

FINDING MEANING

Let me begin by asking you a question, and, by the way, I don't know the exact answer.
Is happiness only a matter of neurochemistry or is it deeper than that?

As we have seen, we can boost our serotonin by feeding our friendly bacteria.
We can generate the so called, "love hormone," oxytocin, by hugging people.

We can raise our BDNF and relieve depression through exercise.
But is that all there is to happiness?
Is happiness only about keeping our brain chemistry in balance?

For at least a hundred years, psychologists and psychiatrists such as William James and Viktor Frankl have argued that finding meaning is central to well-being. Frankl has famously said that happiness is only a byproduct of a meaningful life.

We know that one of the key signs of depression is that people lose their sense of meaning.
And we have discovered that finding meaning is one of the best, and perhaps one of the only ways, that people can deal with enormous suffering.

This was discovered long ago by the American psychologist William James. According to James, instead of being an enemy of happiness, suffering is actually the secret friend of happiness. Suffering can fill people's lives with more meaning, especially if we can use it to become wiser.
William James was very interested in spirituality and the links between spirituality and psychology.

Many scientific studies indicate that spiritual activities seem to have a significant impact on our sense of meaning as well as happiness. Social scientists originally thought that happiness generated by spiritual activities, was mainly due to the social bonding taking place in spiritual communities, but even if you remove the community component, there still seems to be a significant boost in our well-being.

We don't know exactly why, but according to the recent work of Frank Martela and Mike Steger, a meaningful life includes three things: a sense of coherence that life makes sense; a sense of purpose, a clear direction and an understanding of our role in the world; and a sense of significance that we are part of something important, or bigger than ourselves.
Most Spiritual practices encompass all three of these components.

The second pioneer of both the philosophy and psychology of meaning is Viktor Frankl.
Frankl is the author of the jaw dropping classic *Man's Search for Meaning*, about how he survived a Nazi prison camp through a heart rending quest for meaning.

One of my favorite quotes comes from Frankl:
"life can be pulled by goals just as surely as it can be pushed by drives."

So what does Frankl mean by goals pulling, and drives pushing?
The goals that he's talking about, are the goals that we consciously set for ourselves. And the drives that he's talking about are the instinctive drives, or the basic needs that we have, for survival and security, that tend to push us around, like bullies.

What Frankl means is that, instead of getting pushed around by our instincts, it is far better to set our own goals and let those goals guide our lives.

That doesn't mean that we ignore our basic needs, but we satisfy those needs naturally in pursuit of meaningful goals.

In a way, we set ourselves free, by taking charge of the direction of our life.

And if we set our own goals, that freedom, by itself, boosts our happiness.

If we set our own goals, especially goals that we feel are valuable, the more meaningful our lives become.

For example, if you feel that taking care of the environment is valuable, and you set a goal to blog about that once a month, you have naturally filled your life with greater meaning.

Now, as you may recall, Martin Seligman, one of the founders of Positive Psychology, claimed that we can experience three kinds of happiness.

The first stage of happiness is the Pleasant Life, when we stop and smell the flowers.

The next stage is the Engaged Life, when we use our unique combination of strengths to enrich our own lives.

But very clearly, the happiest people are people whose lives and careers are filled with a deep sense of meaning.

So how does an Engaged life turn into a Meaningful life?

Let's use the example of a doctor again.

As you may recall, she uses unique set of strengths, curiosity and compassion, to find out what is wrong with patients, and treat them. She is thoroughly absorbed in her work.

She is often in a state of flow, and in the process, she is living the Engaged Life.

Now let's say that this doctor not only likes her job, she is so involved in it that she often forgets about the clock and stays in the office talking to patients who are in serious trouble.

Or on her way back home from work, she sees a homeless person who is sick, writes a prescription for him, and treats him.

Now she's discovered the Meaningful Life. She gets carried away using her strengths to benefit the lives of other people.

She hasn't given up making money. That's still one of her goals, but that is no longer the ultimate goal.

Living the meaningful life doesn't mean that we have to deny ourselves in fulfilling a greater purpose.

On the contrary, that's the brilliant thing about Seligman's three dimensions of happiness. You're naturally enriching your own life by enriching the lives of others. It's a win-win combination.

That's why the meaningful life is the secret to a much deeper form of happiness. By using our strengths to realize meaningful goals, we feel greater self-esteem, because we feel that our life is more valuable.

In Frankl's words, as we experience the meaningful life, we are getting pulled by our goals, instead of getting pushed around by our instincts.

So, let's summarize.

Goal setting is a key to personal freedom and happiness. By setting and pursuing our own goals, we free ourselves from the dictatorship of our survival instincts.

By setting goals that we value, we discover meaning.

And finally, by pursuing a meaningful life, we use our signature strengths, not only to enjoy our own lives, but to serve a purpose greater than ourselves.