The Pursuit of Happiness, Contentment and Meaning in Life Without Pushing Big Gears

A discussion about happiness needs to begin with how we define it in our culture. The literature shows that happiness tends to be culturally defined— and some experience happiness as momentary and fleeting. So—it would be difficult to sustain happiness over a long period of time. I suspect that sustaining contentment is the preferred condition. Contentment interspersed with fleeting moments of happiness is the ideal. Further—a discussion of happiness and contentment in life includes understanding how it is related to one’s philosophy of life.

Happiness and Contentment in Life is Related to Your Philosophy of Life

Although this can be a difficult question—you must ask yourself what is your philosophy of life? A philosophy of life--- one that explains good and evil, why millions perish in the Holocaust, why genocide occurs and why there are miracles and good, virtuous people is indispensable to cultivating a happy or unhappy life. If we reacted emotionally to all the horror and anguish people suffer in the world—we would be melancholic and unhappy for an indefinite period of time. Tragically—there is enough suffering in the world to keep one unhappy and the injustice committed daily at the hands of brutal regimes and dictators.

In relation to our own lives, we cannot let each day’s disappointments discourage us, and by reacting emotionally it would be difficult to recover without feeling anxious and fearful to wake up the next day. Adopting a sustaining and stable philosophy of life inoculates us from bleeding every day in our lives—and enables us to frame disappointments in perspective—to perceive these troubling events in light of the big picture.

You can frame your outlook on life to religion/faith if you like, or you can have a philosophy of life rooted in a secular view. The reason it is critical to articulate your philosophy of life is because it will influence how you interpret good and bad events in your life. Your emotional reactions to desirable and undesirable events in life are determined by what you attribute them to. So—in the end, it’s you that determines how much distress or unhappiness an event will have on you. A philosophy of life needs to sustain you—for the long ride in the saddle and not one you conveniently or arbitrarily create to overcome a single, distressing event. It needs to be deeply meaningful for you and enduring—one that you consistently use to understand why events occur in your life and the world. You can define this philosophy of life as an enduring theory that explains life’s events. If you cannot explain your philosophy of life, you will more likely find it difficult to make sense of this absurd, seemingly meaningless world you live in. You will also be susceptible to interpreting events in a negative way that may leave you unhappy living in this uncertain, arbitrary, subjective world.

What is Your Philosophy of Life?

It was Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi death camps who emphasized the role of meaning and purpose in life to sustain the will to live. Frankl endured the agony of being a death camp prisoner and from his work, we draw how critical meaning and purpose is for contentment in life. So—where do we draw meaning and purpose in life from? As human beings living in a democracy, we enjoy institutions and systems of meaning available to us—from work, family, relationships and religion.

Attaining Meaning and Purpose in Our Life Spheres and its Relationship to Contentment

If you can assert your work is meaningful for you, then you are fortunate to be in an environment that is fitting for you. You are in a position that pulls for your capabilities, talents and your work values are nicely aligned with the organization that employs you. The compensation may or may not be enough for you—but since you have meaningful work, it isn’t the most important element for you. You are content with your occupation—whether it carries occupational prestige or not. Obviously, we are all drawn to certain occupations for different reasons. Some of us search for work with high income and prestige—and some look for work that pays less and without prestige—but work that holds opportunity for personal meaning. Where are you?

In terms of our personal relationships, meaning is derived when we feel valued, worthwhile and fulfilled in roles we assume. As a parent, little is more precious than seeing your child’s innocent smile after learning how to ride his/her bicycle alone for the first time. Human beings need self-esteem maintenance—derived from knowing they are loved, valued and indispensable to others. We need to know we belong to our families, organizations we work for and to the world. In the big picture—we need to know we’re more than just organisms occupying space in the world. Rather—we are organisms with substance and we belong to this world in a significant way.

A Noble, Worthwhile Endeavor: Volunteering

A way to acquire meaning and purpose in life is to dedicate time to a noble, worthwhile cause dear to your heart. To manage the pervasive existential angst in all of us—we need to dedicate ourselves to a cause that transcends our immediate small place in the world. One can draw meaning and purpose by dedicating time to support an agency that helps abolish world hunger or volunteering at a food bank to feed the disenfranchised. The opportunities to engender meaning and purpose in life through dedication to a cause that makes a difference in people lives are endless.

I Want You to Make Me Happy

For some individuals, happiness is something to be gained from others. In other words, individuals want to be made happy—expecting others to purchase materials for them or to provide them with opportunities to experience happiness. These individuals undoubtedly have been conditioned to expect happiness to be derived from external agents. I think happiness or contentment needs to be internally derived—meaning it comes from inside of you and not an external agent acting on you to create happiness.