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## **Happiness: A Lifetime of Energy Well-Spent**

**By Jason J. Cochran**

My grandfather is my biggest role model in life. At 73, he served our country, worked multiple jobs, retired, started a family, owns his own house, and more. I haven't done any of that yet. I'm just starting college, which is something my grandfather never did. Just as people's lives are different, people's definitions of happiness are different. Something my grandfather claimed was a big part of his happiness was traveling (J. Cochran, personal communication, March 6, 2023). The last time I was on vacation, I spent most of my time in a luxurious Airbnb, instead of at the ocean or on a boardwalk. That piece just doesn't fit in my puzzle. For me, the most important facets of my happiness are my academic success, strong relationships, and putting my energy toward something bigger than myself.

My grandfather described success as being "measured in your own values" and insisted that "there's a million ways to be successful" (J. Cochran, personal communication, March 6, 2023). I agree with him. Just like happiness, success is something that people must define for themselves. For me, my success has been measured in what I've been able to achieve in school and is a major contributor to my happiness. The happiest moment of my life so far has been giving my valedictorian speech during my high school graduation. To me, it encompasses all of the hard work I put in for years of high school. In my speech, I spoke about how proud I am to be from the school and town I'm from. In the local area, our school isn't seen as prestigious but only as a poor school that is able to stay afloat through its historically good football program. I have friends that avoid putting Clairton, PA on their applications for jobs and colleges because they're afraid of looking bad. I feel the opposite. I'm so blessed to come from a small

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community. I've lived in Clairton and attended the Clairton City School District from kindergarten to my senior year. To me, every academic accolade I receive isn't just proof of things I do, but what my town can do. To anybody that thinks less of my school district just because we're poor or we don't accomplish anything besides football, I am living proof that they're wrong. I am extremely lucky to be a part of that proof alongside everyone else who has gone on to go to college. Being academically successful despite everything people claim to know about my school district and town is one of my biggest motivators. I don't just go to school to get a good job, gain academic honors, or prove people wrong. A big misconception people have about life is that to be happy, you need to get a good job, and to do that you need to go to a good school. While Pitt Bradford is a good school, it's not nearly as prestigious as Harvard or Yale, which I vividly remember my mother telling me to go to when I was only five or six. It's not about what school you go to, or how much money you make, it's about what you're able to get out of your time there.

Anthon Ives, in his TEDx talk at the Taipei American School in 2017, discusses how wrong the vision of going to the perfect school and getting the best job is. He talks about various successful people, listing what colleges they went to, some of which never even got a degree. He talks about hiring practices at some institutions, and how less and less, the college you went to and the grades you got even matter in the hiring process. Instead, he presents research suggesting that happiness instead stems from 5 key factors abbreviated as PERMA: Positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. For me, paving my road to higher education (both from high school to college and now from college to graduate school) gives my life meaning and makes me feel accomplished. I know that I'm doing something with

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my life and that one day I'll work in a field where I can help those around me, hopefully making others as happy as my success has made me.

Robert Waldinger, director of the longest study on human happiness, makes a point to specify that the type of relationships in your life are secondary to the quality of those relationships. In his TED talk in 2016, he says, "It's not just the number of friends you have, and it's not whether or not you're in a committed relationship, but it's the quality of your close relationships that matters." I think that this is important because it highlights how people can find happiness within the other people in their life. Humans are social by nature, and without other people, we are deprived of a need: loneliness is similar to dehydration and starvation. At the same time, I believe that each type of relationship you hold can bring you happiness in different ways.

My family has never been the biggest, but just like my attitude towards education, I believe that makes us stronger. There's only about a dozen or so left of us in town. I live with my grandparents and my father. I owe everything I've ever had to them. My grandparents have looked after me and taught me everything I know, giving me important life lessons and the foundations for my academic career. My father has always worked and provided for us monetarily. Functionally, I wouldn't have been able to accomplish anything if I didn't have them backing me. Developmentally, I would be a worse person if I was kept in any other company. I have all the respect and love in the world for them. Every day, my dad texts me before work, and when I wake up it never fails to make me smile. He always tells me to have a good day, how proud he is of me, and how much he loves me. I can't stress how important this is to my day. Making my family proud is one of the biggest highlights of my life, just as being proud of me is a highlight of theirs. My aunt Barb, who's the closest to us out of our extended family, explained

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that our family fulfilled her and was the ultimate form of happiness (B. Rossi, personal communication, March 11, 2023). I've also had my fair share of friends over the years, and I think having friends allows me to connect with people in ways that don't work between me and my family. I'm able to talk to my friends about things we're interested in, things at school, and things in pop culture. I'm not saying that this is because I live with old people, but my grandparents still believe that every video game has "levels."

