

# HAPPINESS

It was philosopher Albert Schweitzer who is credited with that famous quote that *Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory*. I have a terrible memory, and my health is not that bad, but I was reminded of this saying the other day when I was picked up on Yahoo Messenger by some friends in the IT office. It was Daisy's birthday and a number of Tony's angels had been celebrating with an impromptu picnic in the office. Our web cams were switched on and as the angels appeared on screen one after another, I was struck more than anything else how happy everyone seemed to be.

Of course my male ego easily assimilated this into how pleased they all were to see me! But on reflection I realised that I had never seen any of them with really sad faces; and I further realised that of all the Filipino community over here where I live in the Middle East that I can count as friends, the positive attitude to life that they all reflect is probably one of the main reasons why I enjoy their company so much. Such a change from the cynical and depressive personalities of a number of western expats that live in Dubai!

But can one really make such ridiculous generalisations? It's not as if they don't all have plenty of reasons to be depressed. Of course they do, just like everyone else on this planet. But just as we all have different goals that we pursue in our lives, there is one common universal

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goal for everyone - the goal to become happy, and my Filipino friends appear to have got this down to a fine art.

Psychologists have known for some time that optimism is a good defence against unhappiness. It's no secret that optimistic people are much happier than pessimists. There are specific characteristics features optimists have that bring them more success, greater health, increased life satisfaction, and other good things. If you can become an optimist in your mind, it means that you can develop a happier personality and this reflects itself in the way others also perceive you. It actually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as you involve yourself more, put yourself more forward, take more care of yourself and end up enjoying life more.

There is another group of people who are sure that they are the only masters of their destiny and fate, and benefit by taking negative life events as a challenge rather than a threat. They are capable of dealing with problems by coming up with effective solutions instead of sitting in depression and being absolutely drained and of draining everyone around them into the bargain.

Some happy people surround themselves with family and friends, and deeply involve themselves in daily activities. Most importantly, they have discovered or taught themselves how to forgive others. The happiest people pursue personal growth and judge themselves by their own ups and downs and not against what others do or have. They look on the bright side, even if they encounter really big problems on the way.

Experts believe that we all have a "set point" for happiness, just as we do for weight. People can improve or prevent their well-being, but do not usually take long leaps in either direction from their set point. Even physical health, assumed by many to be one of the keys to happiness, only has an impact if you become ill. The majority of us take our health for granted and are none the happier for it.

Psychologists have long realised that people can learn how to become happy, and that everyone can teach themselves to see the proverbial half-empty glass as half-full. All they have to do is to spend time thinking about all the things that have gone right for themselves, rather than dwelling on what has gone badly in the past. Studies on depression show that one of the main causes is thinking and them suffering about something that went wrong in the past. If you think back over some event and keep turning it over and over in your mind, telling yourself that you messed up big-time, the chances are that you will be upset. You keep feeding if the oxygen of attention and the flames keep burning you up.

So do Filipinos as a race simply have bad memories? Or is it, as scientists at Essex University in the south of England appear to have discovered recently, that variations in a mood-altering gene influence whether people take a pessimistic or optimistic view of life? This gene is involved in the transportation of the wellbeing chemical serotonin, which affects whether or not we are drawn to negative or positive aspects of the world.

It's obviously early days to make any firm conclusion; but as the American author and political activist Helen Keller maintained, *When one door of happiness closes, another opens; often we stare so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us*. I guess my Filipino friends just know instinctively where to look for those other doors.

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