

Newsletter October 2006

IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Most people like the idea of being happy, but how does one define it and is happiness the exception rather than the rule in our modern prosperous society?

It is clear that a lot of people are not happy. Depression is a major cause of disability in our society. Pharmaceutical treatments are often helpful, but are limited by high drop out rates and recurrences on ceasing the medication. Counselling and lifestyle strategies are also useful, but once again are not going to help everyone.

Research shows that happiness cannot be predicted by age, gender, education level and other demographics.

Perhaps happiness is an abnormal expectation. Dr R.P. Bentall wrote a “tongue in cheek” letter to the Journal Of Medical Ethics in 1992 in which he proposed that happiness be classified as a psychiatric disorder. He is quoted as saying “In a review of the medical literature it is shown that happiness is statistically abnormal, consists of a discrete cluster of symptoms, is associated with a cognitive range of abnormalities, and probably reflects the abnormal functioning of the central nervous system. Happiness should be classified as major affective disorder, pleasant type”.

Talking with people about happiness suggests that there are two opposite beliefs. Sometimes it is hard to believe that they are all talking about the same topic.

The first belief is conditional happiness. For example I’ll be happy when I have a great job , bigger house , new car, fantastic relationship, win the lottery, have kids, get fit or lose weight. The problem is that money is not a happy pill. A recent US study showed that people with an above average income were relatively satisfied with their lives, but barely happier than others in moment-to-moment experience. People on lower incomes had a similar number of positive experiences in daily life as those who earned five times more money. Perhaps this is partly because people are generally great at adapting to more money and end up wanting more.

The other belief is that happiness is a choice or an attitude and you will only attract a better job or great relationship when you are already happy.

In general the happiest people have strong social relationships and find meaning and purpose through activities such as parenting, work, hobbies, charity or environment.

Take some time to write down what you are grateful for. This is a great opportunity to think about what happiness means to you and can help you work out if it is time to make some changes in your life.