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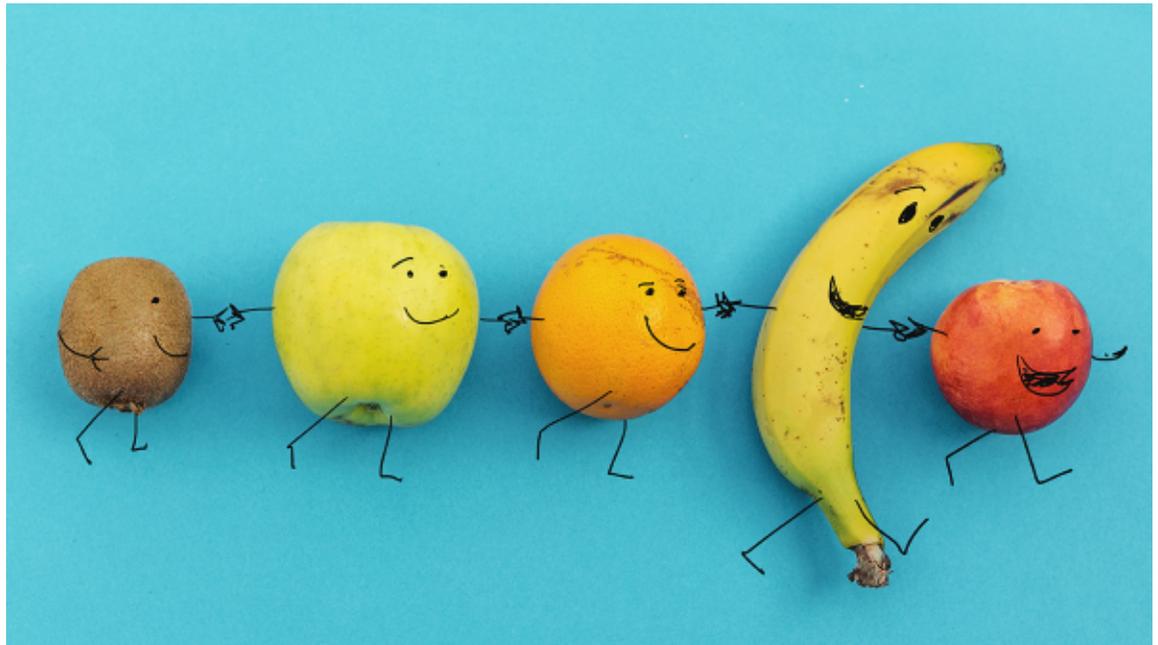
by Cassie Mogilner Holmes

PSYCHOLOGY

What Kind of Happiness Do People Value Most?

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Sure, everyone wants to be happy. But what kind of happiness do people want? Is it happiness experienced moment-to-moment? Or is it being able to look back and remember a time as happy? Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman described this distinction as “being happy *in* your life” versus “being happy *about* your life.” Take a moment to ask yourself, which happiness are you seeking?

This might seem like a needless delineation; after all, a time experienced as happy is often also remembered as happy. An evening spent with good friends over good food and wine will be

experienced *and* remembered happily. Similarly, an interesting project staffed with one’s favorite colleagues will be fun to work on *and* look back on.

But the two don’t always go hand in hand. A weekend spent relaxing in front of the TV will be experienced as happy in the moment, but that time won’t be memorable and may even usher feelings of guilt in hindsight. A day at the zoo with one’s young children may involve many frustrating moments, but a singular moment of delight will make that day a happy memory. A week of late nights stuck at the office, while not fun exactly, will make one feel satisfied in hindsight, if it results in a major achievement.

While happiness scholars have long [grappled with](#) which form of happiness should be measured and pursued, nobody has simply asked people which version of happiness they seek. But if we want to find ways to be happy, it may help to understand what type of happiness we truly want.

