

# THE PURSUIT OF happiness

Happiness is not to be found in mindless pursuits, writes **Fiona Hoban**, but can be found from letting go of expectations



## About

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**H**ow many times have you yearned for a bit of peace and quiet, a bit of time to sit and relax, and yet when that time comes, you struggle to embrace and enjoy it? A sense of unease, boredom or anxiety often arises within and off you go again, checking your mobile phone, flicking through brain-dead TV programmes, raiding the fridge for something chocolatey (or boozy).

The existential philosophers call this the existential vacuum or void – a deep inner sense of emptiness, isolation, meaninglessness and anxiety. Much of what we do with our time is an attempt to distract ourselves from this inner void or sense of lacking. We do things, go places, meet people, buy stuff, wear stuff, collect stuff – and then buy more stuff. All in an attempt to fill that void, all in an attempt to find happiness because we (mistakenly) believe that finding happiness will take care of this inner lacking and make us feel complete.

Ask yourself: how much of what you do truly brings you happiness? How much of it is merely providing temporary relief from a feeling of inner lacking or boredom?

## BEING REALISTIC

Happiness, in western cultures, is often seen as something that must be pursued, sought out and attained. One way or another, happiness is seen as the end result; it is dependent on something external and is invariably something that will happen in the future: I'll be happy when I lose 10lbs; I'll be happy when I get a good job; I'll

be happy when I meet my soul mate. And when we do lose that 10lbs or get that good job or find our soul mate, this indeed delivers a sort of happiness – a sort that, if we're honest, is ultimately short-lived. It's not long before we return again to our seemingly endless pursuit of happiness.

Studies have shown that when people have a big win on the Lotto, they invariably experience a massive surge of excitement, celebration etc, but these feelings are relatively short-lived. It's only a matter of time before they return to the base level of contentment they had before their win. So, if they were a miserable so-and-so before their win, chances are they will return to being a miserable so-and-so after it.

I said this to a friend of mine once and she replied: "I know money can't buy me happiness but I'd rather be rich and miserable than poor and miserable!"

It's hard to argue with that, I suppose, but I think the trick is to be content regardless of being rich or poor.

## FINDING CONTENTMENT

How is it possible to find contentment? With so much financial hardship, so much stress and pressure, so much uncertainty and so much fear, how is it possible to be happy? How is it possible to be impervious to the economic nightmare that's going on around us?

The answer may in part be found by looking at people who have been dealt a seemingly harsh card by life and yet still manage to be upbeat (this is quite different to putting on a brave public face and then going home to fall apart). What are they doing that allows their overall levels of happiness remain intact? What's their secret?

One such secret is the ability to accept whatever card has been dealt, not to resist it in any way. The Buddhists say: "Yield to overcome." Eckhart Tolle says: "Leave life alone; let it be." Paul McCartney wrote many years ago: "Let it be, let it be."

Another key is to release our tight hold on wanting things to turn out a particular way; we can get very

attached to outcomes. Richard Carlson, in his book *Don't Sweat The Small Stuff*, asks us to imagine that we have a favourite glass – one that is special to us and holds many happy memories. Now imagine that favourite glass smashed on the floor. This increases our awareness of the fact that a glass is created and will eventually break. This is true of everything – ourselves included – it's only a matter of when. Obviously nobody wants his or her favourite glass to be broken, but there is peace in the teaching that when we expect something to break, we are not surprised or overly disappointed when it does. Instead of saying "oh no", we can say "ah, there it goes" and be grateful for the time we had to enjoy it.

## HAPPINESS FROM WITHIN

Does true happiness come from within? Not necessarily. This idea can be misleading because it assumes that happiness can be found somewhere, albeit from within. This merely shifts our search from an outer one to an inner one – but it's still a search. The person who seeks happiness in buying the latest beauty product may be just as misguided as the person who seeks happiness from endless soul-searching retreats.

Spiritualism claims that there is no source of happiness (either inner or outer) and therefore any search for it is ultimately futile. In fact, the main thing that blocks us from experiencing happiness is our relentless pursuit of it. True happiness simply exists and is unconditional. An important part of tapping into this unconditional happiness is letting go of an expectation of finding happiness. Did you ever go to a party with zero expectations? You're not expecting it to be a good night; you're not expecting to meet your soul mate – you're just open to



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going with the flow. Isn't it true that those nights are often the best nights?

It's one of life's paradoxes: the minute you let go of your expectation of something, that's the time it's manifested.

Letting go of an expectation to be happy, ironically, brings its own happiness.

Some would say then that the key to happiness is to stop wasting time searching for it. If we are no longer to search for happiness, what do we do with ourselves? Enjoy the happiness that this brings. We are free to simply feel all that comes our way and decide to express happiness through whatever activity or relationship we're experiencing in this moment. We can use relationships and possessions to express our happiness, rather than depend on them to find our happiness. In that sense, happiness must ensue and not be pursued.

Think about it: if you decided to stop searching for happiness, if you decided to give up any expectation of finding happiness in what you do, in the relationships you have etc; if you made your peace with that sense of inner lacking and stopped masking it with various activities and acquisitions – wouldn't all this bring about a state of inner calm and peace?

And from this inner calm and peace springs a happiness that is not dependent on any internal or external condition; this is unconditional happiness – this is love. ☺