I have limited experience with romantic relationships, but I think that a partner is someone that you can be your "truest" self to. There are certain conversations that I couldn't have with my family and friends, but I don't believe that exists with your partner; you should be able to talk to him or her about anything. Additionally, like the word "partner" suggests, they're people for you to traverse life with, working with them every day for the benefit of you both. My grandfather went into detail about this, talking about how they were only able to raise my father by working together as a team. He would make the money, and my grandmother would take care of the house. He completely trusted her with his paycheck, and together, they were able to divide the work up and each have it easier together than they would separately (J. Cochran, personal communication, March 6, 2023). Overall, no matter what kind of relationships you have with people, the stronger they are, the happier you will be. I have been blessed with great friends, great family, and great partners. Coming to college and leaving everyone behind has been hard, but it's also been fun to build new relationships with new people at the same time.

In psychology, there is a school of thought known as humanism. Humanists believe that people are more than just their behaviors. We're different from other animals due to our increased understanding and perception of time. Humans can plan years ahead in the future, and think years back in the past, which gives us a greater capacity for growth and aspiration. I

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believe that to be happy, I need to put my energy towards something that will outlive me. It isn't just about pursuing a goal, but leaving a legacy. For some people, that manifests in the form of starting their own family. Other people might devote their lives to religion. These are both basic societal mechanisms for giving people a sense of purpose and longevity. Other people may devote their lives to research and advancing human knowledge. As I mentioned earlier, I am lucky to begin my education in a career field dedicated to helping people. As an industrial-organizational psychologist, I hope to one day develop and lead research relating to the workplace. If I can discover ways to make the modern workplace more efficient and painless, I may be able to leave a lasting impact on every working person in the world, assuming my research is accepted and implemented. Martinez et al. (2020), in a study about how the pursuit of goals relates to happiness, concluded that:

Goals can help people build on and utilize their strengths and abilities to fulfill a purpose and create meaning in their lives. By setting goals that help people grow individually, they can become physically, cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually healthier. At the same time, they can find a deeper meaning by reflecting on how these goals serve a greater purpose by improving their relationships, preserving their environment, and strengthening the communities in which they live. (p. 16)

The pursuit of something larger than yourself can fulfill all five categories of PERMA. It brings you meaning and accomplishment, helps build relationships, keeps you engaged with something, and improves your emotional health. Without education, I would feel no accomplishment or meaning in my life. I wouldn't meet professors I can look up to and peers I can look forward to seeing every day. I wouldn't be doing anything worthwhile in my eyes! Another example of this is the story of Ryan Beckmand, who in 2018 gave a TEDx talk at the

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University of Western Australia detailing his life story. Ryan grew up in an area with high crime, with an abusive father. He started a tech company, but decided it wasn't fulfilling, and instead began working with non-government disaster relief organizations in Nepal and India. To quote the video description: "His talk explores how to harness a diversity of potential and passion that enables us to be more purpose-driven leaders in a rapidly evolving world." To me, contributing something to society that will live long after you will, that will help people you will never meet, and inspire people not yet born, is the ultimate pursuit of happiness.

Researching and writing this paper has taught me that overall, I believe happiness doesn't come from individual moments, but rather a lifetime of energy spent towards your passions, relationships, and personal achievement and meaning. It's not about your wedding day or your honeymoon, but about your marriage. It's not about the day your research is published, but the hundreds of people who will go on to cite your research after you've died. It's not about being the Valedictorian of your graduating class, but looking back at your high school years fondly as you think of how much you were able to grow during them, despite setbacks. Whereas other people might think they're happy with a lot of money, or with a hobby, or maybe a well-paying job or a nice house, I think those are only really a means to an end. It's not about how much money you make or how big your house is, but what that money goes toward and who lives in your house with you. If I could make a single wish, I would want to be remembered fondly for the rest of human history. Everything would be worth it in the end if I could make even a small positive change.

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