

Happiness: Lessons from a New Science

by Richard Layard

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Reviewed by:

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When considering a book for a common reading program, there are several characteristics that one might hope to find. A common book should first engage, then challenge the reader. The book might relate to his or her place in life and have obvious connections to daily decisions. In other instances, the reader should find connection after reading a page through several times or hearing the perspective of a fellow student. In the end, the book should offer a way to move forward. Perhaps readers will find a new world view, a new approach to decision-making, a new life priority, or an understanding of people or a problem that they did not previously understand.

In *Happiness: Lessons From a New Science*, author Richard Layard succeeds in some of those areas, yet falls short in others. On my first attempt at reading the book, I found myself lost in the dense science on one side and the seemingly basic concept of increasing one's happiness on the other. My question was this: is there a possibility that freshmen will enjoy this book and see how it relates to their life? It was not until I approached Chapters 5 and 6 that I began to believe that answer could be "yes."

Overview

Happiness is divided into two parts. The purpose of the first part is to illustrate the problem. Changes in our society and lives would (seemingly) have a positive impact on our happiness. The world is richer and more comfortable than ever before. In the United States, Britain, and Japan, average incomes have more than doubled (p. 3). Citizens also have more material possessions and better health. However, the world is not necessarily happier. Layard outlines several ways in which we know this. Today, scientists can actually study "what happens in the brain when people experience positive and negative feelings" (p. 11). So, if wealth itself does not result in happiness, what does? Or perhaps more importantly, what prevents us from being happy?

According to Layard, one reason that increased wealth does not result in increased happiness is that we don't evaluate our own wealth in a bubble. Rather, we evaluate our wealth in comparison to others. Layard then pushes forward to examine factors of happiness that will resound with first-year readers—genes, family upbringing, adult life, and goals.

After identifying what could make us happier, Layard labels those things that he believes have decreased our happiness. These include broken families, increased crime, decreased trust, the evolution of science and technology, and a change in gender roles.

It may be unclear how a shift in gender roles could negatively affect happiness. Layard wrote that a decrease in infant mortality, increase in women's life expectancy, and technology

that made housework easier resulted in women being dissatisfied with being just a mother. As more women began working outside the home, they became paid workers while continuing to handle a large part of the housework and parenting. The new economic freedom of women also led to a higher divorce rate.

The focus of Part 2 is on identifying solutions to the problems. Chapter 8 is a pivotal point in the book. It is an argument for moral reasoning and making decisions based on an impartial moral authority. In this chapter, Layard makes his argument for the Greatest Happiness, a principal authored by philosopher Jeremy Bentham, to be the basis for all rules and laws of society.

Layard moves forward with an exploration into potential ways to increase happiness. In discussing economics, Layard touts the efficiency of the free market, the misuse of national income as an indicator of national welfare, and the dismissal of individual preferences, values and attitudes of consumers. He then moves on to the relative comparison of income, social status, and respect combined with the human nature of rivalry. Security and mental health treatment are also discussed at length. Layard writes that people need to feel secure in their income, work, family life, community, and health to feel happy. Religion, spiritual education, psychological therapies, and drug treatment are all discussed as ways to increase happiness.

Chapters 9–13 include a chilling, first-person description of depression, an argument for taxation, and an examination of the importance of purpose through religion. The final chapter begins with Layard's 12 truths about happiness. These are assumptions we can make about the concept of happiness and its impact on our lives. Finally, the author recommends several tangible social policies that he believes will better our society. Among these Layard includes giving more to the poor in the Third World, addressing the problems of mental illness, eliminating unemployment, and teaching empathy and service to others.

Practical Application

When examining *Happiness* and its possibilities as a common reader, this reviewer found its major stumbling point in its potential to be engaging and dynamic for freshmen. However, if students can fight the urge to only be entertained, readers may find a text that will challenge them to think about our social problems in a new way and for a new reason. I do believe that this book will be more successful in some programs than others. I would recommend this book being used in a small liberal arts learning community, or perhaps a community with a focus in psychology or even economics. Layard does a wonderful job in integrating the disciplines and asking the reader to think beyond their own experience and expertise to find creative solutions to age-old problems.

Looking at the book as a whole, there are several obvious themes that could offer rich discussion or basis for activity in the classroom. First, one of the foundations of the book is Bentham's Greatest Happiness Principle. Assignments or activities could be built around the question of whether or not this principle should be used to inform public policy and law, as the author suggests.

