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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

How to Increase Your Satisfaction at Work, Home and Everywhere You Go

By Doreen Stern, Ph.D.

If you were going to calculate the odds of any one person feeling satisfied, what would they be? Fifty-fifty? Maybe higher? Or possibly lower? *How about the chance of you feeling satisfied?* And what, if anything, could raise the odds in your favor? To answer this question, I'm going to differentiate among pleasure, happiness and satisfaction.

HOW IS SATISFACTION DIFFERENT FROM PLEASURE AND HAPPINESS?

You might think I'm parsing words to distinguish among these three positive emotions. Yet leading scholars like Dr. Martin Seligman, the Fox Leadership Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania; Dr. Sonya Lyubomirsky, professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and winner of the Templeton Positive Psychology Prize; and Dr. Gregory Berns, Distinguished Professor of Neuroeconomics at Emory College are quick to point out important distinctions. Moreover, I maintain these distinctions are key to understanding how you can increase your lifelong satisfaction.

What Is Pleasure?

Philosophers describe pleasure as “raw feels”: ecstasy, thrills, orgasm, amusement, mirth, exuberance and comfort. These enchantments are immediate; you experience them through your five senses (sight, smell, taste, hearing and touch). No thought is involved.

Although these “raw feels” are gratifying, they are ephemeral. Here one minute, gone the next, even though they have strong sensory and emotional components.¹

For instance, think about having a massage one Friday night after work. You like it so much you purr (or moan) in pleasure. Only you get stuck in traffic on your way home. When there's no way for your car to inch forward, the driver in the next lane



makes an obscene gesture at you. You feel road rage rising in your throat: It's as bitter as bile. The benefits of your massage have vanished.

It's easy to become inured to pleasure, too. Psychologists call this phenomenon habituation.² Here's an example: The first sunny Sunday of spring, you buy yourself an ice cream cone. It seems like the most luscious concoction you've ever tasted. You like it so much that you buy another one on Monday. Surprisingly, it doesn't taste quite as good. By Tuesday, the thrill is gone. And by Saturday, you don't even notice the pistachio flavor in your mouth.

What Is Happiness?

Then there's happiness, a most delightful emotion. It's the experience of joy, contentment or positive well-being, combined with a “life is good” mentality. It exists on a continuum, like IQ, height and temperature: It can be measured on a numerical scale that ranges from very, very low to very, very

high. Further, your overall happiness is determined by three factors: genetic makeup, circumstances and activities within your control.

About 50 percent of your happiness is based on a set point that originates from your biological mother or father or both. So through good times and bad, whether you get the job you want or not, you return to that baseline happiness level.

Yet there's more involved in your overall happiness than this set point. Ten percent of your happiness is determined by circumstances: Here's where whether you get the job or not has an impact. However, since circumstances affect only 10 percent of your overall happiness, they play a relatively minor role.

Then there's a whopping 40 percent of your overall happiness that's entirely under your control. It's how you choose to think, act and feel. *You can really make a difference here.*

Recently, well-being researchers have identified happiness-boosting activities that fit people's different interests, values and needs. These activities are research-based and have been found to have a significant impact on the 40 percent of the happiness in your court.³

Happiness-boosting activities include expressing gratitude, cultivating a more positive outlook by visualizing your best possible future self (if all your dreams come true), practicing acts of kindness, nurturing social relationships, developing coping strategies, living in the present, savoring life's joys, taking care of your body and soul, reducing rumination, and learning to forgive.⁴

As you can see, all of these actions involve thinking and planning. Thus, they don't dissipate as quickly and you're not as likely to get used to them as you are to the bodily pleasures.⁵

Committing to your goals is another potent way to increase happiness.⁶ It provides a good segue to satisfaction.

What Is Satisfaction?

Remember how Mick Jagger and Keith Richards yearned for satisfaction in the Stones' iconic song of the same name? Looking back, they probably had little idea of what contributes to achieving *real* satisfaction, since it's only recently become visible through magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

MRI helped Berns and his colleagues at Emory University develop the theory that satisfaction arises in the brain, in the form of the chemical signal dopamine passing information from one neuron to another. This neurotransmitter suggests: "Hey folks, this could be a fabulous opportunity. Fame. Fortune. Fun. Let's get going."

In response, you become motivated, and feel a surge of enthusiasm as well as pleasure. It's the biggest surfing wave you'll ever experience, in that it can lead to "the blossoming of a sense of purpose and the stoking in the belly to conquer more obstacles."⁷

Of note, the most satisfying experiences appear to be both challenging and novel.⁸

WHAT'S BEEN YOUR MOST SATISFYING EXPERIENCE?

Please recall the process of earning your FSA designation: You faced a rigorous system of 10 examinations, while working full-time. Some coursework consisted of online learning modules. Because the process was so demanding and lengthy, it was a novel road. Nobody could tell you what difficulties you might encounter, when you least expected them. Furthermore, there was nobody telling you when it was time to saddle up your horse to trot down the promenade. It was entirely up to you. I bet you experienced an enormous sense of satisfaction when you finally galloped across the finish line.

LOOKING FORWARD

Make no mistake: I'm not proposing that you put yourself through such an onerous process as passing your actuarial exams. I am, however, suggesting that you consider what you've been yearning to do. And do it. Taking baby steps. Because the journey is its own reward, and the best way to achieve a satisfying life. ■



Dr. Doreen Stern is a writer, motivational speaker and success coach in Hartford, Connecticut. Her dream is to become a best-selling author. She's currently writing a book about creating the courage to tell the truth. She can be reached at Docktor@DoreenStern.com.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Martin E. P. Seligman. (2002). *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. New York: The Free Press, pages 103–105.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Sonya Lyubomirsky. (2008). *The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. New York: The Penguin Press, pages 31–68.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 69–204.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 140–141.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 205–226.
- 7 Gregory Berns. (2005). *Satisfaction: Sensation Seeking, Novelty, and the Science of Finding True Fulfillment*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, page xii.
- 8 *Ibid.*, xi–17.