FEATURE

Where is happy?

Why is happiness so rarely mentioned in the counselling and psychotherapy literature? asks **Jeff Weston**

WORDS

Jeff Weston is a writer, existential psychotherapist and author of *WAGENKNECHT*.
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My client ambles towards the counselling room upon me popping my head out in a welcoming manner. I have seen many walks across that chasm or 'Grand Canyon' divide between waiting area and therapeutic space, but this one seems particularly defeatist. Yalom confessed: 'I do not like to work with patients who are in love... The good therapist fights darkness and seeks illumination, while romantic love is sustained by mystery and crumbles upon inspection.'[1] I don't entirely share Yalom's assertion, but understand his caution or concern in dealing with fragile, post-relationship clients. However, as relationships are pretty much part of *all* the cases I have come across, there is no ducking such a fundamental strand of the therapist's labour.

'What has brought you here today?' I ask after the rudimentary contracting. He doesn't hesitate, this 45-year-old man. He bowls into a frenetic exploration of the emotions that torment him: 'I guess I wanna wake up happy. It's the sediment of the affair that's still in me, somehow blocking clarity, lucidity... somehow preventing me from feeling things or moving on. I'm numb. Things were possible. I didn't feel as old. I feel very old now – curbed in some way... restricted. I was a confident man before I met her. And during our time together – our three years. But now, after the highs, life seems empty, too ordinary, not worth it. I just wanna hide away. I feel grey, abandoned, without a smile. There was a whizz to my life. I was reborn. I never thought she'd disappear, depart, not want me after all our fun and intensity. Reliance was my downfall. I... when people teach you things about yourself, you hitch your soul to that, you hitch your whole damn life. People just want their truth to come out. Without that, it's not a real life, is it? It's not anything.'

The books say depression is loss of interest, energy, negative self-concept, difficulty in concentrating,[2] a chronic condition characterised by hopelessness, apathy, meaninglessness and withdrawal.[3] And that it is either endogenous, where one is predisposed to its grip, or reactive/exogenous, when life's events prompt its awakening. But it's not in the books what he's feeling – the visceral, howling pain, the near shutdown, the periodic anger, the complete reassessment of life. There is no mention of the utter chaos and fear and longing which have enveloped him.

'Where is happy?' he asks again and again. 'Where is happy now? Now that I don't have her. Now that I can't share my life as I want to and feel that absolute union and joy and laughter like I was at the centre of the world, and mattered. I mattered! To someone else. To someone that understood and got me. I am not the same man as before. I know things now – I know how my heart fills up when the land sits right.'

I cannot be in my head

The 'tragic generation' of poets, as WB Yeats referred to them – those artists at the tail end of 19th century romanticism[4] – included James Thomson and his memorable work, *The city of dreadful night* (1882). It is said to be a study of melancholia and the introverted mind[5] and yet one line jumps out: 'We count things real; such is memory's might.'[6] I would change the second part of that line to: because they are so few. We count things real, because they are so few. Real – our idea of real and happy – it seems, is small, infrequent, often unreliable, yet huge in its ineffableness. 'Real' dictates who we are, what we follow, how our values influence us.

Six decades before Thomson's poem, John Keats wrote *Ode to a nightingale* (1819), whose conspicuous line was: 'Now more than

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ever it seems rich to die.'[7] Such despair hints at a desolate life or one's wishes being too large for society's canvas. Indeed, 'I have been half in love with easeful Death'[7] speaks of an ambivalent mind, of loving the power of imagination (happiness in the nightingale's melodious song), but being plagued by troubles and frustrations in life, in particular his inability to support and marry his companion, Fanny Brawne. 'I cannot be in my head,' my client desperately divulges. A small trembling erupts from him, synonymous with frailty or anxiety.

Love! Two centuries ago with Keats, and now, but much the same. Still agony, heartache, physical suffering. 'The death-wish in the ode is a passing but recurrent attitude toward a life that was unsatisfactory in so many ways.'[8] But what of happy (or happiness) that stems morbid thoughts? Where is it?

What do the books say?

My bashful collection of counselling-related books (81 in total) has 'happy' or 'happiness' indexed a mere six times (in other words, just 7.4% of them). You could be forgiven for thinking that happiness isn't the primary aim of counselling, or at least eking or journeying towards it via self-acceptance, contentment and wellbeing.

Imagine a client scrambling through your library in haste while you're out of the room, hoping to stumble upon a quick fix or certainly the belief that the professionals have defined and categorised the very thing that she seeks. But then if she didn't bump into Edward Hoffman (*The right to be human*), Heinz and Rowena Ansbacher (*The individual psychology of Alfred Adler*) or Erich Fromm (*The art of being*), she might instantly grow disillusioned and think that she was just there to be diagnosed or analysed rather than helped. Indeed, she is much more likely to run into words such as 'hallucination', 'harm' and 'hatred' (and even 'haphazard eclecticism').

