

Defining Happiness

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I had recently breached into the world of competitive swimming. It was my first season in a *Speedo*, racing guys from other school teams—diving, splashing, and flipping my way across fifty to one hundred yards of water. I have been swimming since I was a toddler, so tenth grade was pretty late to move on from just recreational swimming and into the racing realm where speed, technique, and stamina are the keys to success, as opposed to just a smile on your face and some energy. Starting off the season, my time for a “fifty yard sprint” was just above thirty seconds, which provoked the question, “Are you sure you have never swam competitively before?” The answer always being, “Yes I am positive.” But, I felt that thirty seconds was thirty seconds too slow, and that I should be zooming through the water like “The Flash”...if he were a swimmer that is. As the season progressed, I knocked more and more seconds and milliseconds off of my time. Training hard in practice and going all out from start to finish got me down into the low twenty-eight high twenty-seven second dashes. I was feeling better about my speed, and I could feel my improvement, but I knew that I could go faster. On a side-note, knocking whole seconds off of your time is a feat in and of itself, and it gets harder and harder as you get faster and faster; my teammate has been at the same speed of twenty-five and a half seconds for over three years now; and she swims every day year round. We had a meet at the Holy Names University pool one exit away on the freeway, and I swam three events: the “fifty,” the “one hundred,” and the “four hundred relay.” In the “one hundred,” I came in third, while we won the relay. In the “fifty,” however, I came in first place, swimming a twenty-seven, while my teammate Wendell came in second with a thirty. It felt great to win a race, something that I had never done before, while getting a new personal best time along with the victory. I was pumped, and, being pumped, I thought that I could win every race from here on out. The following week we had a big race against Bentley High School all the way out in Walnut Creek. In my mind, losing this race was not an option: I had to win, I wanted to win, I knew I could win.

Some of the team drove themselves to the meet, but most of us were on the bus. The bus-ride ended up taking over an hour through the traffic to get to the huge aquatic center that was the location of our showdown. We got there twenty minutes late, so we warmed up and got in to test the waters as fast as possible. After warming up, there was a special introduction for all of the seniors, an emphasis on those of our opponents since it was their home meet, so we all get into line and wait around through the fifteen minute introductions in the sun in the ninety five degree weather. Baking like potatoes. Standing parallel from their team made size differential between our two squads more apparent than it had been warming up. Us standing on one side with our one senior...them across from us with almost as many seniors as swimmers on our entire team. Three of their seniors had to have been at least twenty; or, at least they looked the part, but the only thing that mattered was their speed in the water, and since I was going to win that was not an issue. When the senior introductions finally finished, we had dried off like bones in a desert (well, bones ready to leave the desert and win some races). We were doing well to start off, not winning everything, but everyone was swimming fast. Then, the “fifty free” came up, right before the customary mid-meet break. Stepping up onto the block I glanced to each side of me. On the block to my left was a tall lanky tan boy who had been introduced as a first time swimmer, and on my right was a short stubbly man looking student who was also a senior. Time to focus.

Off the block fast and I sure dove, tearing it up as soon as I entered the water, pulling even with the boy on my left. At the wall we flipped and were at it again, he was gaining headway at this point, and with my head down I zipped through the water to the finish. Dead last. I came in dead last in the race. Disappointment filled me up, and I crawled out of the water and

walked over to my coaches, wanting to apologize for not swimming faster, yet looking my coach in the eyes I was confused. She was not wearing a look of disappointment, but the look one wears when they are pleasantly surprised. “Man I’m sorry coach,” I said, even though there were no expectations for me to win the race. “Sorry?” she replies, “Elijah, you just swam your fastest race of the season, those guys went, like, a twenty-four. They were SUPER fast. You swam a twenty-six. That’s amazing!” The disappointment eased into satisfaction as she told me this. I had done my best. I impressed myself and my coaches; I had become fast. Even though I came in dead last in my race, the fact that I had worked hard and my work had paid off made me realize that I do not have to be the fastest person in the water every single race to have a victory. The fact that I could even compete with juniors and seniors, people who are almost men, as a first year swimmer, and have my improvements and accomplishments recognized by the people that it matters to left me feeling better about my swimming, excited to continue getting better, and left with me a lasting feeling of happiness.

