



The rocky road to happiness

The verdict is in: wealth does not make us happy. But there are ways to nurture our state of being, and it all begins within, as Phil Brown reports

Do you remember Bobby McFerrin's 1988 hit song Don't Worry, Be Happy? It was a distillation of the philosophy of the self-help guru Meher Baba who died in 1969 and doesn't have to worry any more. The song was a huge hit for McFerrin and people really responded to the song's message. But 20 years on, who has managed to live up to his musical admonition?

It's hard to be happy because there's actually plenty to worry about – a plunging share market, climate change, bird-flu, rogue asteroids – the list of things that should concern us is growing daily.

McFerrin's song seems glib and simplistic in light of all of that, and yet it's still relevant because we still strive to stop worrying and to be happy. And we can be happy, despite all that, according to Sydney clinical psychologist Dr Tim Sharp, founder of The Happiness Institute.

"People can be trained to be happy. The science on that is clear and valid," Dr Sharp says. "They just have to learn to stop looking for happiness in all the wrong places. Making more money won't necessarily make you happy, nor does buying things."

Dr Sharp, who is also a university lecturer and is sometimes known as Dr Happy, has a background in cognitive therapy and positive psychology and believes happiness is a state of mind that can be cultivated.

The Happiness Institute, which admittedly sounds like something out of a Mel Brooks movie, offers happiness courses and coaching throughout Australia.

The good news for unhappy Brisbane people is that the Institute has just opened a local branch office, and it is offering its first course, Happiness – Strategies for a Great Life, later this month.

The Institute's man on the ground here, former army officer Gary Pearson, will lead the workshop, which he says is badly needed, particularly at a time when depression and anxiety are rampant.

"Unhappiness is cancerous, and it's everywhere," Gary says. "It has a significant effect on the quality of lives of people and on the bottom line for companies. Unhappiness is just not productive."

Gary says that it has been clinically proven that people can often think themselves happy, and he says The Happiness Institute is all about achieving that and teaching people simple techniques to help them achieve happiness.

Lekshe Tsulim (Peter Lester), a Wilston-based Buddhist monk in the Tibetan Sakya-pa tradition, who has studied under the Dalai Lama, has found a modicum of happiness by following the path of Buddhism.

"In some ways, happiness is a by-product of understanding which can be enhanced by meditation," Lekshe says. "For me, happiness is the contentment I have found through becoming a Buddhist."

It's the understanding that creates the happiness. Some people wait around for happiness and think they will get it when they retire. They are grumpy because they work hard all their lives so they can be happy at the end."

Happiness is, however, in the here and now says Lekshe, who has recently been helping to teach Brisbane City Council employees how to meditate and be happy, something which should benefit all of us.

"A Zen master says there is no way to happiness, happiness is the way," Lekshe says. "It's not somewhere else, it comes from within your own feeling and contentment. We do too much thinking about it and not enough experiencing it."

Happiness is not just something that psychologists and monks deal with. Philosophers have also grappled with the concept since the dawn of civilisation. For the Greek philosopher Epicurus, happiness was the main reason for living, and all actions should lead to achieving it.

Marguerite La Caze, a senior lecturer in philosophy at the University of Queensland says happiness has been an important philosophical topic throughout the ages.

"But not all philosophers have thought it was the most important thing," Marguerite says. "Some see freedom as more important than happiness. Simone de Beauvoir thought that if women had freedom and equality, they would be happy."

"Immanuel Kant thought we had to be worthy of happiness by living moral lives. I think happiness is really important, but trying to pursue happiness, particularly through pleasure, is self-defeating. And a lot of people equate money and power with happiness and then they get them and find they are still not happy."

Studies of happiness have shown that wealth is not synonymous with happiness. In recent years, surveys have found that some of the happiest people in the world live in countries such as Nigeria, Mexico and El Salvador, places where material wealth is not great but where emphasis on family and community is strong.

In the 2006 BBC TV series The Happiness Formula.

"I'm a Queenslander, and I want to make the Sunshine State the happy state," Gary says. "It's not at the moment. When you go out driving, you see that there are a lot of angry, unhappy people out there."

The Institute stresses changing attitudes and ways of looking at the world, which is nothing new really. "It's not rocket science; it's just common sense," Gary says.

Philosophers and religious leaders from Aristotle to the Dalai Lama have insisted that happiness is within everybody's grasp.

American President Abraham Lincoln once famously said, "Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be", and the people at The Happiness Institute wholeheartedly agree with that.

The Dalai Lama concurs, and in his book *The Art of Happiness*, he says we can train our minds to be happy because happiness comes from within.

"We don't need more money, we don't need greater success or fame, we don't need the perfect body or even the perfect mate," the Dalai Lama says. "Right now, at this very moment, we have a mind, which is all the basic equipment we need to achieve complete happiness."

Australian personal development author Stephanie Dowrick, who inculcates Buddhist philosophy in her many books, says focusing on the good things is a way to create happiness within your own mind.

"When you are thinking about your life, don't pay attention only to your suffering or your mistakes or the things that have gone wrong or even the behaviours you believe you need to work at," Stephanie counsels in *Choosing Happiness: Life & Soul Essentials*.

"Pay attention to your triumphs, your joy, your energy, vigour, your daydreams, your hilarity, exuberance, excessiveness, your capacity to sing opera in the kitchen or dance naked under the stars." Which might make you happy but what about the neighbours? Still, we get her point.

The Buddhist path is one many have taken recently, in a search for happiness, and Buddhist philosophy is popular because it actually teaches practical methods of attaining happiness, particularly through meditation techniques.

In the 2006 BBC TV series *The Happiness Formula*, Professor Daniel Kahneman of the University of Princeton in the US revealed that despite the increase in wealth in developed countries, research showed that in the last 50 years our happiness had not increased.

"Our standard of living has increased dramatically, and happiness has increased not at all, and in some cases has diminished slightly," Professor Kahneman reported. "There is a lot of evidence that being richer isn't making us happier."

The studies confirmed that above a certain point of economic wealth there is not a strong relationship between income and happiness. Researchers with the World Values Survey have reached the conclusion that the desire for material goods is actually a happiness suppressor.

Brisbane artist, author and corporate trainer Vicki Bennett agrees happiness cannot be attained through materialism.

"The idea that consumerism leads to happiness is a major misconception," Vicki says. "It just doesn't work. Once you get what you thought would make you happy you want the next thing and it just goes on and on."

"I find a good way to be happy is to create an environment for happiness. We have a tendency to focus on what's going wrong in our lives but when you meet happy people you usually find they are very good at seeing the good stuff that's happening around them."

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