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The Science of Happiness

By Lou Fancher



Practicing happiness: The O'Donnell family - Michael, Kathryn, Brendan (15), Julian (11), Audrey (14) and Mikey (8) - clowns around while enjoying a rousing game of LafayetteOpoly (just released by Lafayette Partners in Education - see ad page L3). Photo Doug Kohen

parents are so involved. They've built a separate club house for my kids. Orinda is like Disneyland to them," she said, laughing.

It's what you'd expect from a happiness expert: laughter and close family ties. But the single mother comment interjects a sliver of uncertainty.

"Here is what I've gleaned from the many good studies I've read on the subject: It is the quality of parents' relationships with each other, rather than whether they are married or single, that matters most for kids' well-being," she wrote in a 2009 blog.

Studying happiness and related subjects like marriage and parenting is what scholars and students have been doing since Cal alumni Thomas and Ruth Ann Hornaday started the GGSC fellowship program in 2001.

"The studies that tend to be selected for the program are all positive," Carter explained. "For years, psychology has studied conditions of decline and disorder; we look for the reverse of that. For example, we looked at high school students in Oakland, where graduation rates are extremely low, who do graduate. How are their lives different, at both individual and social levels?"

The research has led to findings.

"There are skills: like gratitude. Research shows the more we consciously practice it, the happier our lives are," Carter said, before moving on to something far more difficult: "And self-discipline. It's one thing to know what we need to do for personal happiness. It's another thing to have the discipline to practice it every day."

A colleague of Carter's, UC Irvine Professor Sonja Lyubomirsky, has her own top-two list for happiness: experiencing positive emotions like joy, contentment, interest, affection and love; and having a sense of satisfaction with the direction of your life.

Lyubomirsky has conducted studies to determine the composition of happiness. In a podcast at the center's website, she said it is 50% genes, 10% life circumstances (like money, appearance and health), and 40% intentional activity.

That last factor, intentional activity, is largely in our control, according to GGSC experts.

Rick Hanson, a neuropsychologist and author, offered evidence that the insula, a part of the brain involved with sensing feelings, can be altered with practice.

"Research has shown that as people activate their insula more, such as through meditation, the insula actually gets thicker. In other words, neurons make more and more connections with each other, which actually measurably thickens your insula,"

Happiness.

Thomas Jefferson told us to pursue it.

Mark Twain warned us it could not be combined with sanity.

Helen Keller directed us to find it in "fidelity to a worthy purpose."

And last month, thousands scurried to barely-morning retail openings in

hopes of buying it on Black Friday.

At the University of California, Berkeley, happiness is such an important topic, there's an entire department devoted to studying it: the Greater Good Science Center (GGSC).

Christine Carter, a sociologist and director of the GGSC parenting program, grew up in Orinda. She moved to the area in the late 1970's and attended Wagner Ranch Elementary School and Orinda Intermediate School.

Her parents, Tim and Sylvia Carter still live in Orinda.

"My parents are very involved with my girls. Not only will I be coming home for the holidays, I have dinner there at least once a week. I'm a working single mother, but I don't even feel that single because my

Carter cited research supporting other, correlational findings. Proving what we all know, she described happy people as good at relationships, helpful, optimistic, living in the future, and committed to life goals.

Often, the people Carter encounters are parents, concerned about teaching their children to be happy.

"There are a wide range of factors for happiness. We need to get enough exercise, get enough sleep. There are a lot of things that can get between us and our happiness. You teach kids about things that lead to happiness," she began.

"Children learn from observation, so we teach them by being happy ourselves. If we spend time with our friends and that makes us happy, our kids see that and think, 'Oh, knowing your neighbors is a way to have a happy life.' But if they watch a lot of television, they'll think a new car will make them happy."

Carter is big on play and family time.

"Play time is not empty time: kids need to imagine, to make up rules, to negotiate with peers," she said. "As a working mother, I was hoping the research would come out saying it was just quality time [that mattered]. But kids need family time and times we're not nagging them. They need unstructured time."

The consequences of over-scheduling can be more severe than just the occasional melt-down.

"If we value achievement over character, then they'll learn to steal and cheat to find happiness. Pressuring them to achieve will mean it's very difficult for us to reach our goals of teaching happiness," she said.

Carter believes the biggest happiness killers are materialism, consumption, lack of sleep and exercise, and emphasis on the self.

"Compassion starts with having emotional literacy. Having a vocabulary for identifying what I am feeling, or to recognize what another person is feeling. Helping kids label their emotions leads to emotional intelligence. It teaches them to recognize another person's suffering."

If there's a positive emotion formula: Gratitude (past) + Compassion (others) + Hope (future), why is happiness so hard to find?

Maybe because, like the lost tooth we only notice once it is gone, we don't pay as much attention to its presence as to its absence. Maybe because, like the "lost" keys we trash the house looking for, we hold it, unnoticed, in our very hands.

In this season of joy, take a minute. Breathe. Call a friend. Give. Practice every day. You'll find happiness waiting for you.

EXTRA HAPPINESS NOTES:

Happiness in other Countries

A study conducted by Lyubomirsky asked Americans and Russians what elements lead to happiness:

Americans: concrete items, family, money, success, having fun.

Russians: spiritual salvation, a world of peace and beauty, a mutual understanding amongst peoples.

Simple Steps to Teach Compassion to Kids

Model kindness

Make kids responsible

Don't use extrinsic rewards for helping behavior

Express positive feelings

Expose kids to needs (of others)

Advice for Teens and Adults

Establish strong, quality, social connections

Practice forgiveness

Be grateful and write it down

Practice giving

Move. Not out of town, but around it. Exercise is an instant happiness booster.

Stop moving. Sleep deprivation can lower your mood.

Meditate. Being aware of internal and external environments makes people less hostile and anxious.

Work hard. There is no quick fix. Happiness is not easy.

Link to GGSC website

<http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/>

Link to Carter's blog and class lists

www.raisinghappiness.org

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