

HAPPINESS SKILLS

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Most human beings have a desire to feel good, to avoid painful feelings. If given a choice, most individuals would wish to live life every day with zest, courage, enthusiasm, and passion. Happiness, many would tell you, is their birthright; it is what life is supposed to be about.

Why then are so few people happy? Why do so many people live in a state of quiet desperation, as if the best they could do is to endure the fear and pain associated with life? Why are so many individuals angry at life for being cheated out of happiness?

And yet, all of us have known individuals from different walks of life whom we perceive as enjoying life, as being happy in different degrees. We notice that some are exceptionally intelligent, while others are not particularly smart or talented or even particularly successful in a conventional sense. Many have suffered losses and failures and some have received blows from life that would have destroyed others. Nevertheless, they go on finding a great deal of joy in life. What is it that such individuals know that others do not?

Ayn Rand defines happiness as “that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one’s values.” And, as Miss Rand explains, the values, and the virtues employed to achieve them, must be rational. Reason must be accepted as “one’s only source of knowledge, one’s only judge of values, and one’s only guide to action.” (“The Objectivist Ethics,” *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 28, 25)

Of course, rationality, a correct conscious philosophy, and the other virtues necessary for happiness have been dealt with by Ayn Rand and again by Leonard Peikoff in his most recent book. My goal is to sketch, in the most basic terms, the *psychological* characteristics which underlie the achievement of happiness. I want to deal with such questions as: What specific attitudes, traits, and skills must the happy individual possess in order to achieve such a state? How was he able to develop them? How did he become *skilled* at achieving happiness? And can one acquire such skills if one does not already have them?

Before answering these questions, let me make two preliminary remarks.

First, a *skill* is an ability to do something well, as a result of knowledge and practice. Every skill involves many aspects. For example, skill in writing involves knowledge of the subject matter, facility in the use of logic, a large vocabulary, a good attitude toward work, and so on. The difficulty with analyzing the aptitude for achieving happiness is that it involves practically every aspect of a person's philosophy and psychology.

Since happiness skills and the characteristics that promote them exist on a continuum, in order to simplify things, I will describe someone on the high end of the continuum. I will assume that he has had a healthy development in childhood and adolescence, is basically rational, and has a substantial amount of self-esteem, a good moral character, and the characteristics and skills necessary for happiness. And I will refer to this individual as "the happy person." Such a picture can then serve as a model for those not as high on the continuum to work towards.

Second, the way in which happiness skills involve a person's whole psychology is as follows. What lies behind happiness skills is a collection of certain subconscious and conscious attitudes, which lead to certain traits of mind and character, which in turn lead to certain habitual ways of acting. This combination of attitudes, traits, and habits operates to enable the individual to achieve his values. And it is the repeated *use* of this combination in action over a long period of time which results in happiness skills—in an aptitude for making oneself happy.

Let me begin by telling you that the happy person is primed for the development of happiness skills by a number of key attitudes he has developed. And the most fundamental of these is his basic subconscious attitude toward life: he loves life. In fact, if his sense of life could talk, it would say, "I'm passionate about being alive. What I value most, above all, is life." This passionate love of life is the emotional foundation of the happy person's psychology. It is similar to the solid foundation of a well-built house. It represents his widest and most basic emotional framework.

The happy person's love of life is much more than the enjoyment individuals feel on achieving a particular value or engaging in a particular activity. It is rather the experience of what Dr. Peikoff calls the "metaphysical pleasure" in living, which adds to and intensifies the pleasure of each day. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 340) It is as if the happy person was able subconsciously to grasp that being alive is the "meta" value, the source from which all other values flow. As a result, it is as if he has developed a special ability to keep this love of life in the forefront of his mind, leading him to have a positive motivation in every aspect of his life. Thus, it should not be surprising that passionately loving life leads him, on the conscious level, to look for and find ways to enjoy life.

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This love of life, or at least the precursor of this emotion, can be observed in most children, who begin with a positive attitude toward life, as if they say to themselves, “This is fun, and all I have to do is enjoy myself.” It can be observed in adults who project an adventurous sense of life, such as the young astronomer I saw recently on television as he enthusiastically explained an experiment probing the origins of the stars. It is eloquently expressed in the words of a famous nineteenth-century industrialist who called the world “this heaven below.” This is the kind of love of life that the happy person projects.

The happy person’s automated passionate love of life, like all the basic emotions which form his sense of life, rests on the core evaluations he has developed concerning reality, himself, and others. He, like all children, began forming these evaluations long before he developed his conscious philosophy. Each child is called upon to make choices in hundreds and hundreds of concrete situations. These early choices are enormously important because every significant rational decision moves a child in the right direction, toward achieving happiness, and every significant wrong choice pulls the child in the opposite direction.

Thus, on the basis of wrong choices, the child may conclude that life is full of danger, that people are dangerous, and that he doesn’t know how to deal with the dangers. This can lead the child to develop a fear of life. But if the child’s early choices are rational, they will lead to correct core evaluations—such as that life is good, people are to be enjoyed, I can succeed—which will lead the child in the direction of a love of life. In addition, he can begin at an early age, through a process of emotional generalization, implicitly to understand that he can think, that his mind can guide him toward understanding the world and toward discovering what he likes, and that when he discovers what he likes, he can go after achieving it.

Let me give some examples of good choices, that is, rational choices, a child can make, which can lead to good core evaluations. Suppose he discovers that his mother does not seem to care about facts under certain circumstances, especially when it comes to having to judge the actions of his sibling. He then consciously decides that he must be on the lookout for identifying facts for himself in situations concerning his mother. He eventually realizes that the identification of essential facts is vital in all cases. In another instance, a child and his friend decide to steal some candy from a store. They are caught and punished. The friend wants to do it again, but this child decides that the consequences are bad and he loses interest in stealing.

In yet another example, a child starts a sport, but he is very poor at it and his friends make fun of him. This makes him fearful of the sport even though he enjoys playing it. But he figures out that practicing every day will enable him to get better at the sport and thus help him overcome the fear he feels when he plays it. A final example concerns a child whose favorite playmate