Chapter 10

Meaning and happiness

By Tatjana Schnell, 2020

Meaningfulness and happiness are the same thing, aren't they? At least that's what many people think. However, the closer you get to an understanding of both concepts, the clearer it becomes that neither are they synonyms nor does one inevitably emerge from the other. Happiness is a positive emotional state that can be more or less intense; it is a feeling. Meaningfulness is not a feeling. It is a cognition, resulting from implicit or explicit evaluation processes. But the differences go far beyond the conceptual level. Depending on whether we strive for happiness or meaning, quite different ways of life ensue

10.1 Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being

When psychologists deal with happiness, they tend to call it subjective well-being. One of the pioneers of well-being research, Ed Diener, has defined "subjective well-being" as frequent positive affect, infrequent negative affect, and the cognitive evaluation of life as satisfactory. Due to the emphasis on pleasure and pain, subjective well-being has also been called hedonic well-being (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999). In the following subchapter, current findings on the development (and inhibition) of hedonic well-being are presented. Subsequently, the concept of eudaimonic well-being is introduced; here the focus is no longer on feeling good but on a good – and meaningful – life.

10.1.1 Happy . . .

Who wouldn't want to be happy? Given the choice between pleasure and pain, probably all of us would choose pleasure. But we do not always have the choice. And if we do, then our decision has to take context into account. It is embedded in a specific situation; it will have consequences;

and it will open one way, while closing other ways. Happiness is complicated; and paradoxically, if you're searching for happiness, you most likely won't find it. Research findings show that the search for happiness can actually prevent the experience of happiness. Iris Mauss and her colleagues (2011) discovered that it is particularly dangerous to strive for happiness when, in principle, we are doing rather well. People who lived a stress-free life and were looking for happiness were unhappier and more depressed than those who did not value happiness so much. The researchers were also able to replicate these findings experimentally: High striving for happiness led to fewer feelings of happiness in a joyful situation. Those participants who were not so eager to be happy experienced significantly more joy in the happy situation

How can we explain this? The authors suggest that we are disappointed by our own feelings when we consider happiness to be crucial and find ourselves in a situation that potentially promotes happiness. This is exactly the situation that describes Western societies: Happiness is important and feasible, as mass media and counsellors suggest. And many of us are doing well from a material and social point of view. Happiness should thus make its appearance, but somehow, we don't feel as good as we expect to.

The volatility of happiness is also evidenced by the adaptation effect known as the hedonic treadmill. Soon after a positive event, most people's state of well-being returns to the previous level. This phenomenon was first encountered by psychologists when they studied lottery winners. Compared to a control group, they did not report greater happiness. They also reported being similarly happy before and after winning the lottery (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). With regard to negative and traumatic events (e.g. an accident followed by paralysis), the phenomenon of hedonic adaptation holds a hopeful message: Even after painful events, it is possible to return to initial levels of happiness.

In a literature review, however, Ed Diener and colleagues (2006) found that in the event of the death of a partner, divorce or unemployment, adaptation processes do take place but that the previous level of well-being is not fully regained. Unfortunately, the effect of hedonic adjustment is much more reliable when it comes to the decline of happiness after positive events. After a marriage, a goal achievement, a salary increase, most of us are a little happier in the short term but soon afterwards are as happy as before the event. Therefore, it is useless to condition our happiness on the occurrence of certain events. This applies in particular to the availability of financial resources. For a long time, our society propagated a development model in which an increase in available financial

resources was regarded as a measure of personal success. More money was equated with more well-being. Economic happiness research has refuted this general assumption. The so-called Easterlin paradox proves that in nations in which the gross domestic product increases, the average expressed happiness remains the same (Easterlin, 1974; Easterlin, McVey, Switek, Sawangfa, & Zweig, 2010).

On an individual level, however, there is a positive correlation between income and happiness – but it only applies up to a certain income level. This is slightly above the average annual income (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). A sufficien availability of material goods is therefore necessary for a high sense of happiness, since it allows for the satisfaction of needs like security, nutrition, health, education and participation in society. The fact that a position slightly above the average is also conducive to happiness once again proves the all-too-human tendency to gain well-being from feeling superior to others ("downward comparison"; Wills, 1981). Yet any additional financial gain does not result in additional happiness, or the effect is so minimal that it can be neglected (Boyce, Daly, Hounkpatin, & Wood, 2017).

