

Happiness in Islam (part 1 of 3): Concepts of Happiness



Even though happiness is perhaps one of the most important things in life, science still can not explain much about it. Its concept itself is elusive. Is it an idea, emotion, virtue, philosophy, ideal, or is it just programmed in the genes? There is no agreed upon definition for it, yet still everyone seems to be selling happiness these days - drug dealers, pharmaceutical companies, Hollywood, toy companies, self-help gurus, and, of course, Disney, creator of the Happiest Place on Earth. Can happiness really be purchased? Is happiness achieved by maximizing pleasure, earning fame and fortune, or living a life of unlimited leisure? The series of articles will briefly explore the evolution of happiness in Western thought, followed by the present cultural understanding in the West. Finally, the meaning and a few means of attaining happiness in Islam will be discussed.

Evolution of Happiness in Western Thought

The Christian idea of happiness was based on a reported saying of Jesus, **“...now is your time of grief, I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22)**

The Christian idea of happiness was developed over the centuries and, in turn, rested on a theology of sin, which, as St. Augustine explained in *The City of God*, taught that because of Adam and Eve’s original transgression in the Garden of Eden, true happiness was “unattainable in our present life.”^[1]

In 1776, Thomas Jefferson, summarizing a good century of reflection on the subject in Europe and America, deemed the “pursuit of happiness” a “self-evident” truth. By this time, the truth of happiness had been declared so often and so confidently that, for many, it scarcely needed evidence. It was, as Jefferson said, self-evident. To secure the “greatest happiness for the greatest number” had become the moral imperative of the century. But just how “self-evident” was the pursuit of happiness? Was it, in fact, so obvious that happiness was our naturally intended end? Christians confessed that human beings pursued happiness during their earthly pilgrimage, but remained skeptical about its attainment. Elsewhere, Jefferson himself was pessimistic whether the chase would ever be brought to a satisfying conclusion. “Perfect happiness...was never intended by the Deity to be the lot of one

of his creatures,” he specified in a letter of 1763, adding soberly that even “the most fortunate of us, in our journey through life, frequently meet with calamities and misfortunes which may greatly afflict us.”^[2] To “fortify our minds” against these attacks, he concluded, “should be one of the principal studies and endeavors of our lives.”

Whereas in the fifth century, Boethius could claim that “God is happiness itself,”^[3] by the middle of the 19th century, the formula was reversed to read “Happiness is God.” Earthly happiness emerged as the idol of idols, the locus of meaning in modern life, the source of human aspiration, the purpose of existence, the why and the wherefore. If happiness was not, as Freud said, ‘in the plan of Creation,’^[4] there were those ready to alter the handiwork of the Maker to put it there by manufacturing, consuming, and exporting it as democracy and free-market economy (materialism). As the philosopher Pascal Bruckner observed, “Happiness is the sole horizon of our contemporary democracies.” As a surrogate religion, materialism relocated God to the shopping mall.

Happiness in Western Culture

In our culture, it is commonly believed that happiness is achieved when you become rich, powerful, or popular. The young want to be that popular pop idol, the old dream of winning the jackpot. We often seek happiness by removing all stress, sadness, and irritations. For some, happiness lies in mood-altering therapies. Eva Moskowitz, a historian, gives some idea of the American obsession with the gospel of therapy: “Today, this obsession knows no bounds...there are more than 260 [different kinds of] 12-step programs in America.”^[5]

One reason we have so much trouble attaining happiness is that we have no idea about what it is. Consequently, we make poor judgments in life. An Islamic tale illustrates the relationship of judgment with happiness.

“Oh, great sage, Nasrudin,” said the eager student, “I must ask you a very important question, the answer to which we all seek: What is the secret to attaining happiness?”

Nasrudin thought for a time, then responded. “The secret of happiness is good judgment.”

“Ah,” said the student. “But how

do we attain good judgment?

“From experience,” answered
Nasrudin.

“Yes,” said the student. “But how
do we attain experience?”

“Bad judgment.”

