

Lesson 6 Happiness in Shared Moments

Reading 1

Lessons from the Longest Study on Happiness

What keeps us healthy and happy as we go through life? If you were going to invest now in your future self, where would you put your time and energy?

According to a survey of millennials, the most important things in life are wealth and fame. To what extent is this true?

In 1938, researchers at Harvard University began what would become the longest ever study on human happiness. For over 75 years, they studied the lives of over 700 people from privileged and disadvantaged families. Every two years, the researchers sent them questionnaires and interviewed them in their living rooms. The researchers got their medical records, drew their blood, scanned their brains, and talked to their spouses and children.

Studies like this are exceedingly rare. Almost all projects of this kind fall apart within a decade. This is because subjects drop out of the study; the research funding dries up; researchers get distracted or die.

However, this study survived long enough to yield an unexpected result. Many would assume the wealthier group was happier. It was not so. The researchers found that wealth, fame, and hard work didn't have much impact on happiness. Instead, it was having good relationships with friends or family that kept people happier and healthier. What's more, it is never too late to work on it.

Among the study participants, Andrew Dearing had one of the most difficult lives. As a child, his family moved frequently, which prevented him from developing lasting friendships. His marriage was unhappy and eventually broke up. Andrew worked as a clock repairman, and his job was the only thing that gave meaning to his life. When the researchers asked him in his late 50s at what age he planned to retire, he wrote, "Work has kept me alive. Retiring sounds and feels like it's the end of the road."

However, the belief that work gave meaning to his life never made him happy. In fact, for most of his adult life, he reported very low levels of happiness. When asked in his 60s to describe his closest friends, Andrew simply wrote, "No one."

When Andrew was 67, health issues forced him to retire. Shortly after that, he went to a therapist and said that the loneliness he was feeling was becoming unbearable. The therapist advised him to change his environment. After some time, Andrew decided to go to a health club and exercise to get his mind off things. He began to go every day and noticed he was seeing the same people there.

Eventually, he began talking with them. Three months later, Andrew knew everyone at the club and had more friends than he had ever had in his life. Every day he looked forward to his time at the health club, and he began to see some of his friends outside the club.

A couple of years later, when asked how ideal his life was on a scale from 1 to 7, Andrew circled "7" for "close to ideal." His life was so much more fulfilling than it had been. Several years later, Andrew was still close with many of the same friends. He had also expanded his social circle. In an interview, he expressed great relief about the fact that his life had changed.

Sometimes we might feel that we are alone and that it is too late to build better relationships. However, the truth is, it is never too late. There are no quick, easy fixes, of course. With a little bit of patience and courage, you will be able to improve your relationships. Take a look around you. A classmate you haven't talked much with may have a personality that goes unbelievably well with yours. In order to know that, someone has to begin a conversation. Why shouldn't it be you? A little courage could bring you a friendship for life. A happy life doesn't just come to you; it is the result of many small efforts.

Reading 2

Gate A-4

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement: "If anyone near Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Well — one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress, just like my grandma wore, was crying on the floor. "Help," said the flight agent. "Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this." I bent down to put my arm around the woman and spoke awkwardly.

"Shu-dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibt? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee? " * The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly they were used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been canceled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, "You're fine, you'll get there, who is picking you up? Let's call him." We called her son, I spoke with him in English, saying I would stay with his mother until we got on the plane.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for fun. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the fun of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her?

This all took up two hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling of her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies — little powdered sugar cookies stuffed with dates and nuts — from her bag — and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a religious ritual. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo — we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline brought out free juice from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it, and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend — by now we were holding hands — had a potted plant sticking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate — once the crying of confusion stopped — seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.