Health

You Won't Find Happiness Without Deep, Dark Sadness

Don't believe anyone who says the secret is eight hugs a day.

By Eric Spitznagel

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Are you ready for the International Day of Happiness?

It's coming up on March 20th (because Mondays are obviously the happiest day of the week). It's an actual, **globally celebrated holiday**, created by the United Nations, in which everybody in the world takes one day to ... well, we're not quite sure. Be happy?

If that sounds cynical, you'd be entirely correct. The push to be happy can sometimes feel forced at best, and like a complete illusion at worst. Have you seen what's happening in the world lately? We've got a raving lunatic in the White House, hate crimes are at an all time high, and the Doomsday Clock just moved 30 seconds **closer to midnight**.

But that hasn't stopped many well-meaning researchers, philosophers, positive psychologists, and spiritual leaders from trying to crack the happiness code anyway. Many of them—like humanitarian leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, *World Happiness Report* co-author Sir Richard Layard, and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Center Director Saamdu Chetri—will be coming to Miami in March for the first annual **World Happiness Summit** to compare notes from years of academic and clinical research.

"They're going to translate these ideas into actionable rules," says Karen Guggenheim, one of the Summit's co-founders. "It won't just be academic conversations. This research doesn't help anyone if you just put it in a journal. That's not enough."

Actually, much of the happiness research over the last decade has come with actionable rules. The problem is, those actionable rules are usually stupid.

Thanks to actual studies conducted by real institutions and published by not-fake academic journals, we now know that happiness can be achieved by **smiling more**. Or **taking off your pants**. Or **eating more vegetables**. Or just **not being a dick**. Or having **eight hugs a day**—yes, *exactly eight hugs*.

Then there's the grandpappy of happiness research, the **Grant Study**, which has been following several hundred white guys from Harvard and the Boston area for close to a century, monitoring their behavior and trying to determine the root of a meaningful, happy life. George Vaillant, a Harvard psychiatrist who oversaw the study for three decades (from 1972 to 2004), summed up their findings thusly: "The Grant Study points to a straightforward five-word conclusion: Happiness is love. Full stop." Great. So in other words, the Beatles were right all along?

Many of the researchers attending the Summit agree that modern happiness research hasn't exactly been making huge strides. "There hasn't been that much change since 2007, at least not when it comes to the fundamentals," says Tal Ben-Shahar, a Happiness Summit panelist and former Harvard professor whose class on positive psychology was the most popular in the university's history. "The most meaningful advance has been in the area of neuroscience. We are learning more and more about the brain, and how it is related to the different emotional states."

Brain scanning has unearthed some remarkable discoveries—like that most subjective happiness originates **in the right precuneus** of the brain—but that mostly explains *why* you're happy, not how to *be* happy. One of the people who got his brain scanned is Ricard Matthieu, a Tibetan Buddhist monk and featured speaker the Happiness Summit. He's been touted as "**the world's happiest man**"—a title he reportedly hates—which nonetheless was proven by science when neuroscientists from the University of Wisconsin **monitored his brain waves** with a electroencephalography (EEG) test and found his mind capable of an "abnormally large capacity for happiness."

Matthieu doesn't think he's a unique snowflake. In fact, he insists anyone can reach his state of lasting wellbeing once they've freed themselves "of afflictive emotions, such as hatred, craving, arrogance, jealousy and mental confusion. It is also the wisdom that allows us to see the world as it is, without veils or distortions."

It sounds like the wisdom of a man who doesn't use social media, or one who has never worked at a job requiring a maddening commute, or been to a gathering with relatives who want to share their ass-backwards political opinions with you, or gotten into a fight with a spouse or partner over who was the last one to do the dishes.

"Unfortunately, our control of the outer world is limited, temporary, and often illusory," Matthieu tells me. "Our mind can be our best friend or our worst enemy. Training of the mind, which is the true meaning of meditation, is crucial for dealing effectively with deluded thought and afflictive emotions that are the causes of suffering. It is a skill that can be developed."