An example of our good judgment is knowing that materialistic comforts by themselves do not lead to lasting happiness. Having reached that conclusion by our good judgment, we do not retreat into our comforts. We continue to crave a happiness that seems out of reach. We make more money thinking that is the way to become happy, and in the process neglect our family. Most big events we dream of yield less sustained happiness than we hoped for. In addition to getting less happiness than we expected or hoped for, we frequently do not know exactly what we want, what will make us happy or how to get it. We misjudge.

Enduring happiness does not come from ‘making it.’ Imagine someone could snap their fingers and give you fame, fortune, and leisure. Would you be happy? You would be euphoric, but in the short run. Gradually you would adapt to your new circumstance and life would return to its normal mix of emotions. Studies show that big lottery winners after a few months are no happier than the average person! To recover the joy, you would now need an even higher high.

Consider, too, how we have “made it.” In 1957, our per-person income, expressed in today’s dollars, was less than \$8,000. Today it is \$16,000. With doubled incomes, we now have double the material goods that money can buy - including twice as many cars per person. We also have microwave ovens, color TVs, VCRs, answering machines, and \$12 billion a year worth of brand-name athletic shoes.

So are we happier? No. In 1957, 35 percent of Americans told the National Opinion Research Center they were “very happy.” In 1991, only 31 percent said the same.^[6] Meanwhile, depression rates have soared.

God’s Prophet of Mercy said:

“True enrichment does not come through possessing a lot of wealth, but true enrichment is the enrichment of the soul.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Footnotes:

[1] *City of God*, (XIX.4-10). (<http://www.humanities.mq.edu.au/Ockham/y6705.html>).

[2] *Notes for an Autobiography*, 1821.

[3] *De Consol.* iii.

[4] *Civilization and Its Discontents*, (1930).

[5] *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession With Self-Fulfillment*.

[6] *Center for a New American Dream*, 2000 Annual Report.
(<http://www.newdream.org/publications/2000annualreport.pdf>)

Happiness in Islam (part 2 of 3): Happiness & Science

Part 1 of Happiness in Islam discussed the evolution of happiness in western thought and its effect on western culture. In part 2 we will re-examine the definitions of happiness and talk about the relationship between science and happiness and how this in turn relates to the teachings of Islam.

The Merriam Webster online dictionary defines happiness as a state of well being or contentment, a pleasurable or satisfying experience. Philosophers often define happiness in terms of living a good life. Happiness has also been defined as a state of well-being, characterized by emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy.

In the past few years psychologists and researchers have been studying people all over the world to find out what exactly makes us happy. Is it money, attitude, culture, memory, health, or altruism? New findings suggest that actions have a positive effect on happiness. "Yes! Magazine" has come up with a list of scientifically proven strategies for becoming happy. Not surprisingly they neatly correspond to the way God and His messenger Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, have taught us to behave, which is an indication of the perfection of Islam.

Here in no particular order, are seven "scientifically" proven ways to increase happiness.

1. Avoid comparisons.

According to Stanford psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky^[1], focusing on our own personal achievement instead of comparing ourselves to others, leads to greater satisfaction. God says in the Quran,

"Do not strain your eyes in longing for the things that we have given to some groups of them to enjoy, the splendour of the life of this world through which we test them. The provision of your Lord is better and more lasting." (Quran 20:131)

2. Smile, even when you don't feel like it.

“Happy people...see possibilities, opportunities, and success. When they think of the future, they are optimistic, and when they review the past, they tend to savour the high points,” say Diener and Biswas-Diener.[2]

Prophet Muhammad , may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said, “Do not think little of any good deed, even if it is just greeting your brother with a cheerful smile.”[3] and “To smile in the face of your brother is charity given on your behalf.”[4]

One of Prophet Muhammad’s companions said, “Since the day I accepted Islam, the Messenger of God would never meet me without a smiling face.”[5] The late Islamic scholar Sheikh Ibn Baaz, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “A smiling face indicates a good quality and causes blessed results – it indicates that one’s heart is free of rancour and it causes affection to grow between people”.

3. Get out and exercise.

A Duke University study shows that exercise may be just as effective as drugs in treating depression. Prophet Muhammad said: “A strong believer is better and more beloved in the sight of God than a weak believer.”[6] He was not only talking in terms of faith and character, but also that optimum health and fitness were desirable traits in a believer.

