

The History of Happiness

by Peter N. Stearns

Idea in Brief

Today the Western world is caught up in a culture of happiness, but it wasn't always so. It was only in the 18th century that the values of the Enlightenment ushered in the notion that happiness was the attainment of a worthy life. Since then the pursuit of happiness has gained momentum and spread to every aspect of behavior, from religion and politics to work and parenting.

It's important to trace this steady encroachment of the happiness imperative because it reminds us that today's values are not givens in the human condition. Culture reflects choices, and new choices can change it.

It's also important to recognize that any societal choice has both good and bad consequences. When the goal becomes happiness, the idea arises that unhappiness is to be avoided in ourselves, our families, and our workplaces. Emotional states short of bliss become sources of anxiety and are even diagnosed as pathologies. That may lead to choices that aren't for the best and, paradoxically, make a lot of people more miserable.



Artwork: **Yue Minjun, *The Massacre at Chios*, 2001, oil on canvas, 300 x 220 cm**

A modern Russian adage holds that “a person who smiles a lot is either a fool or an American.” It's true that when McDonald's arrived in Russia, in 1990, one of its first tasks was to train clerks to seem cheerful. I've spent time since with Russian friends, discussing cultural rules on showing happiness, agreeing that differences remain.

The point here is not to disparage Russians. Most East Asian cultures also have lower happiness expectations than Americans are accustomed to. Some Latin American cultures tend in the other direction. The point is that cultural variations on happiness are considerable, contributing to the findings of international happiness polls that dot the contemporary public opinion landscape.

Moreover, attitudes toward happiness don't just vary; they change. Danes, the current polls suggest, are no longer so melancholy. Exploring the nature of such change not only illuminates our own context for happiness but also allows us to assess its advantages and downsides. Without historical perspective, American expectations seem so normal and so natural that they're difficult to evaluate.

The fact is that the commitment to happiness in Western culture is relatively modern. Until the 18th century, Western standards encouraged, if anything, a slightly saddened approach to life, with facial expressions to match. As one dour Protestant put it, God would encourage a person who “allowed no joy or pleasure, but a kind of melancholic demeanor and austerity.” This does not mean people were actually unhappy—we simply cannot know that, because cultural standards and personal temperament interact in complicated ways. But there is no question that many people felt obliged to apologize for the moments of happiness they did encounter. Sinful humanity had best display a somewhat sorrowful humility.

This changed dramatically with the 18th century and the values of the Enlightenment. Alexander Pope declaimed, “Oh

happiness! our being's end and aim!" while one John Byrom urged that "it was the best thing one could do to be always cheerful...and not suffer any sullenness." The charge here was double-edged and has remained so. On the one hand, it was now perfectly legitimate to seek happiness. On the other, not being happy, or at least not seeming to be, was a problem to be avoided. Ordinary people began writing about their interest "in enjoying happiness and independence." Disasters, such as the brutal yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793, produced recommendations to the survivors to keep up their spirits and avoid excessive grief.

The list of historians working on happiness is not long, but those who've tackled some aspect of the subject generally agree: At the level of rhetoric, at least, a significant shift occurred in Western culture around 250 years ago.

The Rise of Happiness

1776

U.S. Declaration of Independence declares that all men have a right to "the pursuit of happiness."

1926

The song "Happy Birthday" is composed.

1963

Smiley face is invented; annual licensing fees exceed \$50 million by the decade's end.

1977

McDonald's introduces the Happy Meal.

The obvious question is why, and while some causes are pretty clear, we probably still fall short of a fully satisfactory explanation. Components include, certainly, the intellectual shift toward a higher valuation of matters in this world and a reduced commitment to traditional Christian staples such as original sin—all part of the cultural environment created by the Enlightenment. It's important to stress that the happiness surge was not antireligious; a key component was the new idea that being cheerful was pleasing to God. The 18th century also saw some measurable advances in human comfort for the middle classes and above, ranging from better home heating to the availability of umbrellas to provide shelter from the rain. (Only a few British traditionalists objected to the latter as undermining national character.) One historian has also noted the 18th century as a time of improved dentistry, when people became more willing to lift their lips in a smile; he argues that the ambivalent smile of a Mona Lisa probably reflected embarrassment at tooth decay. The several shifts driving the happiness surge were powerful enough to propel happiness into politics by century's end, with the American revolutionary commitment to the pursuit of same.

Indeed, there seems to have been a bit of an American twist on all this even early on. A British journalist in 1792 was surprised at "the good humor of Americans," and 40 years later another noted that Americans seemed unwilling to complain, for the sympathy they might gain would be outweighed by their friends' disapproval. It was in the 1830s that Harriet Martineau, often described as the first female sociologist, professed amazement at how often Americans tried to make her laugh: One stranger "dropped some drolleries so new to me, and so intense, that I was perplexed what to do with my laughter." The smiling American was becoming a stereotype two centuries ago, as a new nation sought to justify its existence by projecting superior claims to happiness. It was no accident that this same new nation, at this same point, quietly revolutionized the approach to death by introducing the garden cemetery, where people could gain a sense of contentment, if not happiness, as they contemplated the end of life.

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