Of course that makes sense. Of course it's true. But the reason many of us (points at self) have knee-jerk reactions against it anyway, sneering like it's a "Hang in there, kitty" meme, is that it discounts sadness. It treats our bad feelings as "deluded thought and afflictive emotions." Is sadness really an emotion we should be running away from? Maybe it's happiness that isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Eric Wilson, a professor at Wake Forest University and author of *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*, says we've changed the way we've diagnosed depression. "What once would've been categorized as normal sadness, like mourning the loss of a loved one, now if it lasts a little too long, it can be seen as clinical depression," he says. "We have a faster trigger finger for diagnosing someone as depressed."

We live in a culture that values happiness, or at least the appearance of happiness. Wilson, who has bipolar disorder, says he's personally grappled with the cultural expectations of constant bliss. "I used to feel that something was wrong with me because I wasn't happy all the time," he says. "There's a stigma in our culture against feelings of melancholy."

Many deep thinkers in the happiness field seem to treat happiness and sadness like an either/or proposition. You're happy *or* you're sad, and it all comes down to making the right choice.

"We need to water the seeds of happiness, which everyone is not ready to do," says Chetri, who will speak at the Summit. "Happiness needs a new definition. I think we will be happier if we learnt to eliminate the sadness. How can we do that is the way forward for me."

In theory, eliminating sadness entirely sounds like a wonderful idea. Except the reality would likely be really terrible. It's the exact opposite of what we hope for our children. Remember that Pixar movie *Inside Out*? It argued eloquently for sadness. Not because sadness helps us appreciate happiness more, or can lead us back to happiness, but because sadness, in and of itself, is an emotion worth experiencing. If you're not sad sometimes, maybe a *lot* of times, you're missing out on the point of being alive.

I'm a parent, and I saw *Inside Out* with my 5-year-old, and I bawled like a baby. Not because I realized that I needed to be more accepting of sadness in my life, but because I knew my son needed to be. I wasn't part of the equation. Every other parent I've talked to had the same reaction. The pro-sadness message of *Inside Out* was clearly just about childhood, not us. We're adults. Our job is to be happy and fulfilled *all the time*. Let the kids cry it out.

"We will eventually learn to think in a more nuanced and useful way about it," says Randy J. Paterson, a clinical psychologist and author of *How to Be Miserable: 40 Strategies You Already Use*. "Not just 'Happiness *good*, anxiety *bad*. Instead, people will learn more useful ideas like 'Emotions are normal and not lethal diseases to be eradicated. We like some of them more than others, but we will never have it all the time.'"

But what if happiness science got to a point where they accepted that sometimes people *choose* to be sad, because sadness can, in some situations, be the more genuine emotion? Melancholy, if you're doing it right, can be deeply, profoundly satisfying. Like Victor Hugo once wrote, "Melancholy is the happiness of being sad." If that sentence doesn't ring true, you have never been melancholy. You've just been vaguely blue.

The happiest I felt last year was when the Chicago Cubs won the World Series, and I cried about how much I missed my dad, who died almost 15 years ago. I don't mean I got a little misty eyed. The floodgates opened. I was a freaking mess. Everything I'd kept bottling up for a decade plus, because I was so focused on being happy and positive—I'm an adult, dammit, and adults don't wallow—came bubbling to the surface. I was a spewing geyser of man tears.

The night the Cubs won, I walked through the streets of Chicago, and passed dozens of crying men. I don't know if they were crying about their dads too, but they were crying about something. We cry-fived each other, which is high-fiving while weeping uncontrollably.

didn't get to that happy-sad place with mindful meditation. I did it by accepting that I was really, really, really pissed off and sad and deeply hurt that my dad never lived long enough to see his beloved team win.

It was a relief to finally have an excuse to say, "This sucks. I fucking hate this." Letting that pain wash over me was an endorphin rush. I felt alive and unburdened and grateful. Maybe that's the same feeling happiness experts get when they're doing yoga on the beach and thinking happy thoughts. If that's true, maybe we're all doing the same thing and calling it different things.