4. Make friends and treasure family.

Happier people tend to have good families, friends, and supportive relationships, say Diener and Biswas-Diener.[7] “We don’t just need relationships, we need close ones” that involve understanding and caring. Allah, the Exalted, says:

“Worship God and join none with Him in worship, and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, the poor, the neighbour who is near of kin, the neighbour who is a stranger, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (you meet). Verily, God does not like those who are proud and boastful.” (Quran 4:36)

Prophet Muhammad said, “Among the things that bring happiness to a believer in this life are a righteous neighbour, a spacious house and a good steed.”[8] Islam places great emphasis on the solidarity of families, neighbourhoods and the wider community.

5. Say thank you like you mean it.

People who keep gratitude journals on a weekly basis are healthier, more optimistic, and more likely to make progress toward achieving personal goals, according to author Robert Emmons[9].

At the core of the teachings of Islam is the idea that to be happy or content we must be grateful to God, not just for what we perceive to be blessings but for all circumstances. Whatever condition we find ourselves in we are grateful and sure that it is good for us as long as we are following the teachings of God. God said:

“Therefore, remember Me (God) and I will remember you, and be grateful to Me (for My countless Favours on you) and never be ungrateful to Me.” (Quran 2:152)

And (remember) when God proclaimed: ‘If you are grateful I will give you more (of My Blessings); but if you are ungrateful verily, My punishment is indeed severe.’ (Quran 14:7)

6. Give it away, give it away now!

Make altruism, and giving in charity, part of your life, and be resolute about it. Researcher Stephen Post says helping a neighbour, volunteering, or donating goods and services results in a “helper’s high,” and you get more health benefits than you would from exercise or quitting smoking.

Islam encourages people to be generous towards family, friends, neighbours, strangers and even enemies. This is mentioned repeatedly throughout the Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad.

“Say: “Truly, my Lord blesses the provision for whom He wills of His slaves, and also restricts it for him, and whatsoever you spend of anything (in God’s Cause), He will replace it. And He is the Best of providers.” (Quran 34:39)

The people came to the Prophet Muhammad, and asked, “If someone has nothing to give, what will he do?” He said, “He should work with his hands and benefit himself and also give in charity (from what he earns).” The people further asked, “If he cannot find even that?” He replied, “He should help the needy who appeal for help.” Then the people asked, “If he cannot do that?” He replied, “Then he should perform good deeds and keep away from evil deeds and this will be regarded as a charitable deed.”^[10]

7. Put money low on your list of priorities.

People who put money high on their priority list are more at risk for depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, according to researchers Tim Kasser and Richard Ryan. God’s messenger said, “Be happy, and hope for what will please you. By God, I am not afraid that you will be poor, but I fear that worldly wealth will be bestowed upon you as it was bestowed upon those who lived before you. So you will compete amongst yourselves for it, as they competed for it and it will destroy you as it did them.”^[11]

Happiness is not only intense joy, it also involves contentment. In the next article we will examine the role of happiness in Islam and discover that following the commandments of God is the path to righteousness, contentment and happiness.

Footnotes:

[1] The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Penguin Press, 2008

[2] Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth, Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008

[3] *Saheeh Muslim*

[4] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[5] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[6] *Saheeh Muslim*

[7] Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth, Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008

[8] Reported with a saheeh isnad by *al-Hakim*.

[9] Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier, Robert Emmons, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007

[10] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[11] *Ibid.*

(part 3 of 3): Happiness is Found in Sincere Worship

In Part 1, we discussed the evolution of happiness in western thought, and its effect on western culture. In part 2, we re-examined the definitions of happiness and tried to understand the relationship between science and happiness. Now, in part 3, we will learn about happiness in the teachings of Islam.

Islam is the religion that is more than a religion; it is the religion that is a complete way of life. Nothing is too small or too big to be covered by the teachings of Islam. Rejoice and be happy, remain positive and be at peace.^[1] This is what Islam teaches us, through the Quran and the authentic teachings of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. Every single one of God's commandments aims to bring happiness to the individual. This applies in all aspects of life, worship, economics, and society.

