The Road to Happiness Isn't What You Think It Is



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Psychologists have long studied what makes people "happy." The technical term is "subjective well-being" (SWB) or a person's own opinion of how happy they are – and whose else's opinion matters, really?

So what did they find out makes people happiest? Winning the lottery? Early retirement? Lounging on the beach for weeks on end?

Interestingly, no. According to Carleton University psychology professor Dr. Timothy A. Pychyl, writing in *Psychology Today*:

> *The consensus based on the psychology of action and personal goals clearly indicates that the successful pursuit of meaningful goals plays an important role in the development*

> *and maintenance of our psychological well-being. To the extent that we're making progress on our goals, we're happier emotionally and more satisfied with our lives.*

In other words, we feel the most happy when we're making progress towards a clearly defined goal. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explores this phenomenon in his book *Flow State*. He interviews athletes, entrepreneurs, artists and other high performers about the feeling of being "in the zone"—time slows down, the outside world melts away, and nothing matters but the work.

Same freezing basement, whole new attitude

So what makes people *unhappy?* It's not a lack of money and it's not a lack of time. It's the lack of a clear goal to work toward. With a clear goal to work toward, money doesn't matter. The failures of the past don't matter. All that matters is progress toward that goal.

I experienced this in my own development. At my lowest point, I was working at home in my freezing basement in rural Pennsylvania, with a plastic paint bucket for a chair. I had a dozen businesses in various stages of half-baked. I was miserable. But when I ditched all of the businesses but one, something happened. I was thrilled, in the zone, my eyes focused laser-like on the prize.

Nothing had changed about that damned refrigerator of a basement. Nothing had changed about that painful paint bucket. I still hated them. What changed was that I was no longer miserable. I was on a mission. And I built that business to six figures in less than a year, and seven figures in less than four. Now I live in Florida and I have a proper office chair. It's comfy.

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Sailors without a rudder

Most people rarely find "the zone" as described by Csikszentmihalyi. They instead live in an anti-zone of confusion, without a clear goal. Their employers make most of their decisions for them; they work dutifully and even happily toward someone *else's* goal. Or they may run like hamsters on a wheel to support a family or save for retirement, their only purpose to stave off financial ruin.

In their personal lives, they resort to Netflix and buying new toys, hoping for happiness but lacking the one thing that will give it to them: a clear goal to work toward. When they set out to be in business for themselves, they're like sailors without a rudder. Left to set their own sail, they go in a million different directions, only to end up right back where they started and more frustrated than ever.

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What's the question?

When I have Q&A calls with my students, I can always tell the ones who haven't defined the problem. When it's their turn to ask a question, they start telling a rambling story. Out of respect for everyone's time, I often cut them off as politely as possible and ask, "What's the *question?*" And it usually boils down to, "What do I do?"

Not much to work with. Clearly, we haven't defined the problem. Sometimes I push a little further into the details of their life and find utter chaos: a messy kitchen; an unmade bed; a million apps on their phones pushing them

notifications; halfway through 16 online courses; 12 pages into five books with six more coming from Amazon; five half-baked businesses launched and ideas for 10 more.

My job as a coach is now clear. First, help them clear out the clutter, boil their activities and their environment down to the essentials. Next, help them *define the problem.* Find the one outcome they want to achieve, and then define the one process that will get them there.

Once they define the problem, psychology and SWB kicks in and starts to work its magic. With the confusion dispelled and replaced with clarity, their morale improves about 1,000%, as does their motivation to actually do the work. After all, they now know exactly what they are supposed to do and why.

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What's the solution?

For most of my students, the goal is a prosperous business and financial freedom. I can relate to that. If that's the problem, there's a simple solution: Make a sale. Websites, business cards, email autoresponders…they're all useless if you never make a sale.

Easy, right? Not so fast. To make a sale, you need product-market fit. So the one thing I encourage my students to focus on first is confirming product-market fit. Once you thread that needle, your work is 90% done anyway. Confirming product-market fit takes three steps:

1. Talk to your target market, listening to their problems and looking for one you can solve.
2. Devise a solution to their problem. ***Don't build it yet.*** We're still confirming product-market fit. There's one step left….

3. Ask members of your target market to pull out their credit card and buy it. Right now.

That’s how you confirm product-market fit, that you have a product so in-demand that your prospects buy it before it’s even developed – just to have first crack at it.

Forget everything else. The *one* thing is to solve that problem, and you’re in business.

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