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Beautiful Minds

The Differences between Happiness and Meaning in Life

There can be substantial trade-offs between seeking happiness and seeking meaning in life

By Scott Barry Kaufman on January 30, 2016



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“Humans may resemble many other creatures in their striving for happiness, but the quest for meaning is a key part of what makes us human, and uniquely so.” — Roy Baumeister et al. (2013)

The pursuit of happiness and meaning are two of our most central motivations in life. A wealth of research in positive psychology suggests that happiness and meaning are, in fact, essential elements of well-being. Happiness and meaning are strongly correlated with each other, and often feed off each other. The more meaning we find in life, the more happy we typically feel, and the more happy we feel, the more we often feel encouraged to pursue even greater meaning and purpose.

But not always.

An increasing body of research suggests that there can be substantial trade-offs between seeking happiness and seeking meaning in life. Consider, for instance, the “parenthood paradox”: parents often report that they are very happy they had children, but parents who are *living with children* usually score very low on measures of happiness. It seems that raising children can decrease happiness but increase meaning. Or consider revolutionaries, who often suffer through years of violence and discord for a larger purpose that can ultimately bring great satisfaction and meaning to their lives and the lives of others.

In his delightful book “Meanings of Life”, Roy Baumeister used examples such as these to argue that people seek not just happiness but also meaning in life. Likewise, eminent Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl famously argued that humans have a “will to meaning” in his seminal recounting of his harrowing (yet often meaningful) experiences living in a concentration camp during the Holocaust.

In recent years, a number of studies have further supported the differences between happiness and meaning. In one clever study, Baumeister and colleagues found that factors such as feeling connected to others, feeling productive, and not being alone or bored contributed to both happiness and meaning. However, they also found some important differences:

Finding one’s life easy or difficult was related to happiness, but not meaning.

Feeling healthy was related to happiness, but not meaning.

Feeling good was related to happiness, not meaning.

Scarcity of money reduced happiness more than meaning.

People with more meaningful lives agreed that ‘relationships are more important than achievements’.

Helping people in need was linked to meaning but not happiness.

Expecting to do a lot of deep thinking was positively related to meaningfulness, but *negatively* with happiness.*

Happiness was related more to being a taker rather than a giver, whereas meaning was related more to being a giver than a taker.

The more people felt their activities were consistent with core themes and values of their self, the greater meaning they reported in their activities.

Seeing oneself as wise, creative, and even anxious were all linked to meaning but had no relationship (and in some cases, even showed a negative relationship) to happiness.

It seems that happiness has more to do with having your needs satisfied, getting what you want, and feeling good, whereas meaning is more related to uniquely human activities such as developing a personal identity, expressing the self, and consciously integrating one's past, present, and future experiences.

Further support for this idea can be found in a recent study conducted by Jo Ann Abe on the impact of happiness and meaning-making over an extended period of time. This study overcomes some limitations of prior research on this topic, such as the reliance on self-report questionnaires and the assessment of happiness and meaning at a single point in time.

Abe extracted measures of happiness and meaning-making from weekly journals, which were written over the course of a semester. The participants were given freedom to write about what they wanted, and were encouraged to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings. Therefore, this study allowed people to really process their emotions and integrate their experiences across time.

The journals were analyzed using a well-validated computerized text-analysis program developed by James Pennebaker and colleagues. Happiness was assessed by looking at the frequency of positive emotions words (e.g., happy, laugh).

There is a general consensus that meaning has at least two major components: the **cognitive processing** component involves making sense and integrating experiences, and a **purpose** component, which is more motivational and involves actively pursuing long-term goals that reflect one's identity and transcends narrow

self-interests. Abe assessed the cognitive component of meaning by analyzing the frequency of causal words (e.g., because, reason) and insight words (e.g., understand, realize). She assessed the purpose component of meaning by analyzing the use of third-person pronouns (which would indicate a detached third-person perspective).

What did Abe find? First, the frequency of positive emotions was only weakly related to measures of adaptive functioning at follow-up (which ranged from half a year to 7 years). In fact, positive emotionality was *negatively* related to optimism and positively related to emotion suppression at follow-up. This finding is consistent with other research showing that even though meaning-making may be associated with negative emotions in the moment, it may contribute to greater resiliency and well-being in the longer-term.

This finding also supports the potential downside of happiness. While happiness may make us feel good in the moment, the avoidance of negative thoughts and feelings may stunt personal development over time. After all, personal development often requires experiencing the full range of emotions (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)). There is also emerging research that over time, happiness is associated with an increased sense of loneliness and a decreased sense of well-being.

In contrast, the two measures of meaning (cognitive processing and purpose) were *positively* associated with most of the measures of adaptation. In particular, cognitive processing was very strongly related to grit (passion and perseverance for long-term goals), and self-distancing was robustly related to gratitude and well-being, and *negatively* related to emotion suppression. What's more, the *interaction* between cognitive processing and self-distancing was additionally associated with measures of adaptation. It seems that meaning-making is particularly adaptive if one can maintain a self-detached third-person perspective (see [here](#)).

This study adds important nuance to the emerging science of meaning. In studying meaning, and its similarities and differences with happiness, it's important to use multiple methods. In addition to self-report and journal writing, other researchers use peer-ratings and genomic methods. To get a fuller picture, we will need to look at the overall pattern that all of these methods reveal.

While this study focused on the differences between happiness and meaning, it

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colleagues note, “Years of research on the psychology of well-being have demonstrated that often human beings are happiest when they are engaged in meaningful pursuits and virtuous activities.” Indeed, when we are deeply engaged in an activity that is in accordance with our best self, we often report the highest levels of life satisfaction (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

In my view, further investigation of the similarities and differences between happiness and meaning can contribute substantially to our understanding of this ‘sweet-spot’ of well-being: that seemingly magical combination of happiness and meaning that sets off the [virtuous cycle](#) that can ultimately lead to a life well lived. Now, that would be really meaningful.

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Note: For more on this topic, see Emily Esfahani Smith’s terrific article in [The Atlantic](#), “There’s More to Life Than Being Happy”.

* Interestingly though, actual deep thinking was positively related to both happiness and meaning. As the researchers note, people underestimate how happy deep thinking will make them feel!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)



Scott Barry Kaufman

Scott Barry Kaufman is scientific director of the Imagination Institute and a researcher and lecturer in the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. He conducts research on the measurement and development of imagination, creativity, and play, and teaches the popular undergraduate course Introduction to Positive Psychology. Kaufman is author of *Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined* and co-author of the book *Wired to Create: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Creative Mind* (with Carolyn Gregoire).

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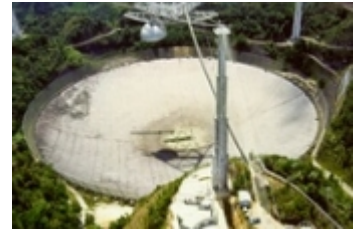
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