

SELECTION 6

Happy People

Vocabulary Review

a famous *gourmet*
comparisons are largely *irrelevant*
deviate from your adaptation level
a *hierarchy* of needs
to realize your *potential*

1 There is no simple formula for producing happiness. I
2 just can't list a set of requirements and say that these, or
3 some proportion of these, are necessary; that you will be
4 happy if you have them and unhappy if you do not. Yes,
5 certain elements are very closely related to happiness. For
6 example, married people are happier than unmarriages on
7 the average. Sex, good health, an above-poverty income,
8 friends and a job each makes happiness easier to attain.
9 Also, there is evidence that people who have confidence in
10 their own guiding values, who believe that there is mean-
11 ing and direction in life, and who feel they have control
12 over the good and bad things that happen to them are
13 generally happier than people who do not.

14 But not one of these factors is either necessary or suffi-
15 cient. You can lack any one of them and still be happy—
16 and you can have all of them and still be miserable.

17 I cannot provide a recipe—like a cup of love and a
18 teaspoon of guiding values. Perhaps that's because happi-

19 ness depends on something more complex than a combi-
20 nation of ingredients. It depends less on the mixture of
21 elements than on how the individual responds to them.
22 In lieu of supplying you with a "no-bake, quick-cake"
23 recipe for happiness, what I can do is provide you with five
24 basic theories of what makes an individual happy.

25 Comparison to Others

26 The comparison theory is a compelling one, widely dis-
27 cussed and simple to understand. It goes like this: If you
28 are doing better than someone else, you are happy; if you
29 are doing worse, you are unhappy. There is no set level of
30 anything—money, sex, love, whatever. Rather, you look
31 around at other people and get some idea of how much of
32 each important element they seem to have. You are
33 satisfied if you have about as much, and delighted if you
34 have more.

35 Take, for example, the college graduate and the less-
36 educated man who both earn the same salary. The college
37 graduate compares himself to other college graduates, so
38 his income might not seem very good. In fact, it might
39 seem low. In contrast, the high school graduate compares
40 himself to other high school graduates. If he finds that he is
41 making more than most of them, he feels good about it.

42 Although this makes sense and, I suspect, is true some of
43 the time for some people, it is not the whole story. For one
44 thing, I did not find that sexual satisfaction was related to
45 one's notion of others' sexual behavior. Most people think
46 (wrongly) that others are more sexually active than them-
47 selves; but those who thought others were more active
48 were just about as likely to be happy themselves as anyone
49 else. In other words, happiness with sex depended not on
50 number of sex partners, only somewhat on frequency, and
51 not at all on what one thought others were doing. It de-
52 pended on whether one was in love, and how "good" the
53 sex was, whatever that meant to them.

54 My guess is that the comparison theory works in the
55 realm of your achievement of goals set by society, but a
56 more *absolute* happiness scale is in play concerning cer-
57 tain crucial, personal elements of your life. In other words,
58 society says it is good to make money, be successful, get
59 recognition and have a good job; and society also defines

60 what each of these terms mean. How much money is a lot?
61 We can only tell by comparing ourselves to others similar
62 to us.

63 In contrast, other crucial elements in our lives are
64 evaluated without comparisons and without the defini-
65 tions of society. We experience and judge them directly.
66 For instance, I don't much care whether Craig Claiborne
67 or any other famous gourmet likes a particular restaurant.
68 I may use his judgment in deciding whether to try the
69 place, but once I'm there, I can taste the food for myself; if I
70 like it, that's all that matters.

71 The absolute scale seems to me to work for internal
72 states that contribute to happiness: sexual pleasure, love,
73 satisfaction with marriage and family. Also, self-
74 confidence, feelings of control and a sense of meaning in
75 life all depend mainly on the individual himself or herself,
76 and comparisons to others are largely irrelevant.

77 Expectations vs. Achievements

78 A related theory is that happiness depends on the com-
79 parison between what we expect and what we get. Instead
80 of comparing ourselves to others, we ask ourselves what
81 we want (or expect) and are happy when we achieve as
82 much and particularly when we get more. Under these
83 terms, what other people are doing matters only insofar as
84 they have influenced our goals and expectations. If I make
85 half a million dollars and that's what I expected to make,
86 I'm happy—even if everyone else makes a million. In the
87 same way, if a comedy movie gets rave reviews from the
88 critics and from our friends, but it turns out that we only
89 laugh or smile a few times, we are disappointed. But if we
90 had heard nothing about the movie and simply wandered
91 in on impulse, the few laughs and smiles may be enough to
92 give us a good time.

