

Should Life Be Happy or Meaningful?

It's the never-ending question – even if it is rather a subconscious one. What makes for a good life? We all strive for happiness, but does that do the trick? According to this article from [Time](#), the type of life we are after is one that is meaningful, not happy.

Does that indicate that people with meaning in their lives won't have happiness? Of course they will – but a long-term happiness, or joy. I guess it comes down to this: those who seek happiness will opt for immediate pleasures: enjoying that whole tub of ice-cream, shopping 'til they drop, drinking without limits. While these feel good at the time, their after-effects and long-term consequences (poor health, debt, hangovers, anyone?) aren't so fun. As for the people who seek meaning, momentary pleasures might be forgone for something bigger – eventually leaving them feeling enriched and part of something bigger than themselves.

The perfect example, as the article pointed out, is parenting. Trust me – waking up in the middle of the night to feed your baby and changing nappies don't exactly bring about feelings of happiness. They do however give so much meaning to life, and the long-term joy that comes from bringing up an amazing human being is just priceless.

So what are the factors necessary for acquiring meaning in life? The article had four suggestions:

Belonging

It's the type of word that conjures up memories of your high school English curriculum, but I suppose the theme was chosen for a reason – research shows that a sense of belonging adds

meaning to life. And only naturally: we are social beings, after all. When I think about people I know whose lives demonstrate a strong sense of meaning, they all seem to be part of a close family, have genuine friends, or are involved in a church or religious group, team or club.

Purpose

As the article put it, this is “less about what you do and more about how you see what you do”. Whatever you do with your life, what does that mean for you and how are you contributing to the world? A housewife might see her duties as small and tedious; or she might see them as loving her family by providing them with a warm and welcoming home. A surgeon might see her work as patient after patient with the same condition, or she might see it as changing the life of the individual in front of her and their family. A garbage collector could get bored of the same routine, or be passionate about keeping his local area clean and beautiful. That’s purpose!

Growing From Suffering

The article called this section ‘storytelling,’ and described it as the way you make sense of the negatives in life – but I think ‘growing from suffering’ sums it up better. Do you grow from tough moments and take note of any positive that comes from it, or do you just let it contaminate your life? For example losing a job – a person could choose to wallow in the hit to his pride, or he could see it as an opportunity to try something new that he might not have done otherwise. Or being bullied – this could lead one down a path of destruction, or move them to find their inner strength and feel real empathy for others in a similar position.

Transcendence

I guess this is about getting out of yourself, and remembering how small we, and our little problems, are in the scheme of things. This last week for me has brought a lot of bad news: unexpected deaths, breakups, sickness. With these on my mind, the things that might have been bugging me seemed so petty and insignificant. And with these on my mind, I was more likely to be moved to focus on others rather than myself – which brings meaning. However bad things don't need to happen to feel transcendence! For a little awe in your life, all you need is a stunning sunset or a breathtaking view – guaranteed to make you feel small again.

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