

How do we even start to define happiness?

What even is an emotion? The words affect, emotion, feeling, mood-state are used interchangeably, although they are variations on a theme. In this podcast an emotion is a psychological and biological process that involves neurochemicals, other physiological reactions, thoughts especially language of the mind and behaviours. Emotions are data reactions to external things and also internal events such as memories, dreaming, daydreaming for example. I'd say an emotion is a building block to making sense of the world around us, other people and place within the world. Emotions come in various flavours and there is much debate in the types of emotions and how to categorise them. My favourites include guilt, contentment, surprise, contempt and amusement. The human emotion landscape is vast.

Defining happiness is tricky and often involves 'it depends' parameters and variables. It seems to be a social construction, which is reflected differently in different cultures, having different meanings, interpretations and focuses. I often wonder how it conflates with Western individualism and assumptions around finding your bliss, whatever that means. Some cultures value purpose and activity over happiness. As we define and make sense of happiness it inevitably will come with assumptions, beliefs and philosophies underpinning it. Not to mention privileges. I mean, even the Greek philosophers couldn't agree. Is it a virtuous life and realised potential through justice, courage and wisdom tempered with moderation? Or could it be having an ascetic lifestyle, noble friends and avoiding politics?

The more one tries to define happiness, the more complicated it becomes. It's like grasping at smoke. Dare I even suggest that the word happiness is at times unhelpful. So, in addition to feeling more confused and overwhelmed in trying to find a definition, let's assume happiness is more than an absence of pain.

According to Brené Brown's definition in *Atlas of The Heart*, my go to for emotional definitions, "The state of happiness as feeling pleasure often related to the immediate environment or current circumstances". According to Brené Brown, happiness is stable, longer lasting than joy, usually the result of effort, perhaps more connected to the external world, external events and circumstances beyond us. Interestingly, Brené Brown writes way more about joy, calm, contentment and especially gratitude.

Sonja Lyubomirsky writes in her book *The How of Happiness* "experiences of joy, contentment or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful and worthwhile." What I like about this definition is that it brings in action.

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The lack of definition, and it's very personal and contextual nature, means that happiness as a term, should be treated with curiosity and caution, especially when use it to define ourselves and our experiences. What does happiness mean to you? How will you recognise it if you bumped into it at Gloucester Green Bus station?

Perhaps it is as Lucy from Peanuts said in the 1960s - Happiness is a warm puppy. For the Oxford context I'd like to upgrade this to an Alpaca, as they seem to be frequent visitors during student welfare weeks. So, happiness is a warm Alpaca.

I want to introduce the Stories of The Mind. Aka the Secret Director.

And they all lived happily ever after is something you might have heard depending on where you grew up in the world. We can see already that this sets the scene for potentially unrealistic expectations. Happiness seems to be something we should have and are owed; we must aim towards and own. There's a certain undercurrent of perfectionism when it comes to happily-ever-after-endings, especially when life and happiness just doesn't work that way, because life and people are messy and confusing and certainly not linear – happiness is part of the journey not the destination and it is a dynamic process.

Let me put it another way, the esteemed poet Pharrell Williams once sang in his song Happy:

- Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth
- (Because I'm happy)
- Clap along if you know what happiness is to you
- (Because I'm happy)

But is happiness really the truth Pharrell?

We all grow up with stories of some sort. Stories with lessons, stories with morals and stories with rules. Our metaphoric and narrative brain loves stories because they are more easily encoded, remembered and came well before writing. Stories are vehicles with crucial developmental information in how we should be in the world and how we engage in the socially constructed and culturally sensitive social contracts and expectations. Stories help build templates. And templates help build stories. We can use templates as defaults when we meet new situations, things we haven't encountered before. Sometimes those templates can do with some tuning up or amending or at least reviewing. Sometimes we might hold rules too tightly and lose the ability to act flexibly and adaptably to situations.

I'm often curious who is talking to me about my templates and rules of happiness? Is it me or my mind? Is it the Secret Director who constructs these narratives using templates behind the scenes – just mostly out of conscious awareness? But sometimes in the spotlight too.

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I call it the Secret Director because it is a metaphor, it acts like a director might, the director moves your gaze towards the film or narrative of our lives, the Secret Director decides the camera angles, brings in the thought and feeling actors in and probably writes the score too. The Secret Director writes the scripts and composes the production. It produces the stories of the mind that have some sense of continuation and consistency. Imagine the Secret Director processing all of the conscious and unconscious material and sculpts a seemingly consistent narrative or story. This story or better yet, sets of stories can then guide our attention or our focus. This in turn can then drive our behaviour.

Sometimes it is helpful to ponder is this behaviour for the Secret Director or for me. I talk about this later on, but the Secret Director often wants to keep us safe, is fear-orientated, risk-avoiding and works in the short-term. When we make decisions and take action in the world, even when we really want something, and it is value-driven behaviour that we choose and is a long-term investment, the Secret Director can appear to provide a scary narrative that warns things could go terribly wrong and that we will end up feeling bad – this can influence our decisions and our actions. Better safe than sorry, but at what cost. The Secret Director could be a right response at the wrong time.

Happiness isn't the truth, it is not a truthful state. It's a directed mindset that is often transient and suggestible to errors in part constructed by the Secret Director.

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Let's ponder Primary and secondary pain together.

Humans can experience a primary experience, let's say a sudden onset of happiness. Eugh. I'm looking at beautiful spring field in the golden hour of sunset with buttercups. There are horses. I then not only feel happy – but a secondary process kicks in.

