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## What is Happiness? | An Exploration of Science, Faith, and Mental Health

December 5, 2019



### The Veritas Forum

Shimon Edelman is a Professor of psychology at Cornell, interested in behavioral, neural, evolutionary, and computational aspects of language, vision, consciousness, and happiness. Dr. David Carreon is a psychiatrist at Stanford University and the Medical Director of Acacia Mental Health in Fremont, CA. Please like, share, subscribe to and review this podcast!

### Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast, a place where ideas and beliefs converge. What I'm really going to be watching is, which one has resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with? How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved.

Today we're here from Shimone Edelman. A psychology professor at Cornell, interested in behavioral, neural, evolutionary, and computational aspects of language, vision, consciousness, and happiness. Followed by Stanford psychiatrist and the Medical Director of Acacia Mental Health, David Carreon, as they take to the stage at Cornell and ask the question, what is happiness? An Exploration of Science, Faith, and Mental Health.

I wish the opportunity to speak to all of you. Happiness, mental health, and in an university setting specifically. So the first question I was asked to address is, given your academic background and worldview, how do you define happiness? I find the premise of the question or the introductory part a bit strange, because as far as I can tell, the world doesn't care about anyone's worldview.

So this question is a bit akin to this one, given your academic background and worldview, how do you define gravity? Or hunger? Or depression? Happiness is a bit different in the future. So what do you do? To understand how the world works, what do

you do is you do science? So very, very briefly in one slide basically. What happiness is the question for psychology, so the fundamental distinction is between two kinds of things.

The momentary or joy component, this is what you get to feel and report when you're asked, how are you right now? How happy are you right now at this moment? And the complementary aspect is more about life satisfaction. This is typically what people answer in response to questions such as how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days, kind of retrospective going back for longer if you have lived longer. So for some of us this question carries more weight.

And then that was what happiness is, and we have to ask why happiness is. And that's a question whose exploration one has to start in one place because happiness is a biological phenomenon. We have to start with evolution.

As few does, it was Dobjanski pointed out a long time ago in an open letter addressed to American teachers actually. He wrote that nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution. Few statements have rung toward in my experience in the disciplines that I'm connected to.

I feel like I'm in the intellectual connection to. So a bit more specifically here is a quote from a somewhat more recent paper by Richard Nisbett on the revolutionary underpinnings of happiness. I'll just read because I think it's a great way of putting things.

We were not designed for happiness, neither were we designed for unhappiness. Happiness is not a goal left unaccomplished by some bungling designer. It is an aspect of a behavioral regulation mechanism shaped by natural selection.

And this is a long paper, a very well worth reading. If you want a PDF, just ping me. I'll send you a copy.

Very, very well worth reading. With many insights which actually apply, many of them apply specifically to mental health. I don't have time in the remaining seven minutes or so to go into any kind of detail, but just want to recommend that paper to you.

So how to be happy? This is where you come in. This is your call subject to terms and conditions. Here's a great illustration from the New York Times, cartoon by Brian V. I don't have to comment on it.

Basically, have a look and you'll find you'll discover new ways of being happy. They're just wonderful. Some of them are ways for your pet to be happy.

And this is really for people from all walks of life. One can find here a lead. If you need to be told how to be happy, what makes you happy? Ask yourself.

And you'll get to know something about yourself in that manner. But not free for all, subject to terms and conditions. They said subject to the most serious constraint, which is we are human.

We are animals of particular species. This constrains what we can do and how happy or not we can be. This is what makes me happy.

Another red dot, in this case, in the Expensive Landscape. But I have to move on to the second question I was asked to address. What about happiness and mental health in university settings specifically? So what makes me often happy working at the university, especially at this great university, is that I do science, which Francis Bacon, one of the originators of the concept of science, that his ideas prompted the founding of the Royal Society, the first Academy of Sciences on this planet, wrote, "Science is not to overcome an adversary in argument, but nature in action, and there is no more challenging call to action out there that I know of." And took, quote, the Latin saying from which the Royal Society took its motto, "Nulius in verba." Nulius addictive siorare in verba magistri, como com quiera, pitempestras de ferroir hospes.

My words are not owned by any master, where the winds of reason lead me there I find home. So we scientists don't answer to authority and we are not bound by doctrine. And I find it exhilarating.

Now what helps me, again specifically about myself, remains somewhat sane at the university, maybe another Latin quote, "Man's son, I am corporasano." A lot of physical activity, I swim, I cycle, I hike, I lift weights, very, very highly recommend it. If you find time for that, you'll be much happier for that. Unfortunately, most people have it much harder.

I realize, I fully realize that I'm very highly privileged in many regards. Happiness is hard to focus on because well-being depends on many things, and most of them are denied to those without power and money. It's an illustration from a recent paper on sustainability, which shows in a graphical form some of the factors, some of what it takes for a person to be happy, health, education, work and leisure, agency and political voice, social relationships, stable ecosystems and on and on.

