



Happiness and Success

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Science frequently seems to be in the business of researching common-sense sayings. That, is highly trained specialists spend their time, and your tax to be true—even if we don't follow them. Take, for example, the old saw that “money can't buy dollars, studying things commonly held happiness.” In recent decades, scientists have been hard at work finding out whether or not this is really true. And the result of their research is overwhelming: money can't buy happiness.

But while everybody seems to know this, millions of Americans nonetheless spend their lives in the pursuit of happiness by chasing wealth. As one researcher puts it: “The belief that high income is associated with good mood is widespread but mostly illusory.”

Now, strictly speaking, money can buy happiness of a sort. The person who just won the lottery and is jumping up and down, and hugging everyone in sight, is not secretly weeping inside; they *are* happy. Unfortunately, research shows that this wild euphoria is a cheap high. It's short lived. Once the happy lottery winner sobers up and gets accustomed to being rich, they're right back where they started.

Wealth can't change who you are. If you're difficult, irritable, unforgiving, intolerant, disloyal, and unloving when you're making a five-figure income, these same traits will undermine your happiness when you're making a six- or seven-figure income.

Of course, if you're desperately poor, if you can't feed yourself, if you can't afford to go to the doctor when you're sick, then more money makes a **big** difference. But “once people get past the level of poverty, money doesn't play a significant role in day-to-day happiness.” Research has found that “Once personal wealth exceeds about \$12,000 a year more money produces virtually no increase in life satisfaction.”

Once our basic needs are met, money contributes very little to our happiness, because it doesn't affect the things that make us unhappy day in and day out. Whether you make \$12-thousand or \$12-million a year, if your teenager is driving you up the wall...you're still being driven up the wall. Coworkers can make your life miserable on the factory line or in the boardroom. Our real troubles and rewards come from other people. They involve concerns about children, problems with intimate relations, and getting along with neighbors and coworkers.

One way to avoid this “happiness equals wealth” illusion is to get a better understanding of happiness. Happiness is frequently understood in terms of warm feelings and emotional highs. That's why we call the lottery winner happy, even if the euphoric feeling is short lived. But the ancient Greeks had an odd saying that captures a different conception of happiness: “Call no man

happy until he is dead.” By this, they didn’t mean that life is so bad one could only be happy by escaping its miseries and woes through death. Rather, what they meant was that happiness is the judgment of a whole life lived virtuously. That is, to say that a person is happy is to make a judgment of the quality of his or her character, not just to find out whether they are having pleasant feelings at any particular moment.

So, on the one hand, our contemporary understandings of happiness tend to describe short-term feelings and are based on temporary emotional highs like achieving a particular goal, or getting a raise. On the other hand, classical understandings of happiness tend to take the long-view, based on what kind of person we become and what kind of life we live.

The basic insight of this understanding of happiness is that happiness is a function of our acquiring virtuous characteristics and maintaining and developing them over the span of our lives. Indeed if, as recent research has shown, happiness is related to the quality of the human relationships we have, then the people who are excellent at maintain loving relationships at home and friendly relationships at work, will, for the most part, be happy. But in order for this to happen, people must be of a certain sort. Rather than being irritable, they must acquire the virtue of tolerance. Rather than being judgmental, they must acquire the virtue of mercy. Good friends and loved ones have the moral virtues of fidelity, justice, generosity, compassion, and so on.

The logic is clear. Many recent studies show what we have known all along: its not wealth or success that makes us happy, but the quality of our relationships with coworkers, friends and family. In order for these relationships to flourish, we must acquire the characteristics that allow them to flourish. We need to acquire the virtues. So to be happy, one must be virtuous. This is common sense. Perhaps if science someday shows it to be true, we might begin to act like we really believe it.