Stuart Vyse is a psychologist and author of *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition*, which won the William James Book Award of the American Psychological Association. He is a fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry.

Good News for Grouches: Happiness May Be Overrated

Saying Americans are obsessed with happiness is like saying there is air. The pursuit of happiness is one of the unalienable rights established in the Declaration of Independence, and in recent decades an enormous happiness industry has risen up to help you succeed in your personal pursuit. The demand for books on happiness seems to be insatiable. Recent titles include *Happier*, *Even Happier*, *Stumbling on Happiness*, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, *Authentic Happiness*, and *Flourish*—and those are just the books written by famous academic psychologists.

Economists, too, have suggested that happiness is more important than previously believed, because money doesn't always buy it. Back in the 1970s, economist Richard Easterlin (1974) reported data showing that many countries experiencing substantial increases in gross national product showed no accompanying change in overall levels of happiness. The "Easterlin paradox" has been challenged a number of times, but there is a growing consensus that when measuring national development and progress, economic indicators—such as gross domestic product—should be supplemented by surveys of happiness and well-being.

Finally, positive psychology—a movement described as the "science of happiness and flourishing" (Compton and Hoffman 2012)—has grown rapidly in recent years, contributing to a burgeoning self-help movement. There are flocks of happiness authorities prepared to lecture you on the subject. Just type "happy" into the search field of the TED talk website (www.ted.com), and you will be rewarded with hours of upbeat presentations.

Grouches Live Just as Long

Many of the purveyors of happiness[1] point to research showing that happy people live longer, with the clear implication that if you want to extend your life, you should go out and find more bliss. But a new large-scale study throws serious shade on that claim—at least for healthy middle-aged women. In December 2015, Bette Liu of the University of New South Wales, along with collaborators there and at Oxford University, published an article in *The Lancet* (Liu et al. 2015) based on data from the "The Million Woman Study," a prospective investigation of women in the United Kingdom. The authors eliminated participants who at the beginning of the study already had life-threatening illnesses, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, or chronic obstructive airways disease, which left them with a starting group of 719,671 women who averaged fifty-nine years old at the beginning of the study.

When follow-up measures were taken—an average of 9.6 years later—4 percent of the women (31,531) had died. Looking simply at the raw numbers, the results seemed to show the expected outcome: women who reported they were happy most or all of the time were more likely to be living ten years later. But after controlling for a number of other variables, such as age and the participants' self-reported health at the beginning of the study, the effect of happiness disappeared. Women who were unhappy at the beginning of the study were no more likely to die than those who were happy.

The most important variable turned out to be self-reported health, and Liu and her coauthors analyzed its effect a number of different ways with consistent results. For example, when they separated out just the women who said they had fair or poor health at the beginning of the study, they found that happiness had no effect on their mortality. Similarly, looking only at the women who reported generally good health, there was no effect of happiness on survival. So Liu and her colleagues concluded that a woman's health at the beginning of the study (as measured by her own assessment) was correlated both with her level of happiness and her survival ten years later. But happiness itself was not a causal variable.

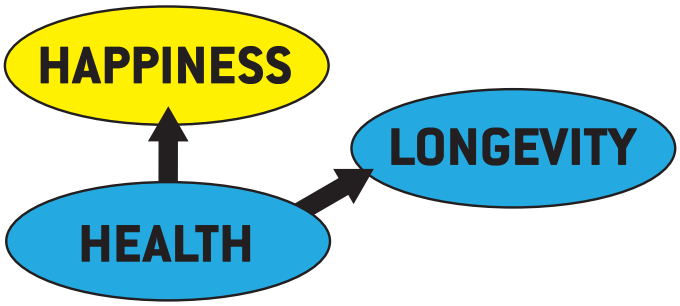
Looking back at the previous studies, Liu and colleagues found further support for their findings:

> Some, but not all, other prospective studies have reported that happiness or related subjective measures of wellbeing are associated with lower all-cause mortality. . . . Where other

> investigators adjusted for self-rated health, any apparent excess mortality associated with unhappiness was attenuated or disappeared completely. (Liu et al. 2015, 880)

According to Liu and her collaborators, most previous researchers missed a confounding variable and, as a result, confused cause and effect. Happiness and longevity are correlated because people who don't feel well are less happy and less likely to survive. But researchers who failed to measure participants' self-reported health at the beginning of their studies missed this relationship.

The conventional view. Happiness has a direct causal effect on longevity.



The more likely causal relationship found by Liu et al. (2015). Health (self-reported) affected both happiness at the beginning of the study and predicted longevity at the end of the study.

This is just one study conducted on middle-aged women in the United Kingdom, and as a result, further research will be needed to confirm and extend these findings. But the investigation by Liu and her colleagues has several strengths: it was a prospective study, using a very large sample that produced clear results. If these findings hold up in future research, they would not entirely undercut the happiness industry. All else being equal, most people would still prefer to be happy rather than unhappy, and as a result, happiness self-help books will remain popular. But one common claim of the happiness gurus faces a serious challenge: Contrary to popular opinion, happiness may not prolong your life, and unhappiness may not shorten it.

If there is an upside to this episode, it is that you are free of the burden of being happy. If you are a contented grouch, for whom the pursuit of bliss has little appeal, this study offers some consolation. If the results are valid, you can be relieved of any concern that your failure to be happier is killing you.