93 This process operates in many aspects of life. Unex-
94 pected success brings pleasure and happiness; unexpected
95 failure brings dissatisfaction and leads to unhappiness.
96 And, attaining what you expect may bring a more or less
97 neutral reaction. For example, if you confidently expect to
98 make \$30,000 a year by the age of 35, earnings of \$30,000
99 will give you only modest satisfaction. It is, after all, just
100 what you expected. And I'm not talking about dreams and

101 fantasies that are fulfilled. If you *fantasize* about making a
102 million dollars or even \$30,000, that's entirely different
103 from truly expecting such an income. When a dream is
104 achieved, presumably that is very satisfying and may give
105 great happiness.

106 Many kinds of interpersonal, social aspects of life also
107 are affected in part by our expectations. What do we think
108 marriage will be like? How many friends should one have?
109 What is it like to have a new baby? How often should you
110 fall in love, and how wonderful will it be when it happens?
111 We all have expectations about these things, some of them
112 reasonable, probably some of them entirely unrealistic,
113 based on ignorance, Hollywood and comic books. If we
114 expect to have total and unleavened joy from the arrival of
115 a newborn baby, we will be very disappointed by diaper
116 changes, three o'clock feedings and colic. Similarly, if we
117 expect love and marriage to be endlessly ecstatic, we are
118 in for some surprises.

119 Even strong physical pleasures such as sex may be
120 heightened or reduced by expectations. If you assume you
121 will have sex twice a day throughout marriage, you will
122 usually be disappointed and may be unhappy even though
123 you are having as much as you *really* want. But there's one
124 group of people who probably still won't be pleased by
125 reaching their goals, or even by occasionally surpassing
126 them. These are the people who have decided, for one
127 reason or another, that life is miserable and that nothing
128 good will ever happen to them. Their expectations are so
129 low that they are almost always reached or exceeded. Yet,
130 these people typically derive little satisfaction from any-
131 thing. They continue to view life as an unhappy state, and
132 occasional successes do not mean much. These may be
133 extreme cases, but they are examples of the fact that our
134 attitudes toward life also determine how much we enjoy
135 what happens to us, and what we achieve. If you expect to
136 be unhealthy, unloved and unemployed, being right will
137 not make you less unhappy.

138 Adaptation Level (or, What You Are Used To)

139 All organisms tend to get accustomed to any level of
140 stimulation they experience for a long period. This is
141 called adaptation, and the amount of stimulation to which

142 they become accustomed is called their "adaptation
143 level."

144 Adaptation occurs in virtually all aspects of our lives.
145 We get used to a certain level of income, a life-style, a quiet
146 or busy social life, the kind of community we live in, a
147 certain amount of sex, the number of friends we have and
148 how intimate we are with them, a certain amount of suc-
149 cess, the work we do and just about everything else. The
150 key point of all this is that we barely notice these things as
151 long as we are at our adaptation level. Only when our lives
152 change, when we deviate from this level, do we feel a real
153 impact. In terms of happiness, one theory is that we derive
154 satisfaction and happiness only when we surpass our
155 adaptation level and unhappiness when we sink below it.

156 This process works for all of the important elements
157 that contribute to happiness. If we are usually perfectly
158 healthy, any sickness makes us unhappy. But if we are
159 usually in very poor health, a slight improvement makes
160 us happy.

161 This theory explains why people who seem to have ev-
162 erything are not necessarily happy. After a while they get
163 used to having "everything" and only getting more will
164 have a substantial effect on their happiness. However,
165 adapting to a particular level doesn't necessarily elimi-
166 nate all the good that is derived from that level. We get
167 used to having lots of friends yet still enjoy seeing them all.

168 Hierarchy of Needs

169 Here's another question, unanswered by the three
170 above-mentioned theories: Why do two people who seem
171 very similar in most respects, who have the same kinds of
172 lives, the same level of material and social goods, and
173 maybe even the same degree of optimism and sense of
174 control often differ enormously in their satisfaction with
175 life and their happiness?

176 Abraham Maslow, a leading humanistic psychologist,
177 suggested some years ago that people have a hierarchy of
178 needs that range from the most basic, physiological needs
179 to higher, more humane, complex, creative ones. He be-
180 lieved that it was necessary to satisfy those needs lower on
181 the hierarchy before one could begin satisfying the higher
182 ones. In particular, the highest need, which he called self-

183 actualization—a complete expression of one's potential
184 and feeling—could be fulfilled only after all the lower ones
185 were satisfied. Presumably, happiness comes from taking
186 care of all these needs.

187 The twist, however, is that each time you satisfy one
188 need, a higher one comes to the fore. When you are hungry,
189 you don't worry too much about being creative. When you
190 are without love, you may not worry too much about
191 expressing your need to understand the world. When you
192 are worrying about gaining recognition and increasing
193 your self-esteem, you may not be concerned with realizing
194 your full potential. Thus, at each stage, almost as we
195 discussed in terms of adaptation level, a new series of
196 needs becomes important. This means that people move
197 up the ladder, become fuller, more actualized people, but
198 do not necessarily become happier because they are al-
199 ways trying to fulfill *some* need.

