

THE HAPPINESS CHALLENGE

Happiness:

What It Is, How We Achieve It

PART 1 OF A 3-PART HAPPINESS LEARNING PROGRAM

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Welcome to the Happiness Challenge

To get started, please introduce yourself to your partner. The two of you were paired up because growth doesn't happen in a vacuum. You are each other's 'accountability partners.' So say hello, get to know one another briefly, and then you can begin learning.

Ready? Let's get started...



Let's Ask Webster

Before we delve any further, let's take a moment to define what the word "happiness" means by taking a peek into a good ol' fashioned dictionary:

Happiness

hap·pi·ness | \ 'ha-pē-nés

Definition of happiness (Merriam-Webster):

- 1a. A state of well-being or contentment; joy
- 1b. A pleasurable or satisfying experience
2. Felicity; aptness
3. Good fortune; prosperity



Discussion Question:

Take a minute to discuss these definitions with your partner. Do you agree with them? You or your study partner may define happiness differently, so it's important to make sure you're starting off on the same page. If none of the definitions above resonate with you, discuss how you would define happiness.

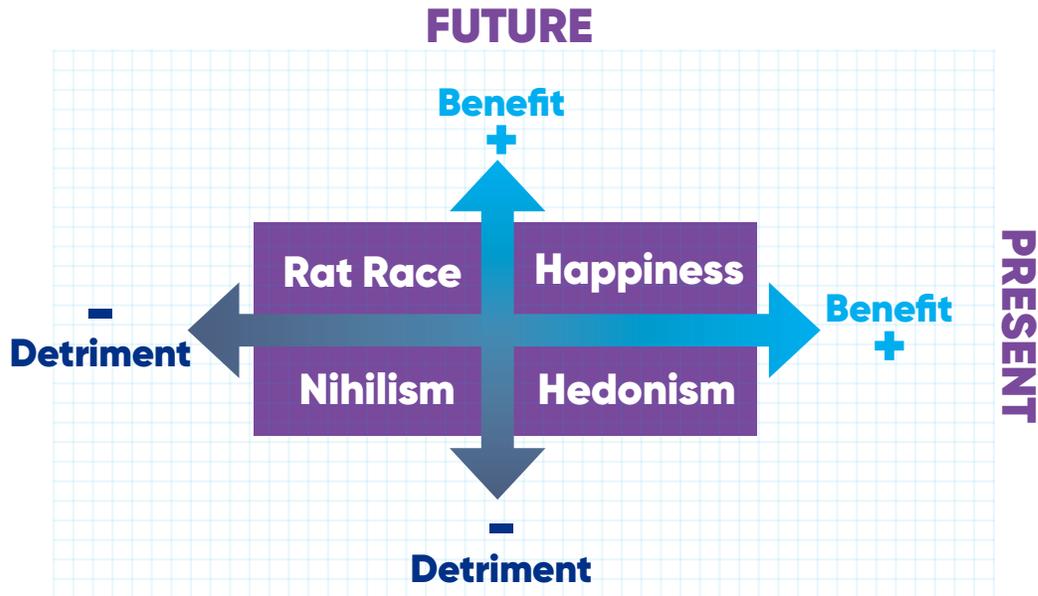


Take It Home:

Please list a few of the things that make you happy. Write them down - nothing is too small (or too big) to include. (Note: If writing things down isn't your speed, that's okay too. Just take a moment to consider what brings you joy.)



Let's Ask Ben-Shahar



Tal Ben Shahar,¹ a Harvard University Professor who gained acclaim for his work on happiness, breaks people down into four general types, with only one of the types achieving happiness. We'll leave the last one, true happiness, for later.

The Rat-Racer - The rat-racer doesn't make time to enjoy life in the present. He works hard to achieve a goal that he believes will make him happier in the future.

The Hedonist - The hedonist primarily chases things that will make him happy in the present and flees from anything that requires hard work – even if it could lead to future happiness.

The Nihilist - The nihilist neither enjoys the present moment, nor has a sense of future purpose. He negates any meaning or value in the world and sees happiness as a lost cause.



Discussion Question:

Do you identify with any of these types? (You might feel that you are a blend of a few.) Why do you think these approaches to finding happiness may fail?