Maybe Ignorance Really Is Bliss

As I reviewed this article, I came across another finding that gave me pause. In the description of their participants, Liu and her coauthors presented an extensive table of demographic variables that were correlated with happiness. Many of the outcomes were as you might expect. For example, having children was not related to happiness, but those who lived with a spouse or partner were happier than those who did not. People who drank were happier than those who didn't, and smokers were less happy than nonsmokers. The relationship with hours of sleep was U-shaped, with those who got seven or eight hours being the happiest, and those getting either more or less being less happy. Not too many surprises there, but then my eye fell on the results for education.

Liu and her colleagues reported a strong association between education and happiness, but the direction of effect was the opposite of what I—perhaps naively—assumed it would be. The least educated women—those whose educational attainment was below the ordinary-level exam (O-levels)—were the happiest, and as education increased, happiness decreased. The lowest educational group was 38 percent more likely to be generally happy than those holding college and university degrees.

Intrigued by this finding, I went off in search of more information to determine whether this was a fluke or a consistent outcome. I discovered that the effect of education on happiness is a somewhat under-researched question, but several studies done in developed countries have shown this negative relationship. For example, a 2010 Australian study summed up the previous research this way:

> It is surprising to discover, then, that more educated people should be no happier or even less happy than people with lower levels of education. Instances of such a negative correlation between educational attainment and subjective wellbeing have been observed in a number of developed countries, including Australia. (Dockery 2010, 9)

It is unclear what causes this negative relationship, but the results of the Australian study contradict the hypothesis that people who pursue college are simply less happy in general. The results, based on 3,518 men and women from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth, show that those who pursue higher education are "relatively happy at school and while attending univer-

sity, and that it is in the years following completion of their university qualification that this relatively lower happiness sets in" (Dockery 2010, 41).

One theory suggests that planning for and attending college sets up a number of expectations about life after graduation and that when those expectations are not met, people become discontent. Given the amount of effort and money that goes into getting a college education, it is easy to see how expectations might be elevated and then dashed (Clark et al. 2015). Another theory suggests that education encourages critical thinking, which in turn leads to higher levels of dissatisfaction with the government and the current state of the world (Dockery 2010). But as the author of the Australian study put it, "there remains no convincing theoretical or empirical explanation" for the negative relationship between education and happiness (Dockery 2010, 41).

Like many scientific questions, this one is far from settled.[2] Some studies have found either no relationship between happiness and education or a positive relationship. But the Australian study, the U.K. study of middle-age women, and several previous investigations have shown this negative relationship.

So if this is a genuine phenomenon, what should we do about it? Should we discourage people from going to college because they might be happier if they simply got a job? I think not. There are many other benefits to higher education, both for the individual and for society. If education makes you a tad grouchier, then so be it. The bliss of ignorance is not worth the ignorance.

Happiness Backlash

Taken together, the happiness/longevity data and happiness/education data point to a similar conclusion: joyfulness is a good thing—even a great thing—but it isn't everything. Happiness may not save your life, and you may have to give up some of it to get an education.

In 2009, Barbara Ehrenreich, a much admired curmudgeon, wrote *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America*. Having received a diagnosis of breast cancer, she was soon confronted with a disease culture that claimed "survival hinges on 'attitude.'" She went on to criticize the shifting of responsibility for recovery onto patients, who are implored to fight back with positivity.

Ehrenreich was also very critical of Martin E.P. Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, and his book *Authentic Happiness*, which touted many health benefits of cheerfulness. Seligman fought back in his next book—with the rather audacious title *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*—calling her "Barbara ('I Hate Hope') Ehrenreich" (Seligman 2012, 203) and accusing her of cherry-picking the data she reviewed, highlighting studies that failed to show the health benefits of optimism and happiness. The controversy goes on, but with the arrival of the U.K. study by Liu and colleagues, an additional point can be assigned to the team of Ehrenreich and the grouches. At the very least it is safe to say the relationship of happiness to longevity has not been definitively established.

The Case for Melancholy

I end by offering a few words of support for emotions other than happiness, joy, and optimism. Let us remember that much of the most beautiful music ever written is sad—sometimes desperately so—and yet we love listening to it. Much of the world's best literature and art is similarly dark and compelling. There have been many defenses of melancholy written over the years, but the best I've come across lately is "The Case for Melancholy" written by Laren Stover November 8, 2015, for the *Style* section of the *New York Times*. It ends like this:

> Should melancholy descend, you may as well welcome it, wear your finest lounging outfit; give it your finest fainting couch or chaise to lounge in, or that hammock stretched between two elm trees. Let it settle in.
>
> You may as well enjoy it reclining with a pot of green thunder tea as you watch the rolled leaves unfurl their poetic fury as it steeps, as you listen to Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloé" or Jean Françaix's Concertino for Piano and Orchestra, 2a.
>
> I propose there be melancholy perfumes, fashions, footwear (no running shoes under any circumstances), music (Lana Del Rey is the melancholy diva du jour, and Joni Mitchell and Billie Holiday still work), elixirs (no alcohol; look what happened to Edgar Allan Poe) and furniture ideally suited for indulging in or succumbing to the deeply tinted blue moods.
>
> I want moonlight.[3] ■

Notes

1. For example, Martin E.P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (Simon and Schuster, 2004). Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener, *Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

2. For example, the state-level analysis of Yakovlev and Leguizamon (2012) finds a positive relationship between percentage of college graduates and the average subjective well-being of the state.

3. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/style/the-case-for-melancholy.html.

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