Whoever complains about the fact that positive events do not increase happiness in the long run might be complaining about first-world problems, as Ed and Carol Diener proved (1996): The vast majority of people on this earth describe themselves as rather happy and content. Last but not least, a further relativisation should be noted. The just-described findings on hedonic adjustment are based on average values. These actually represent a variety of trajectories, which are disguised when only mean scores are reported. After all, a quarter of married people report an increased level of happiness many years after marriage. Others again are even worse off than before their marriage (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). It thus depends on how we deal with events – whereby social comparisons on the one hand and mindfulness and gratitude on the other seem to play an important role.

> Scenario: What world would you rather live in? In a world where you earn €50,000 a year and the others half as much, or in a world where you earn €100,000 a year and the others twice as much?

To a large degree, our satisfaction depends on how we see ourselves in comparison with others. In the scenario described earlier, most people choose the first option. It is not the absolute level of income that is relevant but the relative level that determines what financial possibilities I have compared to others. But social comparisons can be dangerous.

Western industrialised countries are highly competitive. Whereas in the past, we competed with neighbours, friends and direct colleagues, the spread of social media and online performance quantification have exponentially increased the possibilities for comparison. They predominantly concern material goods and status symbols: Who has the better grades, more likes, better looks, the more expensive car, more publications, the more desirable holiday? People who ask these questions train their attention to the identification of deficits. Dissatisfaction is therefore inevitable – and it also drives the hedonic treadmill:

With much anticipation, Paul expected his professional promotion. Now it has arrived, and they even increased his salary. Paul's colleague was also promoted, he learns. His pay rise was even higher than Paul's. This drastically reduces Paul's joy. After a few more years, Paul is also on the verge of a juicy pay rise, which he is looking forward to. However, it is highly probable that Paul will soon hear about someone who earns more than he does. . .

There is an obvious alternative: Paul could draw his attention to those in similar positions who earn less than he does. In contrast to the *upward comparison* described earlier, this would be a *downward comparison*, a comparison with people who are worse off. This type of comparison is generally accompanied by an increase in well-being (Sirgy, 2012). But what kind of worldview does this "happiness strategy" imply? Should we commit to a motto like "It's all right as long as there are enough people who are worse off than me"? There are more-decent alternatives.

For this purpose, it is helpful to know about typical distortions of perception. One of them is the negativity bias: People are more sensitive to negative signals than to positive ones (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). This phenomenon is easily explained from an evolutionary perspective. During the millennia-long development of our nervous system, it was vital to observe stimuli that might be harmful to us. The environment was full of dangers, including physical injuries, the consumption of poisonous plants, attacks by wild animals and hostile people. Overlooking such hints meant illness or death. This was not the case for positive signs. The consequences of ignoring the beauty of a blossoming tree, for instance, were much less serious. But our environment has changed. As long as we abide by a few rules, our lives are rarely in danger. However, our nervous system has not yet become accustomed to this relative safety; it continues to seek cues for danger. The main beneficiaries are insurance agencies.

Such concentration on potential dangers is rather detrimental to our well-being. It leads to more fear and anxiety than might be appropriate. It

also causes us to be more impressed by negative events than by positive ones. Imagine a typical day that is quite pleasant and good. One negative event is enough to overturn our mood. Despite a high number of normal, pleasant or even beautiful events, a single unpleasant event can make us go to bed dissatisfied in the evening. Mindfulness and gratitude come to bear here, the importance of which has been proven in many studies.

Mindfulness is the deliberate and nonjudgemental attention to current events and experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It is about directing attention to everything that happens – not just to potential hazards. The attitude of nonjudgement demands an internal step back. This interrupts the automatism of evaluation, which all too often results in the attribution of danger or loss. As a consequence of practised mindfulness, we learn that our feelings and thoughts are changeable, that we are not determined by them. Studies show that this leads to improved self-control. We can assess situations more realistically and have a greater awareness of our own needs and values (Nakamura, 2012). Under such conditions, our well-being is less dependent on social comparisons.