¹ Tal Ben Shahar, Happiness Model: <https://www.toolshero.com/psychology/happiness-model/>



Let's Ask the Torah



Source 1: Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddishin 4:12

ר' חזקיה ר' כהן בשם רב עתיד אדם ליתן דין וחשבון על כל מה שראת עינו ולא אכל רבי לעזר חשש להדא שמועתא ומצמית ליה פריטין ואכיל בהון מכל מילה חדא בשתא.

In the future, one will have to account for all that his eyes saw and he didn't eat. Rav Lazer was careful [to follow this teaching] and set aside money to eat from every type of food once a year.



Discussion Question:

How does this teaching differ from the Hedonist's approach to pleasure?



Source 2: Midrash, Kohelet Rabbah, 1:13

אמר רבי יודן בשם רבי איבו "אין אדם יוצא מן העולם ויחצי תאוותו בידו, אלא אן אית ליה מאה בעי למעבד יתהון תרתין מאון, ואן אית ליה תרתין מאון בעי למעבד יתהון ארבעה מאה."

No man leaves this world with half his desires (ta'avato) fulfilled: if he has a 100, he wants 200, if he has 200 he wants to make them into 400.

This Midrash is making a powerful statement we can all relate to: our desires rarely satiate us for long. It is a slippery slope, and there'll always be something new we strive for or want to obtain.



Source 3: Mishna, Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot), 4:28

רבי אלעזר הקפרא אומר, הקנאה והתאוה והכבוד מוציאים את האדם מן העולם:

Rabbi Elazar HaKappara says, envy, [the pursuit of] desires (ta'ava), and honor remove a person from the world.



Explanation:

The Mishna warns us that desire *removes a person from the world*. How so? When a person is preoccupied with comforts and short-term pleasures, he loses sight of life and the benefits that hard work can help him achieve in the long run.

People may think, "I'll be happy when I'm married!" or "I'll be happy when my kids learn to show me some respect!" We tend to think there are things we must have before we can be happy. The difficulty is that once we achieve those goals or build those relationships, we may not be satisfied with them for long. The happiness can quickly wane, and we

then set our eyes on a new "thing" that will make us happy. It is mindsets like this that can rob us of seeing the good in our lives right now.



Take it Home:

Are there times you've gone down that slippery slope of chasing comfort? Have you ever ignored something that could contribute to your future happiness because you were afraid of the sacrifice it would take?



Source 4: Maimonides, De'ot 3:1

שָׁמָּא יֵאמֵר אָדָם... הוֹאִיל וְהִקְנָאָה וְהִתְאַוָּה וְהִכְבוּד וְכִיּוּצָא בְּהֵם דְּרַךְ רָעָה הֵן וּמוֹצִיאִין אֶת הָאָדָם מִן הָעוֹלָם. אֶפְרָשׁ מֵהֶן בְּיוֹתֵר וְאֶתְרַחֵק לְצַד הָאֲחֵרוֹן. עַד שֶׁלֹּא יֵאָכֵל בֶּשָׂר וְלֹא יִשְׁתֶּה יַיִן וְלֹא יִשָּׂא אִשָּׁה וְלֹא יֵשֵׁב בְּדִירָה נְאָה וְלֹא יִלְבֹּשׁ מְלִבוּשׁ נְאָה... גַּם זֶה דְּרַךְ רָעָה הִיא וְאֲסוּר לִילֵךְ בָּהּ. הַמְהֵלֵךְ בְּדִרְכָּךְ זֶה נִקְרָא חוֹטֵא.

A person may say, "Since envy, [the pursuit of] desire and honor, and the like, are a wrong path and remove a person from the world, maybe I should completely distance myself from them and take the opposite extreme; I won't eat meat, drink wine, or get married, etc." This, too, is the wrong path and is forbidden. Someone who completely abstains from these things is considered a sinner.



