

## **STRESS, WELL-BEING, AND HAPPINESS**

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This is a broad topic, but one which is important to all of us. It also happens that these items are very strongly interrelated and are different for all of us. Recently, I was reading an interesting book entitled “The Geography of Bliss” by Eric Weiner. Although most of us relate happiness to our particular circumstances and also understand that this aspect of our life can be extremely variable, even from day to day, each culture views this commodity called happiness in a different way. What it takes to make someone happy in Great Britain or Switzerland is often very different from what it takes to achieve the same thing in the US.

With a high level of stress, it is difficult to have a sense of well-being and happiness, and stress also causes physical changes which may be detrimental to our long-term health. Unresolved conflicts in family or business situations or the inability to manage situations which are out of our control are high on the list for causes of stress. Certainly physical illness which affects us or our friends and loved ones is a great cause of stress. This is particularly true if you are a caregiver in a situation where the other is unable to enjoy life and manage well. Financial woes certainly can cause a lot of stress, because if you have more going out than coming in or if there is a loss of finances which may affect your future, this can weigh heavily on you.

How can stress affect us physically? It depresses the appetite because there is no desire for the pleasure of eating. It interferes greatly with the sleep pattern, which is one of the worst aspects of stress since it allows no overnight “healing” of the body which is essential for health. It also affects our interpersonal relationships with others at a time when we need them the most. Psychological isolation is a difficult situation for us. Stress also affects us in terms of our productivity at work or in artistic endeavors. We often lack the motivation in these situations to do those things which give us, in part, our everyday happiness. Certain chemical reactions occur in our body such as an increased adrenalin gland stress hormone output which raises our blood sugar and depresses serotonin in the brain. Additionally, the stores of vitamin C which are important in maintaining the body during stress can be depleted quickly with one single stressful event, and replacement of this may be difficult to do on a rapid basis.

Well-being, on the other hand, is the feeling that everything is going along well, and what is not probably can be fixed. When you have a sense of well-being, the mechanisms for handling stress are intact, your sleep pattern is good, interpersonal relationships are usually good, and you are able to maintain a good appetite and thoughtfulness about what you’re eating and doing. In this situation, most people are productive and their controls for their activities are in good working order so that they don’t engage in destructive “binge” eating or other behavior of that sort.

Happiness is the next level beyond a sense of well-being. Probably it is safe to say that most people can find happiness better when most (but not all) the stress is resolved and a sense of well-being pervades on a daily basis. Of course, happiness is different for each individual and may be relative to our particular time in life as well. What makes a child or a teenager happy is different from what makes a hard-working professional or retired schoolteacher happy. I remember well when my wife asked our exuberant 4-year-old grandchild “What makes you so happy?” His answer was, “You and Poppy do.” For others, happiness is winning the lottery. However, we know the statistics, and it’s clear that instant wealth brings instant woes, and most people are really stressed out after they have won the lottery and faced the conflict about what to do with the winnings. For others, a scotch at 5 PM does it, while for others, meeting the guys in the bar for a beer may be the answer. Watching your child thrive in life or having no financial woes must rank high on the list of things that improve our happiness level. Seeing a secure future and not being worried every day about what is going to happen to you is also an important part of this equation.

However, happiness often but not necessarily comes with experiencing good health. In a situation where we are enjoying good health, our appetite is good, interpersonal relations are good, and we have security about who we are and where we are going with our future.

Interestingly, according to a study done at the University of Leicester in Great Britain, we are the 23<sup>rd</sup> happiest nation in the world. This puts us behind quite a few nations who are not as rich or developed and certainly not as populated. Another study notes that about 84% of people in the US are very happy or “pretty happy.” However, if you look at the statistics, our divorce rate has doubled and the teen suicide rate has tripled. Violent crime has quadrupled, and so the measurable parameters of happiness in general in a society are revealing a trend which is not particularly favorable. We also note that we are a lot richer than we were 50 years ago, but no happier. Extremes of poverty or stress related to a complex culture such as ours tends to rob people of that happiness.

Since we all want to be happy and healthy and we all want to feel and look good at every stage of our life, we really need to analyze what makes us happy and healthier. Some would say find your passion and pursue it. I would agree with that, but I would say find your best health potential and pursue it through stress relief mechanisms, good diet, a good exercise pattern, and good interpersonal relationships. During times of stress, it may be necessary to seek counsel from other people or even a psychological counselor who is able to help us resolve the acute and chronic aspects of stress which clearly affects your long-term health pattern. Keeping your body in the best working order by the proper supplements and by the most nutritious diet that you can eat will provide some cushioning against the effects of stress, but no guarantee that you won’t be affected by it.

While happiness, well-being, and stress are strongly interrelated, it is possible to look at the individual aspects of these mental and physical states and improve on each one of them without being too “extreme” with our solutions. In times of stress when we know

that our minds and bodies are being affected, we need to act in a positive manner to resolve this.

Exercise, eat right, and maintain your high nutrient level through antioxidant-rich food and supplements. This will put you in the best situation possible to achieve happiness.