

Sustainable Happiness

New philosophy course challenges students to a happy life

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Happiness Cubed

Happiness studies span disciplines — each of these Liberal Arts course offerings takes its own unique approach to the topic. Interested students might take all three for a multi-dimensional exploration.



Psychology of Happiness (Psychology 791)^[1]_[SEP]

An advanced examination of positive psychology research: How can we measure happiness and subjective well-being, and what factors influence happiness?

Taught by Rebecca Warner



Happiness, Well-Being, and a Good Life (Philosophy 410)

An introduction to philosophic inquiry through the philosophy and psychology of happiness: what contributes to and detracts from happiness, well-being and a good life?

Taught by Paul McNamara



Classical Society, Politics, and Ethics: Happiness and Ancient Views of the Good Life (Classics 520B)

An historical approach to happiness and the good life: how do ancient concepts of the good life influence later views, and how do specific historical circumstances alter visions of a life well lived?^[1]_[SEP]

Taught by Susan Curry

With freezing temperatures and waves of winter storms inundating much of the country, it's been hard not to feel a little worn out this winter. Beyond light therapy boxes and keeping our chins up, is there anything we can do to sustain a little positivity?

Students in professor Paul McNamara's new philosophy course, "Happiness, Well-Being and a Good Life," are considering their options. They're tasked with writing a "happiness plan" — a blueprint for a good life that includes actions they might take to ensure and enhance their happiness and things to avoid that might be detrimental. They'll end up with personal strategies to see them through cold winters, cold shoulders and the myriad challenges life has to offer.

"I wanted to create a course for first-year students to start them thinking not just about what kind of career they might want, but in a broader and informed way about what kind of life they want and how they are going to make that happen," says McNamara.

Luckily, there are at least 2,500 years of thought on the subject, so students have a lot to draw on.

For background, students start in ancient Greece. Plato argued that a moral life was a happy life. Develop the virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation and justice, and you'll live a moral — and happy — life. Other early western thinkers argued that happiness is achieved through the practice of rational thought, or by avoiding pursuits that bring physical and mental pain or by worshipping God.

For a bit of wisdom closer to our own century, students look to Enlightenment thinkers such as Hobbes, Butler and Kant who have a thing or two to say about how desire relates to happiness. The continual fulfillment of desires — fleeting though a single payoff may be — produces happiness, one philosopher suggests. Many thinkers argue for modulating passions, pursuing only those that are benevolent or calm.

Eastern thought, too, has a rich history on the subject, in the traditions of Taoism and Buddhism, and recent research shows that meditation increases happiness. The Dalai Lama himself co-authored a book, [*The Art of Happiness*](#), in which he wrote, "If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

But students will spend much of their time this semester studying contemporary ideas about happiness in the young field of positive psychology, founded in 1998 by Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania. For Seligman, psychology had too long concentrated on what makes people mentally ill and not on what makes people well. He wanted to change that, so he began studying how happiness works.

In his 2002 book, [*Authentic Happiness*](#), Seligman contends that there are three forms of happiness: the pleasant life, the good life and the meaningful life. The pleasant life is comprised of physical pleasures; the good life of work, family and activities, and the meaningful of pursuing causes greater than one's self. A good and meaningful life — and not necessarily a pleasant life — are critical for authentic happiness, he writes. We can maximize authentic happiness by building on our personality strengths and practicing optimism. Seligman now has decades of research that support many of his claims.

One optimism practice proven to increase happiness is the expression of gratitude, which can be as simple as jotting down three things every day for which you are grateful. It sounds a lot like the old adage, “Count your blessings.” But there’s an important difference, according to McNamara.

“Many of the questions that psychologists are investigating philosophers started asking 3,000 years ago,” says McNamara. “It’s not as if people throughout history had no reason to believe that counting your blessings, or looking on the bright side, or being ‘philosophical’ about challenges in life was a good thing or a wise thing, but the methods that science and psychology use are less prone to error, so now we can test those ideas in a rigorous way.