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What is “happiness”? In the dictionary, “happiness” is defined as the “feeling or showing pleasure or contentment.” This definition makes sense; sure, it defines the word “happiness.” It tells whomever wants to know about what happiness is, and how to recognize happiness when it is encountered. However, this definition lacks the marrow of what happiness really is. While the dictionary gives us a ground level definition for what happiness is, there is much more room to delve deeper into the experience of happiness and how it can be defined. “...A deep sense of flourishing that arises from an exceptionally healthy mind,”(A Guide to Developing Life’s Most Important Skill Happiness 19). Happiness is not merely just a feeling, but it is an emotion that is caused by keeping a “healthy mind,” and by doing so allows happiness to become a part of your inner being, and in doing so it will become stronger and stronger inside your brain, making you happier throughout.

How does happiness work in the brain? Scientists claim that there are four main categories of happiness, chemically, that occur in the brain. The categories are happiness from: endorphins, dopamine, oxytocin, and serotonin. All of these are caused by chemicals that are naturally inside of our brains, but are released for different reasons. Endorphins are released when we experience pain, and help to dull the pain, so the happiness from endorphins is the sense of euphoria that helps us to keep going after we have been injured. Endorphin happiness is not a long-lasting chemical happiness, and is only used in certain circumstances involving physical pain, but if it were not you, “would touch hot stoves and run on a broken leg” (Psychology Today). The second kind of chemical that can cause happiness is dopamine. Dopamine is released when your end goal is within your sights. Dopamine is used to give us a burst of will at the end, to excite the mind for the finish, and help push us towards meeting and completing our goals. The third kind of chemical released by our brain is Oxytocin. Oxytocin happiness occurs when we trust, and it is a main factor in how we pick our partners. Oxytocin is the easiest neurotransmitter to activate. “All you need to do is simply hug someone or shake their hand. The simple act of bodily contact will cause your brain to release low levels of oxytocin — both in yourself and in the person you’re touching. It’s a near-instantaneous way to establish trust” (io9.com). Although oxytocin does help us create social bonds and is inarguably a necessity in human interaction, high levels of oxytocin can be detrimental. Having very high levels of oxytocin can make you emotionally oversensitive. The last category of happiness that

can be triggered in the brain is that caused by the release of Serotonin. Serotonin is used to keep a balance in our body, and a deficiency of serotonin can lead to depression, sleep disorders, low sex drive, and overall poor health. To keep serotonin levels high it is important to exercise, sleep, and laugh. All four of these neurotransmitters are vital for being happy, but not everyone is able to activate them equally.

Can one learn how to be happy? Yes. Plain and simple, right? Well, right and wrong. Studies have shown that about half of our happiness is genetic, and cannot be altered. More specifically, some people are born less happy than others. But, that does not mean that we cannot mold the remaining part of our happiness that is not genetic, we can.

Although, you can learn to become happier. To learn how to be happy you must really want to become happier, and be willing to commit yourself to your own personal process. Many people turn to spirituality and religion as a way to increase happiness in their lives. Religion has been shown by a 2005 study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania to have helped cut back addictions to drugs and alcohol, reduce conflicts between partners, help to bring communities closer together through promotion of “altruism, volunteerism, kindness, and forgiveness,” as well as help cope with stress and sadness. On the other hand, religion has its downsides. Religious beliefs can lead to passivity, thinking that god will help you and if he does not then it was meant to be, as well as anger toward groups of other religious belief with whom they do not see eye to eye, which has been the cause of many genocides and massacres in the name of religion through history. Another way that we can lead happier lives is giving; giving back to the community and giving gifts to other people have both shown significant improvements in the happiness of those who are giving. Giving will make you feel needed, and being needed gives us a purpose which will subsequently motivate us to keep on giving. Other ways in which people improve their happiness include getting exercise and staying in shape, thanking others, listening, and being optimistic, even thinking about being happy and smiling regularly will increase your overall happiness.

Looking back on my swimming experience, I learned two things that drew me to my conclusion about happiness. First of all, I learned that working towards a goal and becoming motivated to meet that goal brings joy and purpose. Second, I learned that happiness cannot come without a hint of sorrow. Although happiness was achieved in my experience, I did not improve much more the rest of the season, and I never found myself feeling as good as I did when I lost my race. Happiness can be achieved in moderation, but the pursuit of never-ending happiness is a goal that cannot be achieved.

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