

You will always be happier than your boss

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You probably came to this article with a preconceived idea that the title of this article is not true or maybe. You will be surprised that this title is supported by factual findings from scientific research.

The secret in social science is there are no objective metrics for happiness. My objective metric for whether you are happy is whether you tell me you are happy through a survey. I can also perform text analysis of what you note down and see positive words pop out or I can inquire from your friends and family members. If we can figure out what happy people do differently, then we can do causal studies to make not-so-happy people do those things, and then we can see if they get happier.

The shocking collection of findings coming out of the happiness research indicates that our intuitions are just as wrong when it comes to what will make us happy. There are many things that we are much persuaded to seek out, thinking they are going to make us happier, but in actual sense, they do not make us happy. At least not the way we think. We lack motivational capacities to go after the things that really do matter a lot for our happiness.

Things that everybody thinks makes them happy that don't

A big one is money. More often than not, the majority of job seekers pick their job based on salary scope. It is true that more money makes you happier if you are living below the poverty line. Research by Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton (2010), two Nobel Prize-winning economists, shows that more money will make you happier up until annual income of around \$75,000. Then at that point, even doubling or tripling your remuneration is not going to improve your well-being or buy you happiness.

Another one is material goods. We think a new electronic gadget or a brand-new car will make us feel good. It will for a very short period but then we adapt, and get used to it much more quickly than we think. Oh, and here's one that is very salient for my students. We think good grades will make us happier. It turns out there is a correlation between high school grades and well-being, but it is a negative correlation. That is, the kids who get the best grades are the most miserable. They also have the lowest levels of self-esteem and the lowest levels of optimism.

Another funny misconception we have is that we think we are a lot happier in leisure than at work. However, with many jobs, work gives you a certain kind of flow, and you actually enjoy it more than watching TV and other kinds of leisure. There are studies showing that when you are at work, you are doing something interesting, and you say you feel good. However, when I ask how you feel when you are at home at leisure, you might be bored scrolling through Netflix and feeling somewhat apathetic.

So what is it that make us happy that we neglecting?

One big thing we neglect is the importance of free time. There is a lot of research on what scientists call time affluence. Work by Ashley Whillans, a professor at Harvard Business School, shows that the more we give up money to get time, the happier we are. Therefore, if you pay people to do your laundry or use your money in other ways to get more free time, you will be happier. The problem is that we often give up time to get money, so we get it backward

Another big predictor of happiness is how much time you spend with other people and how much time you spend with the people you care about. There is also lots of work showing that we are happier when we are being other-oriented — caring about others more than we are. People who give more to charity and people who spend more time volunteering tend to be happier than people who do not [this result is controlled for income].

What can we do to lead ourselves to happiness-inducing behaviours?

Oftentimes people think there is some tension between making workers happy versus having workers who achieve the bottom line. All the studies of happiness suggest that happy people perform better. They are more creative. They are more willing to put in time at work. Companies often think the only way to get people to work harder is to pay them more. There are so many other ways to motivate people. Having people feel that they are in it together, or giving them a job that has meaning, or even expressing gratitude to workers. A study by Adam Grant (2010) of Wharton Business School showed that call centre workers double their rate of calls after a supervisor comes in and expresses gratitude for what they are doing.

Making money for some anonymous stockholders is not a motivation that resonates with our internal psychology that well. Therefore, there might be better ways to motivate people. There is work by Marty Seligman (2014) at the University of Pennsylvania and colleagues on character strengths — engaging in activities that feel good to you. Do you care about learning? Do you care about helping people? Research suggests that people are happiest at their job and perform best when they are thinking about their job in terms of maximizing their strengths. Take someone whose job it is to, say, clean toilets. It does not sound all that fun. However, when janitors reframe their job to fit with their strengths, they enjoy it more. So if you're a janitor, say, in a hospital, and you think, "every toilet I clean is going to help a kid with cancer," now all of a sudden you not only love the job but you perform it better. If you work at a pharmaceutical company, you can focus on selling more drugs this quarter, or you can focus on the fact that you are producing drugs that are going to help people with horrible diseases. Those kinds of motivations are often much more powerful than paying somebody a couple extra hundred dollars a week

Conclusion

High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being. This means that your boss does not become necessarily happy because he earns more than you do.

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