I have purposely excluded Rollo May (*The cry for myth*), Oliver James (*Britain on the couch*) and Christopher Kul-Want and Piero (*Introducing Slavoj Žižek*) from this scene, due to their pejorative slant on the word happiness. But what does happy's purge from most of the counselling literature tell us about the position we find ourselves in? Hoffman, the Ansbachers and Fromm, together, almost assert its importance – if one squints a little – through their mnemonic (HAF), but its noticeable absence from *Client-centered therapy* and *On becoming a person* (both Carl R Rogers), *Existential counselling and psychotherapy in practice* (Emmy van Deurzen), *Games people play* (Eric Berne), *The integrative counselling primer* (Richard Worsley) and *Counselling for depression* (Paul Gilbert) tells us much about its neglect across the modalities: person-centred, humanistic/existentialist, transactional analysis, integrative and cognitive behavioural therapy.

The origins of happiness

Why is this? And where did happiness originate? If the 'heavyweight' Rogers cannot dutifully make its presence clear to his readers, and neither can two significant training books (*Counselling skills and studies* (1st edition), by Fiona Ballantine-Dykes, Barry Kopp, Traci Postings and Anthony Crouch, and *Counselling skills and theory* (4th edition), by Margaret Hough), then what hope or real understanding is there? Also, the impressive tomes of John McLeod (*An Introduction to counselling* (3rd edition)) and Andrew Reeves (*An introduction to counselling and psychotherapy* (2nd edition)), likewise, make no mention of this instrumental word. They both also exclude the words 'anger' and 'aggression', which, according to Maslow in 1967, were the most pressing psychological issues in the US; the dark side of human nature,[9] needing to be understood. But back to happiness, back to the *other side* of the coin.

'It was us against the world,' my client continues. 'I liked that. I liked that concept. It made me comfortable, able to feel like I had a base, like I was strong, like I could brush off minor problems because I had her. I always had her to return to, to give me sustenance once more. She deflected things I never really knew or saw at the time, but now they get through the shield that I have great difficulty

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holding up. I miss getting to know her – even three years in. Just being sat at a restaurant table or in the car before or after a long walk. It was just us, in a cocoon, our cocoon, our private world, somehow separate from the noise or weather… unravelling our stories. I miss that. I miss that soooo much. And now, there's not a single person in the world that I want to know like I did her. I'm just busted… a wreck.'

I can feel his emptiness, his short-term fate, like he is an abandoned shell, like nothing can restore his sensibilities, stability, firmness or autonomy. I say very little, knowing that this unrestrained flow is necessary – the groundwork for later discussions. Just a nudge, the odd one-sentence nudge, and there will be a verbal cascade again.

Etymology

The word 'hap' – meaning fortune or chance – entered the English language around the 13th century. 'Happy', later on, in the early 16th century, came to refer to feelings of pleasure. Sayings with racial overtones ('Happy/jolly as a sandboy') came into existence, with the reference being to 'habitually drunk' grown men or boys, or '…merry fellows who had tasted a drop';[10] this seemingly innocuous state actually had an appalling history, with slave owners forcing alcohol onto their plantation workers so they did not have time to think or rebel. From Charles Dickens (The Jolly Sandboys inn in *The old curiosity shop*) to Thomas Hardy ('larry', meaning 'state of excitement', originating from the Australian 'As happy as Larry' in relation to the 19th-century boxer Larry Foley),[10] happy has a curious past.

But what of its truancy from key counselling books and even popular dictionaries, which serve to act as firm guides when, for a moment, we lose our way? Fine minds such as Colin Feltham and Windy Dryden (*Dictionary of counselling* (2nd edition)), Keith Tudor and Tony Merry (*Dictionary of person-centred psychology*) and Mike Cardwell (*Dictionary of psychology*) didn't feel the need to include it. Present in class are 'hallucination', 'harmful interventions', 'hate', 'habit', 'habituation', 'hallucinogen', 'halo effect', 'hardiness' and 'hassles', but it is as if 'happy' is cowering somewhere, afraid to consort with its more streetwise peers.

Freud, perhaps, gave testament to this, in that '…making the sick well didn't mean making them happy, but [rather] turning "hysterical misery into common unhappiness"'.[11] That is a wearying thing to accept – common unhappiness – almost as if it is impossible to climb back into the ranks of the joyful once you have fallen. Moreover, Philip Roth's novel, *Sabbath's theatre*, both seriously (because it exists) and comically makes use of a *Journal of Medical Ethics* entry by RP Bentall in June 1992, titled 'A proposal to classify happiness as a psychiatric disorder':[12] 'It is proposed that *happiness* [their italics]… be included in future editions of the major diagnostic manuals under the new name: major affective disorder, pleasant type. In a review of the relevant literature it is shown that *happiness* is statistically abnormal, consists of a discrete cluster of symptoms, is associated with a range of cognitive abnormalities, and probably reflects the abnormal functioning of the central nervous system. One possible objection to this proposal remains – that *happiness* is not negatively valued. However, this objection is dismissed as scientifically irrelevant.'[12]