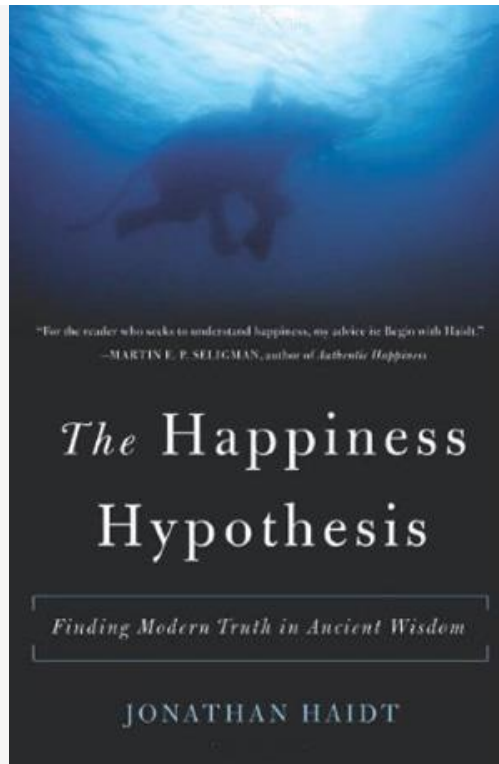
While decades of testing suggest that interventions such as gratitude exercises can help people feel happier, other research points to a genetic disposition to a certain capacity for happiness — a tendency for people to settle at their own pre-determined level of positivity, regardless of circumstances.

“An example might be that you win the lottery, and, within a year, you are back to being at roughly the same level of happiness that you were before or worse; or you suffer a substantial disability but soon return close to the level of happiness you had before,” says McNamara.

Still, there is some flexibility to improve our happiness baselines, and research shows it’s worth the effort. As if the pleasure of happiness itself weren’t enough of a reward, positive moods have been found to increase our immune function and help us perform better on a range of tasks.

Recommended Reading

[The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom](#)^[SEP] by Jonathan Haidt (Basic Books, 2005)



“Haidt looks at ten different views of human nature, seeing how they fit with contemporary psychology, especially positive psychology,” says Paul McNamara, associate professor of philosophy. “It’s an accessible and fun book that mixes psychology with philosophical literature, religious literature, and what might be called, broadly, wisdom literature. I think it would be hard to come away from this book without thinking you’ve learned something about yourself.”

A potential pitfall McNamara intends to examine closely with his students is supposing that we know with surety when we are happy or what will make us happy. Much of positive psychology research rests on self-assessment surveys. But is happiness something that is so transparent that we are incapable of being mistaken about it, asks McNamara? A strain of philosophy called the Eudaimonistic tradition suggests it is not.

Consider the student who enrolls in a certain major because her family thinks that it will bring career success and, thus, happiness. The student might believe that this is true and gauge her happiness based on how well she is fulfilling the plan, but the plan may not resonate with her deeper desires.

“In the Eudaimonistic conception, you might look at your goals —short-, medium- and long-term — and ask: Are they well integrated with one another and also, in some sense, with your deeper self, who you are? If they are, then all else equal, you are well off in this conception,” says McNamara.

Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert, author of the 2006 bestseller [Stumbling on Happiness](#), finds that people aren’t really very good at forecasting how something will make them feel. Our feelings in the present shape how we think we’ll feel in the future. Memory, perception and our brain’s cognitive functions often distort how we interpret

and imagine experience. Students developing a happiness plan have a tricky path to navigate if they can't trust their own assessments of what will make them happy. Gilbert suggests that asking the advice of someone with relevant experience might be an effective way to help make those important decisions.

In the 2010 PBS series [This Emotional Life](#), Gilbert gives viewers a snapshot of the state of the science of happiness. His conclusion? Money, health and work are all relevant to our happiness, but strong social networks are the most important indicator of a happy life: "Life is a journey through time, and happiness is what happens when we make that journey together."

If thousands of years of wisdom and decades of science could be boiled down to a single idea, it might just be that connecting with others is the best way to sustain a happy life — and make it through a long, hard winter.

Related:

UNH acapella group Not Too Sharp sings a decidedly happy song

[See the video on YouTube](#)

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IN THE CLASSROOM



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