In a series of studies, recently published in [The Journal of Positive Psychology](#), we directly asked thousands of people (ages 18 to 81) about their preference between experienced and remembered happiness. We found that people’s preferences differed according to the length of time they were considering – and according to their culture. For Westerners, the happiness most people said they wanted for the next day was different from the happiness they said they wanted for their lifetime, even though one’s days add up to one’s life. We found this interesting; if people make decisions by the hour, they may end up with a different version of happiness than what they say they want for their life.

In one study, we asked 1,145 Americans to choose between experienced happiness (“where you experience happiness on a moment-to-moment basis”) and remembered happiness (“where afterwards you will reflect back and feel happy”) for either a longer timeframe (i.e., their life overall or next year) or a shorter timeframe (i.e., their next day or hour). The majority of participants chose experienced happiness over remembered happiness when choosing for their life (79%) or their next year (65%). By contrast, there was a roughly even split of participants who chose experienced happiness and remembered happiness when choosing what they wanted for their next hour (49%) or day (48%). This pattern of results was not affected by individuals’ overall happiness, impulsivity, age, household income, marital status, or parental status.

After participants made their choices, we asked them to write a short paragraph explaining why. We found that those who favored experienced happiness mostly expressed a belief in *carpe diem*: a philosophy that one should seize the present moment because the future is uncertain and life is short. On the other hand, participants’ explanations for choosing remembered happiness ranged from a desire for a longer lasting happiness, to a nostalgic treasuring of memories, to the motivation to achieve in order to feel productive and proud.

So people became more philosophical when asked to consider longer time periods like their life overall, and they reported wanting more happiness experienced in the moment. But when they

thought about the next day or hour, it was as though a Puritan work ethic emerged — more people seemed to be willing to forfeit those moments of happiness, to put the work in now to be able to look back later and feel happy. This willingness is necessary, of course, during certain periods of life. But defaulting to it too often may lead to missing out on experiencing happiness. Those unseized moments add up, and together they may go against what many believe constitutes a happy life.

We conducted a few more studies to test the robustness of our results. In one study, we gave people different definitions of remembered happiness to see if a particular portrayal was driving the result. In another, we varied how soon the hour was that they were considering (“one hour today” vs. “one hour toward the end of your life”) to see if imminence and perhaps impatience played a role in people’s preferences. In both cases, these treatments didn’t change the pattern we saw: when choosing for their life, most people chose experienced happiness over remembered happiness; but when choosing for an hour, half chose remembered happiness.

Last, we wanted to test whether the pattern we saw among all of our American participants generalized to other cultures. We presented the same choice between experienced and remembered happiness, for either their next hour or for their life, to approximately 400 people in other Western countries (England and the Netherlands) and 400 in Eastern countries (China and Japan).

Like Americans, when choosing for their life, the majority of Europeans (65%) chose experienced happiness over remembered happiness; but when choosing for their next hour, the Puritan work ethic appeared even more strongly with a majority (62%) choosing remembered happiness over experienced happiness.

In contrast, Easterners’ preferred happiness persisted across timeframes. The majority of Easterners chose experienced happiness over remembered happiness regardless of whether choosing for their life (81%) or their next hour (84%). Why this consistency? We believe that participants in China and Japan were more clear in their preference for experienced happiness due to the long religious history in Eastern cultures of teaching the value of mindfulness and appreciating each present moment.

Our studies asked thousands of individuals which of two types of happiness—experienced or remembered—they preferred. We found that the answer depends on whether people are considering the short pieces of their life or their life overall, and where they’re from. Though the pursuit of happiness is so fundamental as to be called an inalienable right, the particular form of happiness individuals pursue is surprisingly malleable.

It’s important to note that while this research helps us understand people’s beliefs about which happiness is preferable, it does not prescribe which form of happiness would be better to pursue. But these results reveal that Westerners planning their lives by the day or the hour will likely achieve a different version of happiness than what they themselves believe makes a happy life. We’re all too busy, and we’re driven to turn down opportunities to constantly feel happy. But if you believe you

want a life of happiness experienced in the moment, think twice before preventing yourself from achieving it.

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