Another way to balance negativity bias and to increase well-being on a long-term basis is to practise gratitude. While the idea may seem to imply a religious stance, it is not per se tied to any particular ideological background. Gratitude is understood as the appreciation of what one experiences as valuable and important (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). Many studies have shown that gratitude is related to well-being. Individuals who appreciate their living conditions, events, people, things and so on report a high sense of well-being. It is even possible to increase well-being by practising gratitude, as several studies demonstrated (Emmons, 2008). In Section 10.3, you will find the instructions for a typical gratitude exercise.

For some people, joy and satisfaction are natural: Their default value is a good mood. In fact, there is a genetic predisposition that determines our well-being. On the basis of behavioural genetic research – especially twin studies – and molecular genetic studies, researchers came to the conclusion that 32–41 percent of the variability in subjective well-being is due to genetic differences among people (Nes & Røysamb, 2017). Positive emotionality seems to be less attributable to genetic factors than negative emotionality (Zheng, Plomin, & von Stumm, 2016), which suggests that attention should be drawn to positive attitudes such as mindfulness and gratitude. The influence of living conditions is estimated to be relatively low, at around 10 percent, which leaves a lot of room for intentional action. Those of us who were not born with a predisposition to happiness will thus find it a bit harder to be happy. But better don't

make happiness your ultimate goal. Instead, practise gratitude because you see reasons for it, not because you expect it to make you happy. Exercise mindfulness for the sake of being in the present, with all peaks and troughs . . . which brings us straight to another kind of well-being, namely eudaimonic well-being.

10.1.2 More than pleasant

> And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and good things in life.
>
> (Aristotle, 1999, p. 13)

There are many different ways of pursuing hedonic well-being. The route is nearly irrelevant; what counts is the result, the good feeling. The concept of eudaimonic well-being is more demanding. It is primarily concerned with the way of living. The word "eudaimonia" comes from Greek antiquity. Aristotle elaborated on the concept in his Nicomachean Ethics. He emphasised that eudaimonia is not a state but a way of acting. Only those who act will win "the noble and good things in life" (see the foregoing quote).

But how should we act? Aristotle does not make a general statement here. To him, good action is closely related to personal characteristics and the type of motivation we act on. The ideal, he suggests, is for each and every one to actively commit to the realisation of their talents and virtues. The goals we pursue will therefore vary, but they should all adhere to one principle: not to create injustice. Justice, for Aristotle, is "the most complete virtue." Accordingly, eudaimonia is "never only my personal happiness. I cannot strive for and realise it at the expense of my fellow human beings, and I cannot even strive for and realise it in isolation, without reference to my fellow human beings" (Jacobi, 1979, p. 320 f.; transl. TS).

We therefore need to consider the consequences of our actions and the reason for our actions (our motivation). According to Aristotle, actions are "good" when they are performed for their own sake. In psychology, we call this intrinsic motivation. The opposite is extrinsic motivation: the performance of an activity in order to earn a reward or avoid punishment. Again, this criterion of eudaimonia is difficul to generalise, because it refers to internal processes. Thus, one person can live out their thirst for

knowledge for intrinsic reasons, because they regard knowledge itself as desirable. Another person may strive for knowledge because they expect to improve their reputation from it. In the latter case, Aristotle would not speak of eudaimonic action.

Last but not least, acting well presupposes that we voluntarily commit to our action. Aristotle saw humans as reasonable beings, capable of insight and discernment. This supposed autonomy implies responsibility. On this basis – but not through force or mindless adaptation – eudaimonia is possible (Schnell, 2013).

