To be happy, focus on these factors within your control

Faith, family, friends and work: make sure your “happiness portfolio” is well diversified among these four.



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By Arthur C. Brooks

We all want to be happy, but it’s not about money. So, what is the secret to happiness, and

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what can be done to be happier?

There are numerous books and articles, and more than 30 years of scientific research on the subject. A basic question in the research is, “Who is happy?” One way to get the answer is to ask directly, “Are you happy?”

Other studies examine MRI scans, or they ask husbands and wives separately to rate their own happiness and that of their spouses.

All the research essentially points to the same thing: about 35% of us are “very happy,” about 15% of us are “not happy,” and the rest of us fall somewhere in between.

Happiness has a genetic component

Although a person’s happiness level wavers, going up or down over time, it tends to settle back near a set point. It turns out that happiness, in general, is determined by three things:

- genetics
- circumstances
- certain life choices

Regarding how much of our happiness is determined by **genetics**, a great deal of what we know about this derives from the Minnesota Twin Family Study, which looks at identical twins separated at birth, raised in different families and then reunited in mid-life. Genetics, it seems, accounts for around 40% of how religious you are and your political persuasion, and is more than 50% responsible for how outgoing you are, how neurotic, how inclined to criminality and how likely you are to abuse alcohol. An estimated 48% of your happiness is genetic. In other words, almost half of your happiness would seem to be determined at birth.

The second thing that determines happiness is **circumstances**. Research says that, at any given time, 40% of your happiness is governed by your life circumstances — striking it rich, getting married, publishing a book, moving abroad, nasty emails and so on.

While 40% may seem a lot, research also shows that the happiness, or unhappiness, that comes from circumstances doesn’t last. For example, if your salary were doubled or if you won the lottery, you would be happier for roughly six months; then you would settle back near your set point. As humans, we are highly adaptable and get used to things.

The bad news is that circumstances that make you happy won’t have a lasting impact on

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your happiness levels overall. But the good news is that setbacks — those things that make you unhappy — don't last long either.

Happiness is within reach, if you choose

That brings us to the remaining 12%, which comes from **your decisions**. This 12% is key because you control it. And there's a secret to making the most of this 12%. Think of it as a happiness portfolio with four parts: faith, family, friends and work. As with any portfolio, you should be diversified in these four elements.

- **Faith.** Work on your spiritual development.
- **Family.** No one ever said on their deathbed that they wished they had spent less time with their family.
- **Friends and community.** This is more important than people think, as loneliness is a top cause of unhappiness. Remember, it is worth making extra effort to cultivate enriching friendships.
- **Work.** This is perhaps the most important pillar for happiness. According to one U.S. survey, 89% of respondents reported they liked or loved their jobs. This covered all kinds of jobs — from mowing lawns to teaching — and was unrelated to how much money they made. What determined their happiness was the extent to which they felt their work was creating value for society.

Clearly, work is a good thing, particularly as it contributes to success that is earned. The free enterprise system may not be perfect, and social safety nets are needed to help the most vulnerable members of society. Yet free enterprise is ultimately about matching people's skills and passions to opportunities on a large scale, and enabling people to pursue meaningful work and earn success. And this is the surest path to finding happiness within your control.

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