

QUEST FOR HAPPINESS – By Dr T Pham

In Australia, it is estimated that 45% of people will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime. In any one year, around 1 million Australian adults have depression and over 2 million have anxiety (Beyond Blue).

Anxiety is the most common mental condition in Australia. On average 1 in 4 people will experience anxiety and 1 in 6 people will experience depression at some stage in their lives.

In this life some people are unhappy when they don't get what they want or others are not happy with what they have. In life we cannot control most things that happen around us, for example:

- Our family;
- Our relatives;
- Our friends;

When we are born, we enter the world into families which we did not choose. Some families are fortunate and some are not. For example:

- Some families are poor;
- Some families experience domestic violence;
- Some families experience sexual, mental and physical abuse;
- Some families are wealthy;
- Some families live in countries of war, famine and fear.

Everyone wants to be happy. However, happiness can be elusive. The more we search for happiness the more we seem to struggle in discovering what true happiness is.

So how can we find happiness?

What is happiness? Happiness has different meanings to different people. There are legitimate reasons to be happy, such as:

- escaping from a dangerous situation;
- escaping physical or mental abuse; and
- escaping from a serious illness.

If I am in a state of starvation, having food will make me very happy. Other people will be happy if they can have a new car, a new house, a boat... and the list is endless. Sometimes though, this creates a problem. Once you have the car or new boat etc, the excitement is often short lived and then you may want to have another thing or something new.

A lonely person may think: "I am only happy if I can find a partner, my "perfect match". People often believe in fairy tales, that a couple can and will live happily ever after. The reality can often be disappointing. The happy wedding may be the start of an ongoing relationship problem and stress ...

The divorce rate may be up to 50-60%.

So this kind of happiness is not long lasting because people want something else again and again. They are often chasing an elusive happiness.

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In my opinion, true happiness comes mostly from a peaceful mind, a state of contentment at every minute of the present moment.

We only live at the present moment but often we are too absorbed with the memory of the past or worry about what our future will be. We then forget how to be aware and enjoy the present moment and before we know it, time passes quickly and we regret not making the most of the present time and our life then passes quickly.

We often think that our memory is very accurate but in reality it is biased depending on our mood at a particular moment in time. We will often remember things that are most upsetting resulting in us feeling angry, upset or guilty or, if we remember happy moments we soon realise that they have gone and then our mind fills with regrets.

Hence, we allow our minds to think of the past. We then become frustrated, angry and or sad. This will sometimes lead to depression. We should remember the past is the past, we can't change it.

Our minds will also think about the future. We then may become anxious and apprehensive of what might happen. We will then spend time and energy thinking about what the future will bring and we can sometimes become overwhelmed by thinking about possible future problems. This will create a feeling of being tired and unable to do things in the present. We will become absorbed by thinking about the future.

Most people's mind has the habit to switch between the past and future, which will lead to feelings of sadness and worry.

The best way to live, I believe is to keep our mind focussed fully in the present moment, the very moment we live. This is **mindfulness**.

If we keep thinking about the unknown future, we will:

- feel the stress of the uncertainty;
- the unpredictability of the future; and
- be overwhelmed by the so many responsibilities and commitments we have to fulfil.

We will then become worried and anxious. We suffer because our imagination often anticipates every possible difficulties and failures in the future. This can lead to low self-confidence and low self-esteem. Life is hard enough, so I suggest not to make it harder with your imagination thinking continually about what "might be" in the future.

A student, who is studying for an exam, will be worried about failing the exam even though the exam is in the future. If a student is so worried and nervous, he/she will be very tired because of the stress and energy spent on negative thinking. Instead, if the student applies mindfulness in their approach to their study, he/she will then be focussing on the task in front of him/her. The approach will be to incorporate one lesson at a time then moving onto the next lesson and so on. At the time of the exam the student will concentrate on the questions without being shaky and forgetful and therefore will have a better result.

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We often struggle to deal with adverse events in our life. We often do not accept the event(s) and will then suffer more. We feel that the event is not fair, we won't accept it and then suffer more. We become a victim, feeling that life is so unfair and then think we are a victim of fate and everything that could go wrong will go wrong.

The best thing to do is to accept what we cannot change. We can only change our reaction to life events.

If someone verbally abuses us, we cannot stop the abuse but we can choose how we react to it. We can put up a fight, we can argue or we think about it again and again which will make us more angry and upset. The words were said once but we could think about it hundred times more and this will make us unhappy and this will allow our enemies to hurt us more. We do not realise that we give the other person to hurt us. If we let go no one has the power to hurt us.