What distinguishes Aristotle from other ancient thinkers is the importance he attaches to the satisfaction of basic material needs. Pragmatically and realistically, he declares the necessity of sufficien means: "For our nature is not self-sufficien for the purpose of contemplation, but our body must also be healthy and must have food and other attention" (Aristotle, 1999, p. 176 f.). He thus agrees with the findings of modern happiness research as presented in Section 10.1.1. For a eudaimonic life, basic material needs have to be fulfilled. A further increase in financial means, however, is no guarantee of an increase in quality of life. Instead, under certain circumstances even the opposite may happen, as Aristotle subtly points out:

> Still, we must not think that the man who is to be happy will need many things or great things, merely because he cannot be supremely happy without external goods; for self-sufficienc and action do not involve excess, and we can do noble acts without ruling earth and sea; for even with moderate advantages one can act virtuously (this is manifest enough; for private people are thought to do worthy acts no less than despots – indeed even more); and it is enough that we should have so much as that.
>
> (Aristotle, 1999, p. 177)

Despite all the talk about good and virtuous action, Aristotle also sees the importance of enjoyment. For him, pleasure and happiness are not an end in themselves but positive side effects of eudaimonia. They are closely linked to the action that produces them – and that at the same time is completed by joy. In other words, happiness is not considered detached from the character of an action. It is the natural consequence of a life lived in accordance with personal talents and virtues, voluntarily, responsibly and under appropriate living conditions.

Several studies show that Aristotle's theory is transferable to contemporary life. Meaningfulness can be understood as an expression

and indicator of eudaimonic well-being, whereas subjective well-being, positive mood and life satisfaction are regarded as indicators of hedonic well-being. Michael Steger and colleagues (2008) asked their study participants how often they exercised certain hedonic and eudaimonic activities per week. Examples of hedonic actions were sex only for pleasure, buying jewellery or electronic devices, getting drunk, taking drugs or eating more than you want because it tastes so good. Eudaimonic activities included volunteering, giving money to a needy person, writing down one's future goals, thanking someone or entrusting someone with personal thoughts (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). The participants were also asked about their hedonic and eudaimonic well-being: their mood, life satisfaction and meaningfulness. The results confirmed Aristotle's assumptions: Hedonic activities neither contributed to a good mood nor to life satisfaction or meaningfulness. Eudaimonic activities, on the other hand, were accompanied by meaningfulness and by positive mood and satisfaction with life.

Stephen Schueller and Martin Seligman (2010) asked respondents to what degree they pursued pleasure, task engagement or meaningfulness in their lives. Here too, the lowest hedonic well-being was found among those who were striving for pleasure; both the striving for meaning and the striving for task engagement were accompanied by significantly more happiness, positive mood and life satisfaction. Ethan McMahan and Maggie DeHart Renken (2011) also found no connection between a pleasure-oriented lifestyle and positive mood, life satisfaction or meaningfulness, whereas a meaning-oriented, eudaimonic lifestyle was associated with higher meaningfulness and with more life satisfaction and positive mood.

In a longitudinal study carried out by Bernadette Vötter and me, we examined subjective well-being and meaning in life among highly gifted people. The data again supported the earlier-reported association: Participants who reported high meaningfulness at the first measurement showed higher subjective well-being at the second measurement, about four years later. This was not the case the other way round: Subjective well-being did not predict later meaningfulness (Vötter & Schnell, 2019).

10.2 Meaning without happiness

Happy, then, are those who succeed in living according to their personal talents self-determinedly, responsibly, in the knowledge of being connected to fellow human beings and under good external conditions. Yet again and again, we find ourselves in restrictive situations. Or we are

faced with the choice between a pleasant option and an alternative that seems right but promises to be demanding. Especially in the short term, meaningful options often appear less pleasant. They are the more difficult choice; they may be challenging. But this is one of the reasons why they usually have positive long-term consequences: Those who challenge themselves gain more experiences and get to know themselves as more active and self-effective than those who tend to choose the momentarily more pleasant option.

But meaning can also be experienced when situations are void of happiness. Such experiences demonstrate that meaningfulness is independent of pleasure and pain and that it is possible even in moments of suffering. Memorably, Viktor Frankl here referred to the "defiant power of the mind" (2011, p. 147). He experienced this power of defiance when he suffered under unspeakable conditions in a concentration camp but refused to give up his dignity. Although the atrocious situation severely restricted his options, Frankl experienced a remaining spiritual freedom. The Nazi subordinates had no access to his innermost being. Frankl managed to rise above degradation and humiliation, to turn suffering into an achievement, as he later said.