Many of the happiness researchers and experts I spoke with sidestepped the issue of sadness, or insisted that being unhappy just wasn't necessary, because anybody could beat down those bad feelings if they were willing to do the work of meditation and positive thinking. It all came down to "finding the path out of sadness to be happy again," as Chetri explained it.

Some—like Neil Pasricha, Director of the Institute for Global Happiness, and the bestselling author of *The Happiness Equation*—agreed that this was a problem, not just in the field of happiness research but among regular joes trying to navigate through complicated emotional minefields.

"Usually the question I get most often is, 'How can I be happy *all the time*?'" he says. "That's easy. You can't, and you shouldn't try. It's not about looking at the world as either all positive or all negative. What you start to realize is, the glass is neither half full nor half empty. It's just refillable."

Others, like Ben-Shahar, think I'm full of shit. (Those are my words, not his.)

"Attacking positive psychology—the science of happiness and human flourishing—for not taking into consideration sadness is attacking a

strawman," he says. "Very few researchers in the field would argue that we need to look away from sadness. This is what self-help or New Age gurus may argue. Rejecting sadness only intensifies the feeling. It's important to give ourselves the permission to be human."

He's probably right. But then again, the itinerary for the Happiness Summit doesn't seem to offer much room for exploring sadness. There are panel discussions with names like "Broadcasting Happiness," "Happiness as a Competitive Advantage", and "Celebrate Happiness: Share it!" If sadness is really being given equal time, why not include at least a panel or two with names like "Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now (and That's Okay)" or "I'm Dying, You're Dying, We're *All* Dying"?

I pitch my ideas to Happiness Summit co-founder Guggenheim, and remarkably, she kinda likes them. "Absolutely," she says. "We need more sadness in the discussion. There's probably not enough." And then, apropos of nothing, she starts to tell me about her late husband, who passed away four years ago.

"I was married to him for 21 years, and I lost him to the flu," she tells me. "The fricking *flu*. Who dies of the *flu* in the United States of America?"

I can hear the heartbreak in her voice. It was the same barely-contained rage I'd heard from my mother when my dad passed. It was the unspoken context of "Fuck you, universe. How dare you do this to me?"

"My husband was an amazing, brilliant, kind man," she says. "He wasn't a bad person. It *shouldn't have happened* to him. But it happened. He died."

"How do you get from that dark place, where everything seems meaningless and cruel and horrible, to creating a Happiness Summit?" I ask.

"It's not a big leap."

"It's a *huge* leap," I insist. "It's like going from 'I lost the love of my life to a drunk driver' to 'I'm running Oktoberfest'."

"You know what it is?" she says. "If I get a 4X4 and I hit you on the face, it's going to hurt. For you to say, 'Oh that's fantastic, that feels great,' that would be insane. You're not telling the truth."

"That hurts like a motherfucker," I agree.

"It does," she says. "It *still* does. The sadness is there. It's always there. I feel it on Thanksgiving, on Christmas, my anniversary, his birthday. I feel it every day. I was in that room when he died. I saw what death looks like. If you go through it and come out the other side, I can't even begin to tell you. It's so painful, it's agonizing."

"I can't," I tell her. And that's true. When I try to picture what it'd be like to watch my wife die in front of me ... just imagining it makes me fall apart.

"But the thing is," she continues, "the moment comes and goes like a wave. You don't hold on to it. You don't attach to it. You *choose* not to attach to it. You *choose* not to label it 'My Pain, My Loss.' You don't own it."

I don't know why she makes such a convincing case. It could be because she keeps reminding me that she's not an expert, and she doesn't have a PhD, and hasn't been trained in mindful meditation by the Dalai Lama. Maybe it's because she doesn't keep trying to insist that happiness is waiting for all of us if we'll just make the effort. Happiness is there, sure, but the sadness isn't going anywhere.

"You're making me miss my dad," I tell her.

"That's okay," she says, in the most amazingly reassuring voice. "Pain can be a fantastic catalyst for change."