

Articles

Coping with happiness and its causes

Sally Mathrick

Languishing in my sickbed, I begin to reflect on how happy I really am, and how happy we all actually are, as earthlings in 2007. The Happiness and Its Causes conference in Sydney has stimulated wonder about hedonia, (feeling good) and eudemonia (functioning well), about the 84,000 delusions of the mind and the learned tools that can create more enduring happiness.

Mucous accumulates in my frontal sinuses, impeding my ability to breathe nasally and my lips begin to parch. I'm not feeling great, I'm feeling bad. This physical experience of ill health is not hedonically satisfying nor providing pleasant affect whatsoever.

As for achieving the eudemonic happiness, my chances are higher. There are eleven signs to indicate Eudemonia, as detailed by Dr Corey Keyes. These are: being integrated into a group; being a part of growth and development; being accepting of others; having social interest; contributing to society; mastering your environment; accepting the self; involvement in positive relations; experiencing personal growth; autonomy; and hav-



Participants in this weekend's integrative medicine conference, clockwise from left, Sally Mathrick, Mandy Nolan, Dr Anthony Solomon, Jane Enter and Jacqueline Boustany. Photo Jeff 'Joy Division' Dawson

ing purpose in life

To ascertain whether or not you're flourishing, according to Keyes, is having at least six eudemonic signs at high levels in life, as well as one hedonic sign, ie feeling satisfied or having positive affect in your life.

Sadly, only 17% of adults in the USA are flourishing. This fact means the remaining 83% of adults will be

more likely to develop chronic illness, be less productive and less successful in their work, and be more likely to feel helplessness. One in every two US adults will have a mental illness in their life. According to the Beyond Blue website, one in five Australians experience depression in their lives. These are worrying facts.

As I grab another hanky

and sip my YEP tea I realise I have all my needs met – warmth, shelter, food, clothing, fluid and social support. Once the basic needs are met, Howard Cutler, who worked closely with HH Dalai Lama, assures us, then happiness depends on mostly inner conditions, and is determined mostly from state of mind.

The training of the mind

towards happiness and positivity helps to create constructive emotion, which the Dalai Lama suggests, brings peace of mind. Developing an aptitude towards compassion is the starting point and indeed the bulk of being happy and extending happiness.

Professor Richard Davidson from University of Wisconsin has shown that real physical change in structure of the brain takes place by attentively directing actions and thoughts. New neural pathways are formed through conscious effort and repetition. This tendency of the brain is called neuro-plasticity.

We are creating everything as we go along.

Sonja Lyubomirsky from the University of California ran a trial whereby participants would perform five random acts of kindness one day each week for five weeks, eg opening doors for strangers, putting coins in other people's expired meters. By the end of the trial, there was a significant increase in levels of personal happiness of the participants. Helping others can lead to greater personal happiness.

Personal happiness leads to helping others. People

who are happy help others more. People who don't feel able to help are not as happy. Another clever study was performed whereby participants whose mood was boosted by finding money in a phone booth were more likely to help a stranger who had dropped things, than one who didn't get the boost.

Cutler suggests that compassion is a practical tool to increase happiness and increase community connection. The personal effort invested to increase happiness, by developing unbiased compassion, leads to a natural altruism to increase the happiness in the nation.

Another tool for creating enduring happiness is adopting the attitude of gratitude. Focus on what you do have, suggests Dr Tim Sharpe, Chief Happiness officer of the Happiness Institute in Sydney, rather than on what you don't have.

■ Naturopath Sally Mathrick of the North Coast Medical Centre is convener of the Third Integrative Medicine Conference, on happiness and depression, at the Byron Bay Beach Resort. See more at www.byroninhealth.com.