200 Another way of looking at this is that as we ascend the
201 ladder, as we satisfy more needs or just get more out of life,
202 our standards and sights change. I think that many people
203 do follow Maslow's scenario: They constantly expand
204 their horizons, constantly want more. In many ways this is
205 good, but it may also mean that happiness is never
206 achieved. This theory may explain why happiness can be
207 so elusive; once attained for a moment, it seems to slip
208 from one's grasp and be just around the bend, just beyond
209 one's grip.

210 Talent for Happiness

211 Finally, there is the idea that some people have a "tal-
212 ent" for happiness that others lack. We all know that some
213 people enjoy life more than others, make the most of what
214 they have, while others are exactly the opposite—always
215 complaining, never seeming to experience joy, looking at
216 the sour side of everything. Such divisions in people do
217 exist, and to some extent this "talent" or capacity plays a
218 role in happiness. Unfortunately, we just don't know what
219 constitutes this talent or how one gets it. Perhaps there are
220 complex personality traits or combinations of them that
221 allow or encourage happiness and others that do the oppo-

222 site, but we don't know what they are. I don't think it's
223 true, as some have suggested, that happiness comes from
224 asking very little from life. Some of the happiest people
225 have asked a lot; some of the unhappiest have asked little.
226 Nor is there any reason to believe that true happiness
227 comes from passively accepting whatever happens to you.
228 Under some circumstances presumably this would help,
229 but many of the happiest people fight constantly for what
230 they want, accept nothing at face value, constantly strive
231 for more.

232 Having looked at a great many answers to questions
233 concerning happiness, it seems clear that there is no one
234 best way to respond to the world in order to attain happi-
235 ness. Overall, however, these theories of happiness can
236 help a great deal in understanding the phenomenon.
237 Taken together, they give a fairly good picture of who is
238 happy and perhaps what determines happiness. The
239 major conclusion is that happiness is an enormously com-
240 plex concept and feeling, and that the quest for happiness
241 is inevitably constant and dynamic for most people. We
242 change, the world changes, our needs change and our
243 requirements for happiness change—all the time.

244 One final thought. While it is true that happiness is
245 elusive and that the pursuit must continue for our entire
246 lives, it is also true that at no point is the quest hopeless.
247 One of the clearest findings from my research is that al-
248 most nothing in one's past makes happiness unattainable
249 in the future. People who led very unhappy childhoods,
250 whose parents divorced or died, who were treated coldly,
251 who had physical and psychological problems, still man-
252 age to be happy adults. People who have unsuccessful
253 marriages, get divorced and remarry are just as likely to
254 be happy as those in a first marriage. People who are
255 unhappy where they live and move to another city, are just
256 as likely to be happy in their new location as people who
257 were there in the first place. And people who are 65 and
258 older are just as likely—perhaps even a little *more*
259 likely—to be as happy as younger people.

260 The pursuit of happiness is difficult and chancy, but you
261 are never eliminated from the game.

Selection 6 Comprehension Questions

Decide whether each of the following statements is true or false according to the selection. Then mark T or F in the appropriate place.

- ___ 1. Generally speaking, married people are happier than unmarried people.
- ___ 2. It is always possible to find happiness, no matter how unhappy your past has been.
- ___ 3. If you have a good income, friends, a job, good health, and adequate sex, you will certainly be happy.
- ___ 4. It is not true that some people have a "talent" for happiness and others don't.
- ___ 5. One theory says that happiness depends on the difference between what we expect and what we get.

Choose the correct answer for each of the following questions and circle the letter before it.

- 6. Which of the following does *not* express the idea of one of the theories of happiness mentioned?
 - a. We compare ourselves to others.
 - b. We have a hierarchy of needs.
 - c. The more you have, the more you want.
 - d. What we are used to is not enough.
- 7. Which of the following statements is true according to the selection?
 - a. There is no one key to happiness—the search for it is always going on.
 - b. Young people are usually happier than people who are 65 years of age or older.
 - c. Once you have found absolute happiness, it stays with you always.
 - d. If you don't make a lot of money, you can fantasize about it in order to be happy.

- 8. Which of the theories claims that in order to be happy we have to be satisfied with certain things before we are able to be satisfied with certain other things?
 - a. Adaptation level
 - b. Expectations vs. achievements
 - c. Talent for happiness
 - d. Hierarchy of needs
- 9. Which theory explains why people who seem to have everything are not necessarily happy?
 - a. Adaptation level
 - b. Talent for happiness
 - c. Hierarchy of needs
 - d. Comparison to others
- 10. Which of the following statements might be typical of the hierarchy of needs theory of happiness?
 - a. I am disappointed with a movie that all of my friends enjoyed.
 - b. I am happy because I am doing better than my friends.
 - c. I can't really enjoy my ability to play the guitar because I am out of work and I am hungry.
 - d. I am used to buying a new car every year so it doesn't make me especially happy when I do so.