Happiness is also ripe ground for developing self awareness about what makes the reader happy. Chapter 4 contains an interesting study about the choices working people are willing to make between relative salary and relative leisure time. The results of a study of Harvard University students showed that they care more about relative wealth than leisure time and are willing to sacrifice leisure time to gain more wealth (pp. 41–48).

One of the factors identified by Layard that has an impact on our happiness is our goals. Layard suggests setting goals that stretch you enough to keep you interested and moving forward, but that are still reachable. This may seem like an obvious statement, but he asserts that it has a direct effect on our happiness. He suggests going beyond simply setting attainable goals: “the greatest happiness comes from absorbing yourself in some goal outside yourself” (p. 74). This could be a challenge presented to participants in a common reading program—to set goals that are larger than one’s self. This is a natural lead into another aspect of happiness that Layard labels “personal values” or “philosophy of life.” Taking into consideration belief in God and care for others, Layard asserts that “more anxiety comes from striving to ‘do well’ for yourself than from striving to ‘do good’ for the rest of the world” (p. 72). These two perspectives—setting goals outside yourself and doing good for the rest of the world—are a natural connection to a service-learning component of a common reading program.

One of the strengths of *Happiness* is that Layard presents a global perspective. He presents the relationship between income and happiness in countries around the world (pp. 30–31), work and family life policies of the U.S. and many European countries (pp. 172–178), and the importance of religion and spirituality with specific focus on Christianity and Buddhism (pp. 188–194). Throughout the book, he transitions easily between studies and statistics from the U.S., Britain, Sweden, and many other countries and cultures. This allows readers to examine issues and trends through a global lens rather than restricting the view to only the United States.

For students interested in political science, Layard offers a mini-course in the benefits of democracy. In a section on personal freedom, he states, “In the West we take for granted two factors that are lacking in half the globe—personal freedom and peace” (p. 69). The personal, political, and economic freedom provided by a democracy has a more positive effect on happiness compared to a country under communist control (Layard cites Belarus as an example). Also, citing a 1997 study indicating that Americans are less likely to be involved in organizations of their peers, Layard points to a decrease in trust in those around them as a factor with a negative impact on people’s happiness (p. 81).

At more than one point in the book, Layard seems to address some trends we see on our campuses. He paints a picture of young adults who do not give respect for the sake of respect, a change from previous generations. He indicates that in this generation, positions such as school teacher, police officer, and parent are no longer roles that automatically win respect. Furthermore, he describes the in-between zone of a traditional college-age student, flanked by the control of parents and the responsibility of an employer, “uncertain of their role in society” (p. 92). In another section, Layard describes a generation of students who expect a better standard of living than their parents and are disappointed when they only achieve a comparable standard (p. 139). The result is an unsatisfied population constantly searching for the next best thing.

The author suggests some practical solutions for increasing happiness, including a course based around emotional intelligence. The categories he suggests sound similar to a curriculum that might be designed to help students succeed in college. They are: understanding and managing feelings, serving others, appreciation of beauty, mental illness, drugs and alcohol, love, family and parenting, work and money, media and values, understanding others and how to socialize, political participation, and philosophical and religious ideas (pp. 201–202). He suggests a controlled experiment to test the effectiveness

of such a course. Could a university or freshman seminar course (with Layard's book as a required text) be such an experiment? Or does this type of education need to start much earlier, perhaps in grade school? Is college, with all of the competing messages, too late to change values?

After all is said and done—the book is read and the discussions are planned—instructors may want one assignment or capstone project that pulls everything together. Layard's aim in writing *Happiness* is to present theories on the factors that affect levels of happiness and offer solutions to increase happiness for everyone. He asserts through the entire book that the Greatest Happiness for all should be the ultimate goal; furthermore, students could be challenged to find comparable factors and create solutions to increase happiness in their immediate community—their campus.

Summary

Layard is an economist who sets out to help us live better. While *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* may not be an easy read for freshmen, it could be a worthwhile choice for a first-year seminar. At the right institution, with the right group of students, and with an instructor who gets as excited as Layard about the prospect of making people happier, this book could make an impact on those who read it and, in turn, on the people with whom they interact. While dense and scientific at times, with some effort and an understanding of the underlying purpose, first-year readers and common reading program instructors could make this a very effective book.