Why can't we let go of upsetting events and why do we want to hurt ourselves?

Mindfulness -Keeping our body and mind together.

Here are some practical methods to help us control our mind thoughts:

1. Keeping our mind aware and focussed

When we are active and undertaking any activity such as:

- Cooking;
- Cleaning
- Washing dishes,
- Gardening;
- Eating; and
- Working etc....

We should attempt to concentrate on the task we are undertaking without any distraction. If we concentrate on the one activity, we will obtain better results through efficiency, better work satisfaction and this will then result in being happy because the task will be well done. Our schedules might be busy. If this is so, we will need to focus our energy to perform on this one task and not anticipate future tasks as these could overwhelm us and we will become tired thinking about them. Please remember we can only take one step at a time and then naturally the next step will follow. If we concentrate fully on one task/thing we will not be wasting our energy on interfering thoughts and we will then be more efficient and energised. If we don't concentrate our energy on just one task, we will waste our energy on too many activities we want to achieve which will in turn increase our stress levels. If we concentrate on one task, applying our energy to this task at one hundred percent effort we will then see ourselves transforming into high achievers with less stress in our modern lives.

2. Walking – will improve fitness and health which will help reduce stress

Set aside at least 30 minutes per day for walking. When our body is walking, our mind should be aware of each footstep. That is the right foot, left foot forward without any other thought in the mind. This is the basis of **walking meditation**. This is a very useful tool to use when we are feeling stressed or emotionally distressed. This type of meditation is easy to focus

because we focus on the steps and then we will ignore other disturbing thoughts. We can either walk briskly or at a slower pace. The choice is yours. You can walk indoors or outdoors.

3. Breathing: focus and be aware of our breath going in and out of our nostrils

Our mind is most active when we are sitting or lying down to relax. This is why a lot of people cannot sleep when they are stressed or emotionally distressed. The thoughts will keep coming again and again and sometimes we will allow these thoughts to run around in circles and then they don't stop. Please try and remember our body is still and is breathing so our mind needs to focus and we need to be aware of these breaths going in and out of our nostrils. When we pay attention to our breath, we will automatically ignore any other thoughts which come into our mind. This is the basis of ***breathing meditation***. It is very simple and logic as we find something for our mind to focus on instead of thinking about the past or the future problems/issues. When practicing meditation, it is essential to breathe at a normal rate and do not hyperventilate as this could give rise to panic attacks. Also do not focus on the chest as this could lead to one feeling tightness in the chest. If you do not have time to practice meditation formally, then you can practice it lying down before you sleep or try and be aware of the breaths at any time you have, such as when you are at the bus stop or waiting to see your doctor. This will make you relax and make the best use of your waiting time and then you will be less impatient and unhappy.

These three practice tips above do not require any more time in our busy schedules and they will help us cope with the many demands of our modern life.

Our mind in general has two compartments:

- 1) the conscious mind above
- 2) the subconscious (that we are not aware of) where past memories are stored.

The subconscious is working without our knowledge. For example, we met an acquaintance in the street and we try to think about a name but could not remember and we forgot about the event but a few days after while we sit and relax we suddenly remember that person's name. Similarly, when we are depressed or anxious, the disturbing thoughts might come up during sleep and we wake up early and might not go back to sleep. Early morning awakening is often a symptom of psychological stress.

During the day, there are many thoughts that keep surging up into our conscious mind to catch our attention. If we think and elaborate on every thought(s) that come to the mind, our mind can become very crowded especially if we have recent stressors which can lead to headaches, poor sleep, depression, anxiety, stress, anger....

In life, if someone wants to enter our personal property such as our house, they have to knock and we have to look who is there before we open the door to let the person in. Similarly, in our mind when a thought comes to our attention we have to see if the thought is related to the present or not. If the thought is related to the present we can let it in (as we need it now), but if the thought is from the past or the future, we can just ignore it. The security guard of our mind is therefore ***mindfulness***.

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In summary, the way to achieve happiness is to be able to live fully for the present moment. If there is any adverse life event in our life, we have to think if we could change it or not. If we could change the circumstances, we make steps to change them but in the majority of the time, the life event is there to stay so we have to accept it and live mindfully.

Life is hard so do not make it harder by thinking too much. Just observe a person who is surfing. He is definitely very mindful of the incoming waves and he has to make the best use of the waves. If he falls, he has to stand up and try again. The waves are like life events that can come unpredictably low, high, big or small and we all have to surf through life events mindfully so we do not let ourselves being drowned in sorrow, depression or anxiety.