Thus, it is possible to defy external conditions with our attitude. As long as we are fully conscious, we retain the power of interpretation over what happens. And depending on how this appraisal turns out, the resulting experience and action will be shaped. Frankl has thus succeeded in transforming what at first sight appears to be a hopeless situation into a challenge with a future perspective; a perspective which, as he said, saved his life.

Another example of a victory of the "defiant power of the spirit" is documented in the diaries of Etty Hillesum (2002). Etty Hillesum was a young Jewish woman who lived in Amsterdam during Nazism. In 1941 and 1942, she wrote in her diary, which was published decades later. On these pages, she shares her inner world of experience. While the outer world is marked by anti-Semitic laws that isolate and oppress Jewish people, deny them professional activity and restrict their residence, Etty Hillesum experiences her life as rich, beautiful and meaningful:

> I am not alone in my tiredness or sickness or fears, but at one with millions of others from many centuries, and it is all part of life, and yet life is beautiful and meaningful too. It is meaningful even in its meaninglessness, provided one makes room in one's life for everything, and accepts life as one indivisible whole, for then one becomes whole in oneself.
>
> (Etty Hillesum, 2002, p. 466)

She radically explores herself through an ongoing dialogue with a god whom she finds in her heart. She loves and suffers on a large scale. Love is fundamental to her, both for individuals and for all humanity, including those who oppress her and who will eventually kill her. And she considers the suffering that is part of her life to be just as fundamental (see also Schnell, 2018).

But Etty Hillesum does not stop there. From her inner experience of peace and meaning, she gains the strength to be there for others, to practise generativity. With great effort, she stands up for those who are already subjected to stronger limitations. When more and more of her family and friends are deported to a transit camp, she joins them voluntarily. In the camp, under difficul conditions and with poor health, she works in a hospital. She also repeatedly uses a special permit to return to Amsterdam, putting her life in danger by exchanging information and maintaining contact with underground groups (see Greif, 2004).

> I work and continue to live with the same conviction, and I find life meaningful – yes, meaningful – although I hardly dare say so in company these days.
>
> (Etty Hillesum, 2002, p. 461)

Etty Hillesum sets an example for the claim that meaningfulness is possible even under the worst conditions. Meaning arises from coherent and convinced action, from a sense of integrity that we maintain on our path, from experiences of belonging and the significance of our action for others. Such experiences are far from maximising pleasure and reducing pain; they are anything but pleasant. Nevertheless, they can evoke a deep satisfaction, in the sense of peace with oneself and even, as in the case of this special and courageous woman Etty Hillesum, in the sense of peace with the world.

10.3 Know thyself!

SELF-EXPLORATION: GRATITUDE

VERSION 1 – ON YOUR OWN

Take about five minutes every evening to write down three things for which you are grateful that day, or which you experienced as particularly valuable. Use a digital or analogue diary for your notes and continue the exercise for one week.

VERSION II – WITH COMPANIONS OR FAMILY

Over dinner, for example, share your experiences of the past day with everyone present, telling them about three things that you are grateful for that day or that you experienced as particularly valuable. Continue the exercise for one week.

(Of course, nothing should prevent you from continuing the exercise over a longer period of time. Our son also reminds us time and again to talk about the "three things," which he has obviously enjoyed – as we have, too).

SELF-EXPLORATION: MYTHS OF HAPPINESS

The American psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky (2014) warns us of two types of beliefs that can prevent our experience of happiness. The first concerns the assumption that we can be happy only when a certain event occurs (e.g. partnership/marriage, higher income, child, moving to another house). The second is the belief that when an event occurs, happiness is definitely no longer possible (e.g. separation, illness, loss of employment). Try to find out whether you are – more or less consciously – attached to such "myths of happiness":

Once I . . .

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___

. . ., then I will be happy!

I can't be happy if . . .

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10.4 Literature

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