The meta-discourse can look something like this:

- I'm feeling happy, this is nice.
- What a beautiful sunset, I wish Alpacas were here.
- I wish I was a Alpaca, they always seem happy.
- Alpacas don't need to work.
- What a life.
- Will this happiness go?
- I've got work tomorrow.
- Shit, I forgot about that deadline.
- Why me?
- Why am I not happy?
- What is wrong with me?
- Why don't I deserve to be happy?

End scene. Curtains close. We've left the sunset. Our gaze is being directed inwards. Thoughts connect to other thoughts, memories, wonderings and then our feelings change in connection to those thought patterns and of course, vice versa. Our systems cascade in multi-directional waves. The Secret Director is showing up and re-directing our attention from this present moment experience to other areas of inward experience. No wonder happiness is transient.

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Let's introduce from Secret Director to observing part.

Comparison is the thief of joy, it's automatic, it's natural, and it often leaves us wanting. If we can be curious what triggered the comparison, rather than just following the comparison through, that might give some space to reflect and slow that process down.

I went to Bologna for a short trip some years back. Just to eat pasta and drink wine in a piazza and be connected to a different space. Right at the end of the trip I had a challenging experience trying to get out of an airport parking space that was super tight with a bus waiting right behind me. It was full of people waiting to get to their flights. I then got lost trying to get out of the parking. I can't tell you how stressed and angry I was.

My mind was saying:

- I've ruined the trip.
- Why can't I be happy.

The Secret Director was guiding my attention to the story. The holiday had many wonderful parts, but due to recency effect (where we remember recent things more vividly) and the bias of selection, the lens was that the holiday seemed ruined in the moment. It felt very believable. Of course it wasn't ruined. I'm trying to separate memory from emotional encoding and not see the globality of experience, but that it was the trip I had with all the emotional components that belonged there. When thinking about past experiences the Secret Director tends to focus on aspects that were negative or painful, because they stand out, these can then obscure recall. As I said earlier, The Secret Director often wants to keep us safe, is fear-orientated, risk-avoiding and works in the short-term, it is biased.

When recalling happiness, there's the sum and then there's the parts that make it, which aspects weigh the judgement? Recency effects (where we remember recent things more vividly) and negativity impact might skew how we remember and recall things, especially around happiness. I got the holiday I was meant to have, which was based on values and actions. Having unpleasant or negative feelings if I can call them that, didn't mean the holiday was negative.

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And so we turn to social comparison and labels.

I said earlier that happiness isn't the truth, it is not a truthful state. It's a directed mindset that is often transient and suggestible to errors in part constructed by the Secret Director.

You might have thoughts like:

- This is not where I thought I'd be in my life.
- I'm doing things but they don't make me happy.
- I'm supposed to be happy.

Humans are inherently comparative. We compare all the time. Sometimes we compare and despair, especially upwards, we feel worse off. This when I compare myself against someone I perceive as more successful or rich for example. Sometimes we compare downwards to people worse off, and we feel better, for a bit. Despite our language capabilities and consciousness, we operate by simple comparative linguistic rules that have powerful implications for us and our mindsets aka that Secret Director and the assumptions it makes. How we see ourselves, others and the world. Sometimes we might feel jealousy and sometimes we might feel envy. Envy is coveting what another has, from a place of absence. Jealousy often involves two people or entities, competing for the attention or resources of a third. Envy involves 2 people. Jealousy often involves 3 or more.

An example of this could be when you received feedback and what that activates within us. Do receive the feedback gladly, feel sad, scared, angry, comparative, feel imposter-y, critical. Often it connects to how we see ourselves and compare ourselves. Especially with performance-based self-worth, it can activate that compare and despair. I tend to focus on the critical points rather than other good points. Feedback can change my relationship with the work, but it's the perception that changes, not always the ability.

Comparison is very easily achieved and needs few elements. We need some comparison groups and an arbitrary value of measure that changes depending on what is compared. That value measure can be happiness levels. Or grades, or wealth, or beauty. Happiness becomes comparative and competitive with self and others. Something to own and store for later. It's a discriminator of social value. We might feel we are breaking rules by not being happy.

- They are happier than me.
- They have more happiness than me.
- I should be happy.

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So, as we compare, we also tend to label. So how are measuring success?

And more importantly for who are we measuring that success? How does happiness link to success? Is success about always being happy? Or pretending to be happy?

Good old pseudo happiness, smile for that social media post.

We have labelled some experiences as good or bad, we want more of the good stuff and less of the bad stuff. But who has created those labels? What do the labels assume?

We can't fully control happiness, but we've created a language of control, a language of desirability. As I've discussed, happiness comes and goes, and the context is often more complicated than we initially perceive.

Because we can't control a lot of things in the world including our own internal states and experiences, although we try at all costs, we spend a lot of time trying to understand and trying to control happiness and other experiences. Happiness seems of value in the language of comparison, but at what cost?

The takeaway is that you are more than this narration or story. You are not what you seem. Others and the world aren't always what they seem, try to remember this. You are more than the Secret Director. Think about how the Social Director likes to socially compare us to others and also introduces the narrative and labels. There's a part of us, the observing part, that is unchanged by the critiques of the mind or Secret Director. It can observe the mind, so it really isn't us at all. Also, everything we process is in the past, it has already happened with some slight processing delay. It's a projection to create constancy. The Secret Director is commenting on things already in the past. They are not you. Remember to trust your experiences, not just your mind or the stories it tells you. Does this feeling or thought have my best interest at heart? How can this feeling or thought help me?