True Happiness

You may feel enlightened right now. You may feel confused. Does pursuing pleasure make us happy or not?? The Talmud provides an invaluable insight into achieving true happiness. The following is presented in the form of an allegory:



Source 5a: Talmud, Sukkah 48b

הִנְהוּ תְּרֵי מִיָּנִים, חַד שְׂמִיָּה: 'שִׁשׁוֹן', וְחַד שְׂמִיָּה: 'שְׂמִיָּה'. אָמַר לִיה שִׁשׁוֹן לְשְׂמִיָּה: אֲנִי עַדִּיפְנָא מִיָּנָה, דְּכִתִּיב: (ישעיה לה:י) "שִׁשׁוֹן וְשְׂמִיָּה יִשְׁיִגוּ" וְגו'. אָמַר לִיה שְׂמִיָּה לְשִׁשׁוֹן: אֲנִי עַדִּיפְנָא מִיָּנָה, דְּכִתִּיב: (אסתר ח:יז) "שְׂמִיָּה וְשִׁשׁוֹן לְיְהוּדִים"

There were two heretics, one named Sasson (Hebrew for joy) and one named Simcha (Hebrew for happiness). Sasson said to Simcha, "The Torah considers me more important than you, as it says (in Isaiah regarding the Messianic Era), "They will attain joy [sasson] and happiness [simcha]," (mentioning the word 'sasson' before the word 'simcha'). Simcha replied to Sasson, "[Actually,] the Torah considers me more important than you, as it says (in the story of Purim, after the Jews gained freedom from oppression), "There was happiness [simcha] and joy [sasson] for the Jews,"² mentioning simcha before sasson.

2 Megillat Esther 8:17



Discussion Questions:

1. Sasson and Simcha's dialogue conveys a message about the Jewish approach to happiness. What might the two people in the story represent?
2. Why might Sasson and Simcha, the two parties in the discussion, be labeled as heretics? What's wrong with their perspective?

Let's take a look at the Shem MiShmuel, a prolific early 20th-century rabbinic commentator who helps us answer these questions:



Source 5b: Shem M'Shmuel, Sukkot, 5672 (loose translation)

The term 'simcha' implies gradual, meditative happiness, while the term 'sasson' refers to spontaneous joy. The figurative 'Sasson' argued that joy needs to be jump-started by indulging in random, joyful experiences. Longer-term happiness would flow from there. On the other hand, 'Simcha' argued that happiness is a process that needs to be cultivated over time.

In truth, there's an advantage and disadvantage to each approach, and both are necessary. An unexpected, sudden inspiration can trigger internal change and set a person on a path to sustained positivity. On the other hand, there's the risk of 'easy-come, easy go.' Slow and gradual work on building positivity may be more sustainable, but it can lack excitement.



Explanation:

Sasson can be related to the Hedonist. Both Sasson and the Hedonist focus on the 'now,' relying on more immediately accessible forms of excitement to help them achieve happiness. Simcha can be related to the Rat-Racer – they both focus on the future and work towards a goal that they believe will bring them happiness in the future. Ultimately, both approaches don't work.

So, if one were to combine the two approaches, focusing on what makes us happy in the present and on that which gives us long-term joy, we'd be happy, right?

The Talmud says, no.

In branding Simcha and Sasson as heretics, the Talmud is calling attention to the idea that there is a serious problem with being preoccupied with happiness – regardless of how one achieves it. Yes, we should take positive steps to be happy, but we can become selfish, or misguided if the decisions that we make in our lives are solely guided by a desire to feel happy. Happiness is a byproduct of a life focused on having meaning in each choice, a connection to a larger purpose, and of course bringing joy to others.



Source 6: Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *The Thinking Jewish Teenager's Guide to Life*

Real happiness is what you experience when you are doing what you should be doing. When you are moving clearly along your own road, your own unique path, to your unique destination, you experience real happiness. When you are moving along the path that leads to yourself, to the deep discovery of who you really are, when you are building the essence of your own personality and creating yourself a deep happiness wells up within you. The journey does not cause happiness- the journey is the happiness itself.



Time to Challenge Yourself:

As we have seen, the Jewish view on happiness involves so much more than any dictionary definition. To deepen your understanding of the concepts you've learned, choose ONE of the following challenges to help you apply them. Tell your partner what you chose, and make sure to follow up with one another next week to see how each of you did:

- **Short term pleasure:** Choose one pleasure each day to focus on, and deepen your experience in the moment.
- **Long term goal:** Take one small action that will bring you closer to a long term goal, even if it is inconvenient, painful, or involves forgoing on a short-term pleasure. It might be a habit you need to find a healthy replacement for or a relationship that needs mending that you've been pushing off. Whatever it is, take one small step.
- **Your personal mission:** Write down what you would like to accomplish in your lifetime and the type of person you want to be. In other words, put your destination into the GPS. Once your mission is clear, you're on the road to enjoying the journey for the rest of your life.