And so no power, no money, you will be denied that. And even mental health is weighed on the scales of profit. So here is a page, the front page from the report that had been commissioned by the state of California, from the Rand Corporation, looking at whether or not it pays off to give better mental health treatment to the students at the California, the three university systems, the UFC, the Cal State and the community colleges.

And they found out the bottom line is there's benefit for California of \$6.49 for each dollar invested in that one year when spending on mental health of students was boosted. Well, think of it what you may. I find it strange to have mental health weighed

on those scales.

And I want to ask, why are things this way? And you know, we may be even going to get some happiness out of finding out why, because as Virgil wrote, happy is he who knows the causes of things. So what's the cause of this strange thing when mental health is thought of in terms of dollars? You know, this is related to things like why universities in general and Cornell specifically can afford only to support short-term counseling for their students as opposed to unlimited counseling, this kind of stuff. That's what I'm talking about.

So the question to ask is, "Quibon," or another Latin phrase, I don't know what's with Latin in me this day. Somehow I'm fixated on Latin. Who profits? So ask who profits and you'll find out who profits from the people's low wages, unemployment, personal insecurity, intolerance, scientific illiteracy, choosing religion over reason, and who profits from the states for the interventions, from the war on illegal aliens, so-called, the war on drugs, the war on education, the war on women, the war on minorities, and all the fingers point in the same direction.

It's those who are in power that profit. So what can we do and what should we do to related questions? A very quick advice to make life better for yourself and everyone else, which, believe me, there is data to show for that. We'll make you happy, not just everyone else happy, if you help everyone else.

Do two things, pursue personal goals, alongside systemic change. And I'll leave you with that. [applause] Thank you all for coming out to hear us talk about these things, Nick Schimon, for your speech.

I think this is a fascinating subject, and I'm glad that we're having the space and time to talk about it. So the question is, what is happiness? And I think to begin, I'm going to go over some, just what a strange thing it is. So one thing is that happiness is something that we all seem to want.

It's for the young and for the old. Some people jump out of planes. Some people sit in motionless for hours.

It's also something, at least on some level, that happens to good people, as well as to bad people. Humans have sought happiness by forming steel for violence and by making miracles out of silicone. But what is it? Allow me to jump species for a moment and let us consider the noble sled dog.

A sled dog is made to run. Humans somehow bred wild wolves to forget just about everything about killing, and remember only the part about being a wolf that is running. It's cross-species understanding means anything.

These dogs were about want to run. And I propose that having a purpose for living and

pursuing that purpose is a key to what happiness is. The Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, Victor Frankl, said, "Striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man." And I think the sense that it goes right to the bottom of our biology.

When we lack purpose, we just simply die. Our bodies rebel. Here's a study showing that purposelessness has been found to be an independent risk factor for dying, like smoking, compared to a person with low purpose, those with high purpose have a 14% reduced risk of dying year by year.

And this is really astonishing. There's some really significant connections with who we are and having an idea of a purpose to follow. But for humans, it's not so obvious what we want.

Nobody as far as we knew, bred us to do anything in particular. There seems to be little superficially in common between a Viking and Steve Jobs. But they're busping.

As a psychiatrist, I am best qualified to answer the question in the negative. What makes people unhappy and how do we make them not unhappy? Which is almost like happiness, but at least it's a... If we think those things are on a similar axis, then that might speak to the question. Now, a big part of my job has been taking... has been talking to people on the worst day of their lives.

One of my jobs was to be the uncalled psychiatrist at Stanford or the VA in the emergency room. The emergency room doctors would call me to assess people who came in with suicidal thoughts. It would be my job to talk with the patients and to decide if coming into the hospital would be helpful.

And over the course of my time at Stanford and the VA, I've had hundreds of such conversations. The theme is tragedy, divorce, addiction, disappointment, despair. People whose lives lacked purpose.

Or more often, people whose lives had purposes, but they were frustrated. What they wanted had been taken away, and it seemed like there was no way they could ever get their lives back on track. My clinical experience matches the literature on suicide.

Suicide risk is highest when a person believes the following thoughts. I'm a burden. I'm alone.

And I'm not afraid to die. So, let's leave the emergency room and come to the college campus. You, at least most of you, there's a few older people here, are a bright young person sitting in this discussion, listening to me, and you might be wondering.

Why are there so many mental health challenges now? In fact, our introduction touched on that. And I must admit that I tend to be pretty skeptical of the things you're getting

worse and worse narrative. And as I was preparing for the talk, I wanted to question the premise a bit.

And I did, but sadly, things are in fact getting worse. Here's a study going back to the 1940s on the same scale. Depression in college students is higher than it's ever been in recorded history.

And suicide in college students is the highest it's ever been in recorded history. And that's just very heavy. But the question is why? So first, let's consider one of those three things, the thought I'm alone.

