Caught in the Happiness Trap?

You can’t buy it, force it, or find it in the pursuit of pleasure. But you can find out what happy people know that you don’t!

By Dan Baker, PhD, and Cameron Stauth

The man sitting in front of me (let’s call him Chris) was one of the wealthiest people in the American Southwest, rich in the resources that should bring happiness. He had everything: money, freedom, friends, and family. But I could see that he did not have the one thing he needed most: simple happiness.

His biggest concern, as he put it, was “keeping what I’ve got.” His home life would horrify most people: alienated kids, a wife who bitterly resented his obsession with work, and never any time for just kicking back and feeling good.

Chris had lost his love for life. If you haven’t met many wealthy people, you might think he was an aberration. You’re probably thinking “Give me that money, and I’ll show you how to be happy!”

The fact is that wealthy people, despite Madison Avenue’s fairy tales about them, are unhappy just as often as people without much money. That’s one important thing that happy people know: Money doesn’t bring happiness.

You’ve heard that before, right? So you’re probably thinking “Yeah, that must be true” (while secretly thinking “But it doesn’t apply to me”).

But it does apply to you, as the new, emerging science of happiness proves. The myth that money brings happiness is one of the happiness traps that I’m going to tell you about, along with the happiness tools that will free you from these traps.

Happiness doesn’t mean being in a good mood most of the time or experiencing the emotion of joy. Happiness is a way of life, an overriding outlook composed of qualities such as optimism, courage, love, and fulfillment. It’s not something that changes every time your situation changes. But happiness is surrounded by traps. One of the cruelest paradoxes of life is that the things we so often seek to soothe our souls are the very things that ultimately feed our fears and cause happiness to forever recede before us, just out of reach.

Over the past 3 decades, as I’ve listened to thousands of life stories about the central drama of life—the battle between fear and happiness—I’ve found that there are five primary traps that ensnare people who are trying with all their heart to be happy. Chris was a sucker for the money trap, but each of these traps is uniquely seductive, and each has been capturing people for thousands of years.


Trap #1: Trying to Buy Happiness

Part of the brain is dedicated solely to fear. The brain stem holds instinctual fears and is incapable
of higher thought. The amygdala, another part of the brain, is a storage area for fears. It stores memories of all your painful experiences. It also is responsible for the parts of your body that produce hormones in reaction to fear.

Fortunately, the fear system can be overruled by the third major part of the brain, the neocortex, the site of intellect and the human spirit, which connects intellect with intuition and the subconscious.

All his life, Chris, who had been born into a struggling family, had used money to fight his fears. But it didn't make him happy. The most important message that the science of happiness tells us about money is this: Almost nobody thinks they have enough. In the dark recesses of our brain, free-floating fear tells us that we need more, more, more, or our very survival will be threatened.

There are five things people think money can buy: a life of leisure, status, possessions, financial security, and worldly power. But look at the reality. One of the main ways millionaires gain their wealth is by sacrificing their leisure and freedom.

And status is a slippery slope. No matter how far you climb, there are always people above you. If possessions were a reliable source of happiness, rich people would be significantly happier than middle-class people, but studies show that their happiness levels are only slightly above average. Power? As people rise in worldly power, they lose power over their own lives, because they have so many people to please and obligations to meet. Happiness depends to a significant degree on your expectations. If you inflate your expectations, you’re just begging to be unhappy. Happy people keep their expectations under constraint, no matter how much money they have. They realize that materialistic status is a weakness indulged in by insecure people who are afraid to look inside themselves and face their true fears.

Happy people don’t follow money; instead, they follow their passions. When they do this, they tend not to worry about money, even if they’re relatively poor, because they know they won’t have to suffer to make more of it.

Happy people get their status from within. Their status symbols are a happy family, good friends, and pride in their work.

**Trap #2: Pleasure**

"I've been up so long it looks like down to me," the movie star slurred, as he described the binge he was on, a Mardi Gras of alcohol, sex, and drugs that had left his eyes a soupy yellow. He was a walking illustration of one of the new theories of the science of happiness. It’s called adaptation level theory, and it says that once we become accustomed to any pleasure, it no longer has the power to make us happy.

Happy people, however, know that it’s wise to regularly back away from life’s banquet, so that pleasure will stay novel and refreshing. Unhappy people, including this film star, dive headlong into pleasure and try to wring every drop of gratification from it.

This doesn’t work. Neurologically, it overloads the brain’s pleasure centers, prohibiting further sensations, and it depletes the feel-good neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine. Psychologically, it creates inflated expectations and a sense of boredom. Physically, overindulgence in recreational substances (and even food) creates tolerance and addiction.

If you have a socially acceptable indulgence, such as lying in a recliner while watching movies and
eating, you might be thinking "I'm not caught in the pleasure trap! My pleasures are wholesome." Think again. The most benign pleasures are often the most seductive and can still be deadly to mind and body. Some 60,000 Americans die each year from illegal drugs, but at least 250,000 die from overeating and being sedentary. Before they die, these people often suffer terribly. This is a big price to pay for a happiness strategy that doesn't even work.

Remember: Pleasure is a good thing. But it is the dessert of life, not the meal.

**Trap #3: Trying to Resolve the Past**

About 100 years ago, Freud noted that people often stored traumatic memories beneath the surface of their day-to-day consciousness. He dubbed this black box of memory the subconscious, and he theorized that if the box were to be cathartically emptied by means of psychoanalysis, people would no longer be haunted by traumatic events.

Freud's basic premise was faulty. The subconscious cannot be emptied of its dark and dreadful contents merely by bringing them to the light of day. Whether memories are good or bad, they remain a part of you for as long as you live.

