue", and in using that virtue in the service of one's community. In contrast, his predecessor Aristippus argued that happiness is all about maximising pleasure and minimising pain. To these basic traditions we can add a host of religious, philosophical and self-help suggestions that vary from secretly obsessing over one's desires to acquiring a sexier body.

In a paper published last month in *Journal of Research in Personality* (vol 42, p 22), my collaborators and I tried to assess whether either Aristotle or Aristippus were right. We asked students to complete daily logs which indicated whether they had engaged in virtue-building activities (like writing down their goals or volunteering) or pleasure-seeking activities (like using drugs or alcohol or going for a nice long walk). They also filled in daily questionnaires designed to indicate how happy they were. We found that, as Aristotle argued 2400 years ago, the more virtue-buildling activities people engaged in, the happier they said they were both on the day in question and on the following day. Perhaps surprisingly, there was no relationship between pleasure-seeking and happiness.

These findings are no more than a correlation, but they hint at a bigger story. I think, like many psychologists before me, that virtue-building is an important road to happiness because under reasonably favourable conditions people will relentlessly pursue "growth" in both their abilities and their understanding of the world around them. Further, I think an argument can be made that this drive for growth is rooted in our evolution.

Proponents of pleasure-based happiness often argue that organisms have developed strong biological systems to help them avoid dangerous things and acquire helpful ones. Encountering something good for us will cause us to experience a desirable state of pleasure; something bad will lead to an aversive state of pain. Our ancestors may have leveraged these pain and pleasure systems to help motivate the more complex behaviours required within the social groups in which they evolved.

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The trouble with this explanation is that it fails to account for why people invest seemingly unwise amounts of resources, energy and time in pursuits that have little to do with survival. Cave paintings adorning obscure crannies, the construction of great cathedrals, and our societal willingness to provide artists (and academic psychologists) with a livelihood all point to a thirst for something greater than momentary pleasure. It seems plausible that what marks our species is the chase for something more than immediate gratification. We seem endowed with impulses to reach for something more than the moment – and to keep reaching. We don't stop at locating a source of food; we learn to cultivate that crop or foster those livestock. We don't stop at lauding a desirable personal characteristic; we found schools to teach it to others. Perhaps people evolved to avoid complacency, and as a result we may be wired to respond positively to virtue-building growth.

Yet it doesn't take much insight to note that pleasure is highly motivating, and that people often forgo important ends to avoid a little pain. Many life-threatening medical conditions are left unassessed because of the physical or psychological pain associated with their diagnosis and treatment. Pain hurts, pleasure is sweet. Few would cherish a life filled with painful or pleasureless achievements. With the demands of pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance and the motivation to improve and grow both potentially rooted in our evolution, the human animal needs to find a way to balance the two.

What does this imply for the way our organisations and public institutions can best support people's pursuit of both pleasure and growth? I believe that important clues can be found through research on the meaning that life holds for us. Why is your life the way it is? Do you understand what you're doing here, among these people? What are you living for? If we can confidently answer such questions, we may feel life is meaningful because we comprehend our lives and we have a purpose. Research has strongly linked happiness to such meaning.

As individuals and within organisations and institutions, we should have conversations about meaning and purpose. We should invite a vocabulary that addresses people's dreams, the obstacles they have overcome, and the places they have yet to get to. For example, employees might be encouraged to articulate how jobs could be an opportunity to work toward a broader purpose in their lives. Instead of merely billing for hours, employees working purposefully would be also be investing in their own growth. In this way people may be better able to invest in their future selves. ●

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