

## How Do You Know *If You're Happy?*



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How do you respond when someone asks you if you're happy? The answer may depend on where you're from and what you learned from your parents. Here's why...

I recently heard a psychologist from Stanford University's Culture and Emotion Lab talking about the difference between how people in Western societies define happiness compared to those in Eastern cultures. The contrast was dramatic:

- In the United States and other Western nations, people equate feelings of happiness with **excitement, elation, and enthusiasm**. They describe themselves as happy when they feel one of these emotions (or, as the psychologist explained it, "displaying a big toothy smile").
- By contrast, those in Japan and other Eastern countries equate happiness with feelings of **calm, serenity, and peace** (emotions that are not necessarily expressed with a big smile).

The reasons for these differences, of course, are rooted in cultural factors that go back centuries, in the way children are raised in these cultures, in the values considered to be important in each culture, and in how our culture defines the ways we ultimately *want* to feel (which doesn't necessarily align with how we *actually* feel). In the U.S., we value excitement, elation, and enthusiasm; we like to feel stimulated; and we admire people who are cheerful and extroverted. So we believe we're happy when we have experiences that create feelings like these.

In Asian countries and ancient cultures, spiritual and religious leaders and institutions in the society put more value on practicing meditation to attain inner peace, insight into the nature of the mind, and realization of the true self. People in that part of the world are happy when they are relaxed, calm, positive, and self-actualized.

I don't know many people in my circle or even in our American society at large who describe happiness in those terms, except perhaps avid yoga/meditation practitioners. Their spiritual practice has enabled them to access insights and wisdom that they feel and value more deeply than excitement and elation.

In my life, I have, of course, strived for and experienced the "high" of excitement and elation realized through close relationships, goal achievement, family milestones, acquisition of material things, etc. And I still do. But, now that I'm in my 60s, I'm realizing there's another way to view life satisfaction. Now, I strive more often for contentment rather than happiness, for a sense of peace rather than elation.

Instead of assessing and rating my happiness, I tell others I am "content"—satisfied with the life I've created, the situations I've found myself in, and the varied opportunities that have come my way. I let go of expectations of happiness and instead feel good when I can say I'm in a place of love rather than fear and acceptance rather than resistance. I focus on the simple pleasures of each day rather than aspiring for the "highs" (which can also, of course, sometimes lead to "lows").

This doesn't mean I don't still crave bliss and joy and occasionally feel blissful and joyful. Hearing the news that I'm soon to be a grandmother is a good example of pure joy and true excitement. Healing well from a serious back injury that I thought would affect me more adversely has also made me really happy.

But then there is the true contentment that comes from simple, everyday experiences in my life:

- Walking and talking on a beautiful day with one of my best friends
- Finishing a good book or a crossword puzzle
- Seeing a pair of cardinals on our bird feeder
- Trying a new menu item ordered from a favorite restaurant
- Completing a task I'd been putting off for a long time
- Wandering in nature with my good camera to capture unique, colorful natural scenes
- Lying in a hot bath surrounded by candles, listening to Irish music
- Planning and anticipating an overseas trip after the pandemic is over

- Doing soul-searching writing in my journal
- Reading my angel book and praying for support in following its guidance
- Watching a film from the "must-see list" I've been keeping over the years

How about you? Would you say you regularly experience *happiness*? Or are you more likely to describe yourself as *content*? Are you constantly seeking the "highs" or are you satisfied with the simplicity of daily life and the warm connections you have with the reliable, loving people in your "tribe," the predictable circumstances of your routine, and the sense of purpose you derive from your career or other pursuits?

Predictability can be very comforting. A sense of purpose is key to inner peace. And, of course, warm connections are the anchor we all need to feel calm and content. Ahhhh! It makes me light up inside just thinking about all the people to whom I feel bonded.

Think also about the sensual experiences that touch your soul—the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes that make you smile...that bring you joy. That's your foundation for contentment. Things like...

- The smell of fresh-baked cookies
- The feel of fireplace heat on cold toes
- The sound of a cardinal chirp
- The sight of a goldfinch on a birdbath
- The taste of cranberry-vanilla tea in the morning

What are examples in your life? Focus on them now to feel a contented glow. And see if you don't also feel a new kind of happy!

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