There's a better way: transcendence. You can rise above your fears, traumas, and pain by using your powers of intellect and spirit to create new meaning out of old memories. Instead of making you feel like a victim, these memories can become your greatest motivators and your richest sources of wisdom.

Let me tell you about a patient who achieved that. Rick was suffering from major depression triggered by the death of his wife, Mona, who had died of a lingering illness. For half an hour, I let Rick, who really had been through hell, pour out his guts to me. A little catharsis is a good thing; it opens the wound and lets you see what's needed for healing.

Then, I asked Rick a constructive question, a technique that lights the way to positive action. It was important for him to take action, because talk was never going to pull him out of the life story he was stuck in, a tragic victim of love lost. One of the worst things about the Freudian approach is that it makes people think they can just talk a problem to death without actually having to do anything. So I asked, "If the situation were reversed, and you had died, what would you want Mona to do?"

By God, he said, he would have wanted her to go out and have a full life. "If that's the case," I asked, "what do you think your role in that relationship should be now?" It was as if I'd shaken him awake. When you rouse someone's inner wisdom, it doesn't take long to help them heal.

Slowly, but in a strong voice, he said, "You know what? I've been feeling sorry for myself. For far too long, Mona and I hate it when people feel sorry for themselves." Even though he had tears in his eyes, he began to tell me about all the changes he was going to make. He was going to see his family more, join a church, sign up for a bowling league. On and on.

Rick did all the things he said he would, and the next time we talked, he had a new life story. It was this: "I had more love in a few short years than most people have in a lifetime." His pain was still there. It always would be. It had happened, and nothing could change that. But his spirit had soared. That's not resolution; how can you resolve what he'd suffered? It's transcendence, and it's one of the true paths to happiness.

**Trap #4: Overcoming Weakness**

The lore of psychotherapy and the literature of self-help is permeated with the idea that people
can overcome their weaknesses. So it must be true, right?

Well, to be brutally honest, I haven't seen much of that in my 30 years of practice. I see people changing their lives every day, but it's not by correcting their weaknesses. It's by building their strengths.

For example, I've helped a number of alcoholics stop drinking. Does that mean they no longer have a weakness for alcohol? God, no! They obviously have a weakness for it; that's why they can't touch it. But their continued sobriety tells me that they also have a set of strengths that overrides that weakness.

Trying to cure weakness is a waste of the energy that's needed to achieve change. Focusing on weakness just reinforces fear. Especially intractable are socially approved weaknesses. The most notorious of these is the weakness of workaholism. People who would be ashamed to admit they are alcoholics or drug addicts often boast about being workaholics. Other weaknesses that are disguised as strengths include perfectionism, stoicism, materialistic ambition, desire for domination, and status seeking.

At one point in my career, I specialized in the psychology of stress and cardiovascular disease, and I met a multitude of people with socially encouraged weaknesses. Many had destroyed their cardiovascular system with their fixations on money, control, and status. They were driven by fear, obsessed with time, and completely focused on doing instead of being. Their fears of not having enough and not being enough had landed them in cardiac rehab, frantically bargaining with God for another chance. I encouraged them to focus on their strengths, such as being a good parent, being socially active, or enjoying sports. That soothed their fears and activated their neocortical responses. It reduced weaknesses such as workaholism and perfectionism, but in a fun, positive way.

**Trap #5: Trying to Force Happiness**

You can't just decide to be happy any more than you can decide to be taller. That's because happiness is not a finite entity unto itself, but is the sum of the 12 most important qualities of happiness: love, optimism, courage, a sense of freedom, proactivity (forging your own happiness, not waiting for it to happen to you), security, health, spirituality, altruism, perspective, humor, and purpose. These are the things you should make up your mind to achieve.

Achieving these qualities is tough. But that's the point. You wouldn't expect to become physically fit by just deciding, right? Happiness is hard work. Fortunately, most of the 12 major qualities of happiness are intrinsically pleasant, and most of the happiness tools that help generate these elements are innately satisfying.

For example, one of the simplest and most effective things you can do to lift your mood is to simply keep a pleasant expression on your face. This was proven in a study in which half the subjects were asked to hold pens in their teeth, which made their expressions approximate a smile, while the others held pens in their lips, which created pouts. Both groups were told a series of jokes. The group with the pens in their teeth rated the jokes as funnier. Now you know the key to happiness: Hold a pen in your teeth!

Better yet, use the happiness tools. Learn the happiness tools. They can change your life. They've worked for others. Now, it's your turn.

**What Will Make You Happy?**

**Appreciation**

Appreciation is the purest, strongest form of love. It is the outward-bound kind of love that asks
for nothing and gives everything. Research now shows that it is physiologically impossible to be in a state of fear at the same time. Thus, appreciation is the antidote to fear.

**Choice**
Choice is the father of freedom and the voice of the heart. Having no choices or options feels like being in jail. It leads to depression, anxiety, and the condition called learned helplessness. Choice can even govern perception. Anyone can choose the course of their life, but only happy people do it.

**Personal Power**
This is the almost indefinable proactive force, similar to character, that gives you power over your feelings and your fate. Personal power has two components: taking responsibility and taking action. It means realizing that your life belongs to you and you alone, then doing something about it.

**Leading with Your Strengths**
When you give in to the automatic fear reaction, it makes you focus on your weaknesses, which only reinforces your fear. But when you take the path of the intellect and spirit, you naturally begin to focus on your strengths and start to solve your situation.

**The Power of Language and Stories**
We don't describe the world we see; we see the world we describe. Language has the power to alter perception. We think in words. These words have the power to limit us or to set us free; they can frighten us or evoke our courage. Similarly, the stories we tell ourselves about our own life eventually become our life. We can tell healthy stories or horror stories. The choice is ours.

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