“Whoever works righteousness - whether male or female - while he (or she) is a true believer verily, to him We will give a good life (in this world with respect, contentment and lawful provision), and We shall pay them certainly a reward in proportion to the best of what they used to do (i.e. Paradise in the Hereafter).” (Quran 16:97)

As most of us have come to realise, happiness is that ethereal quality that encompasses contentment and peacefulness; it is the soft joy that causes our lips, faces and hearts to smile. It is determined by faith in God and obedience to Him. Thus happiness embodies the peace security and submission that is Islam. The injunctions and regulations of Islam reinforce the happiness that comes from knowing God and they help to guarantee humankind's happiness during life in this world. However, Islam also emphasizes that the life of this world is nothing more than a means of

attaining the Hereafter. By following the guidelines of Islam it is possible to be happy while awaiting our eternal happiness.

Sometimes, in order to achieve happiness, people attempt to follow complicated paths; they fail to see the easier path that is Islam. Happiness can be found in the solace that comes from being upon the truth. It can be achieved by sincere worship, hastening to do virtuous, noble and beautiful deeds, and by performing acts of kindness or giving charity. These things all have the potential to make us happy, every day, under any circumstances. Even giving the smallest charity, in order to please God, can bring a smile to your face and a feeling of joy to your heart.

“And the likeness of those who spend their wealth seeking God’s pleasure while they are sure and certain that God will reward them (for their spending in His Cause), is the likeness of a garden on a height; heavy rain falls on it and it doubles its yield of harvest. And if it does not receive heavy rain, light rain suffices it.” (Quran 2:265)

Prophet Muhammad said, “Indeed amazing are the affairs of a believer! They are all for his benefit. If he is granted ease then he is thankful, and this is good for him. And if he is afflicted with a hardship, he perseveres, and this is good for him.”^[2] The nature of the human condition means that amongst the happiness there may be great sorrow and within the pain and despair there may be great joy. A believer will accept God’s decree for him and lead a happy life free from total despair or unbearable pain.

Islam has the answer to all the problems that afflict humankind, and knowing this leads to happiness, because it allows us to look beyond the need for self-gratification, and the need to acquire possessions. Following the teaching of Islam and striving to please God is a constant reminder that this life is but a transient pause on the way to life everlasting.

“But whosoever turns away from My Reminder (i.e. neither believes in this Qur’an nor acts on its teachings) verily, for him is a life of hardship, and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection.” (Quran 20: 124)

God says in the Quran, **“Verily! I am Allah! None has the right to be worshipped but I, so worship Me.” (20:14)**. The key to happiness is knowing and worshipping God. When one worships and remembers the Creator as He should be worshipped and remembered, happiness can be observed all around us, at any given moment and even on the darkest night. It is there in the smile of a child, in the touch of a comforting hand, in the rain on parched earth, or in the smell of spring. These things can make our hearts truly happy because they are manifestations of God’s mercy and love. Happiness can be found in worship.

To find true happiness we must seek to know God, especially through His names and attributes. Seeking beneficial knowledge brings happiness. The angels flutter their wings and keep records of those who seek knowledge; the mere thought of this

brings a smile of happiness to the face of a believer. Our righteous predecessors understood the inherent happiness and joy to be found in striving to be close to God.

Outstanding Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, may God have mercy on him, once said, “I once became ill and the physician told me that reading and giving talks on knowledge would only exacerbate my condition. I told him that I could not abandon these pursuits. I asked him whether the body becomes stronger and sickness is repelled if the soul feels happy and joyful. He replied in the affirmative, so I said my soul finds joy, comfort and strength in knowledge”.

Perfect happiness will only be available to us if we spend life everlasting in Paradise. It is only there that we will find total peace, tranquillity and security. It is only there that we will be free of the fear, anxiety and pain that are part of the human condition. However the guidelines provided by Islam allow us, imperfect humans, to seek happiness in this world. The key to being happy in this world and the next is seeking the pleasure of God, and worshipping Him, without associating partners with Him.

And of them there are some who say: “Our Lord! Give us in this world that which is good and in the Hereafter that which is good, and save us from the torment of the Fire!”(Quran 2:201)

Footnotes:

[1] Al Qarni, Aaidh Ibn Abdullah, (2003), *Don't be sad*. International Islamic Publishing House, Saudi Arabia.

[2] *Saheeh Muslim*