This has increased rather dramatically over the past several decades nationally. In 1985, the median American had three people with whom he or she could talk about important matters. In 2004, the number had dropped to one.

Among college freshmen in recent years, the number of people spending almost no time socializing has increased rather steeply. And along this, and possibly driving it, more and more people are excessively into themselves. By standard measures of narcissistic personality, we are more and ever more narcissistic.

Second, let's consider the thought I'm a burden. And let's consider what it means to be a burden. It means that one's purpose has been frustrated, and one's mere existence has begun to frustrate the purposes of others.

Worse than just being a lone wolf, one feels disconnected from the affections of others, but one feels connected enough to pull down the social web like a dead weight. We should pull our weight, we all know, but how much weight should we be pulling? The standards, internally and externally, have increased. We are more perfectionistic.

We demand more perfection of others. We feel that others demand more of us, and we demand it more of ourselves. And I'll suggest one more domain that requires historical aside.

The story popular among scholars goes like this. About a century ago, a lot of people believed a lot of things really strongly, like communism or Nazism. Then we had a lot of wars because everybody believed they were right so strongly, so people started doubting whether anybody should ever be really sure of anything.

Then we started doubting all sorts of things. The civil rights movement, the sexual revolution in Vietnam, pretty well convinced everybody that traditional institutions were corrupt, and the truth was relative. So today we doubt the church and the corporation and the government, as well as any system of thought that might allow us to discriminate between the infinity of options before us.

Everything is relative. Well, everything that is except money. That's real.

In the absence of convictions about transcended things, we are left with merely material ones. And millennials have broken all records on how many of us want to get rich as a top life goal. 81% Purposes beyond the purely mercenary are harder than ever to sustain in a world of relativism.

And so, while few like to admit it, a good job is what all must be sacrificed for. So, current college students are more narcissistic, lonely, and perfectionistic, adrift in an endless sea of options, clinging to the plank of getting rich as the only trustworthy goal. So, I've argued that having a purpose matters.

And if you followed me thus far, my professional qualifications are at their end. So, in terms of advice as a psychiatrist, I think that these are some of the trends that I see commonly in my college-aged patients. And patients at Stanford, that the loneliness and the perfectionism, and these are things that, whether it be in therapy or otherwise, trying to respond to these things is an important factor.

But for the remainder of the talk, I'm going to take off my psychiatrist hat and speak to you as a mere fellow traveler on this journey we call life. So, with my psychiatrist hat off, the first question I'd like to ask is whether any old purpose will do. There's a multitude of possible purposes, but we must consider that some of them might be very, very bad.

Whatever we do, we don't want Hitler to have the ultimate good thing that we're talking about. But how do we keep him from it? And another question I think we should ask about our happiness is whether it is robust to tragedy, the central one being death. As summarized by a grief counselor at UCSB, Steve Smith, humans have, quote, "a highly evolved sense of self-consciousness and individuality that is combined with the knowledge that we are mortal and will eventually die." And I think that as a species, we're not really into that idea at all, end quote.

So, can there be happiness that responds to the tragedies of evil and death? Can there be a purpose for human beings that leaves Hitler out and which is more than a smoke stream to distract us from our ultimate fate? One divergent thinker was particularly opposed to the standard answers. He liked to disrupt the status quo. To those who thought positive affect was the goal, he said, "How blissful those who mourn, for they shall be aided." To those who prospered, who proposed beating others and achieving fame, he said, "How blissful to gentle, for they shall inherit the earth." To those who proposed it was wealth, he said, "How blissful to destitute, abject in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens." To those who suggested that having any desires was the problem, he praised desire, "How blissful those who hunger and thirst for what is right, for they shall feast." Everything is on its head.

In other words, the secret to happiness is not to see happiness. It's to sell happiness and get something better. The man, if you haven't guessed already, is Jesus, and I'm quoting the sermon on the mend.

We started the talk with the noble sled dog whose purpose was to run. I believe that the purpose of the human being is to love. The purpose of the human is to desire the good of others so much so that one would be willing to sacrifice oneself for them.

It is to imagine how the world could be a better place for them and to try to make it real. What's the purpose of life? Well, love the highest thing you can conceive of with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. Follow the example of Jesus who was the ideal hero satisfying all our mythic desires for one to fight the chaos and darkness in the world.

The purpose of life is to reject self-judgment and the judgment of others to reject perfectionism and to receive unconditional love, the kind that says comes you are. The purpose of life is to love even if it costs us every dollar or shutter reputation. The purpose of life is to love other people and share this love far and wide because bringing people together, drawing them in, particularly if they are alone or rejected is just exactly what love does.

Love because it's the fabric of the very universe. Love everyone, even your enemies. Love even in the face of hatred and death.

Love. I've heard a lot of answers to the question, but for myself, I've found none better. [Applause] If you like this and you want to hear more, like, share, review, and subscribe to this podcast.

And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum, thank you.

[Music] [ Silence ]