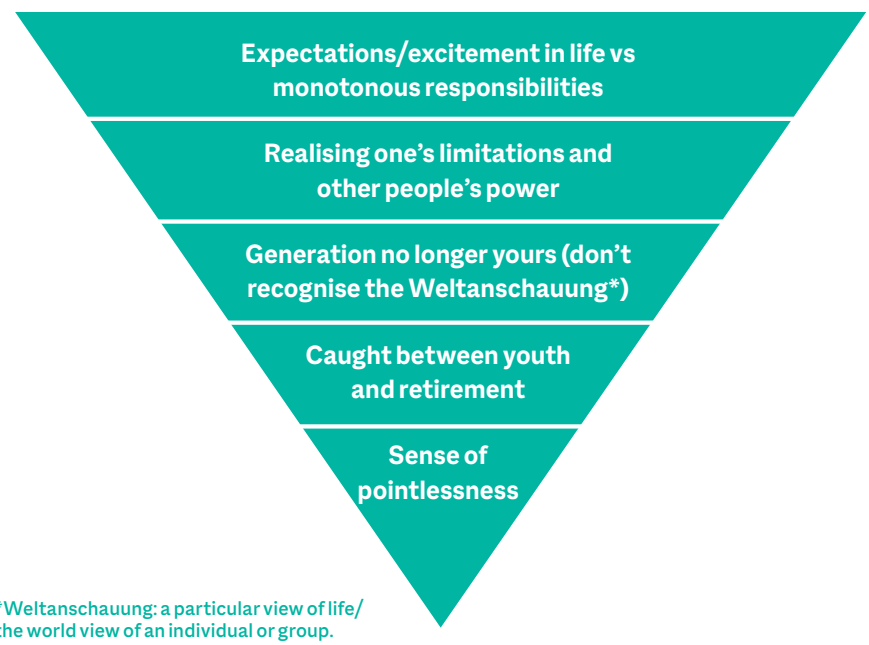
Such a bizarre, yet earnest claim is loosely in line with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) which 'classes grief following a bereavement, if it lasts for longer than a couple of months, as a mental disorder'.[11] What of our protagonist if this is the case? What of lost love, which is on the same continuum as death?

'She used to say she only saw mouths moving when not with me,' my client says, 'no sound, no feeling of being present or attentive, just wanting to be back with me, just wanting to experience ecstasy again. I think, in the end, she chose being popular over love, or rather not being unpopular because of the affair. The risk of that unsettled her more and more. Guilt became the dominant strain within her. What would her daughter think if it came out? What would her parents think? And her friends? Insomnia took her away from me ultimately. Lack of sleep, she believed, was driven by guilt. But how could we not cosset and feel we deserved happiness and love even if it meant going against society's norms. Adultery, philandering, infidelity – I didn't feel like we were any of those ugly words. We were just us. Two people who met and suddenly, overwhelmingly, needed each other. Just to breathe. To function. To have a rock to retreat to. How many can say that? How many can say that they've so utterly lost themselves in another?'

Archetypal needs

There are two archetypal needs: 'The need for status… and the need for emotional attachments.'[13] Such beautiful simplicity is expressed in many ways: 'We all need meaning – purpose and love, significance

Falling Down Syndrome (FDS) or Reverse-Maslow Triangle (RMT)



*Weltanschauung: a particular view of life/the world view of an individual or group.

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and security';[14] self-esteem and warmth; creative dynamism in whatever form and a face to recognise and hold dear. Pleasure, excitement, love, a deep reality, happiness – they are all jumbled together, I would venture. And yet the last word, which arguably holds them *together*, is not given a major part in the play. It is not visible to trainee counsellors, avid book collectors, research pioneers or tutors. It seems that our industry is almost denying its actuality or quiddity and choosing to collude with its rougher neighbours instead.

I would go further here and suggest that a *counterfeit* happy has taken its place. Our 'How did we do?' culture puts great, hollow emphasis on sheen and scoring *everything* around us. We speak to call centre employees for two minutes and they direct us to review websites when our business is completed, as if we had been to the theatre or a football match or a concert. As if we could truly, critically, evaluate a person in such a short space of time. Or even *want* to. It's a worrying trend and is becoming more deeply embedded as we move to increased white-collar employment.

A 2006 study from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) – titled *Freedom's orphans*, by Julia Margo et al – '...showed how social skills, like being charming or compliant, have become increasingly important in order to succeed'.[13] Having a candid, forthright and tendentious conversation in the 21st century is harder than ever. And this leads to depression (which is often the *result* of no longer recognising, or relating to, that around you)[15] being silenced. For which depressed man or woman speaks out when misery, or feeling aggrieved, is taboo and only fanfare welcome?

'We had three children, you know,' he continues. 'Babies who did not quite make it into this world; babies lost, miscarried, after four weeks, seven weeks and five days, and nine weeks. We very nearly made it to the 12-week scan. We very nearly cried together over our creation. That's the problem when the memories come into your head afterwards. They sink you. They make you realise that moments are everything. They make you realise that you can't rewind.'

The longer life has gone on, the more I have related to people who are sad, eccentric, profound, kind or engaging. Maybe in that amalgamation, there is the happiness I seek, the happiness shorn from most indexes and what I deem to be its *authentic* form in modern life. My great problem in the counselling arena is that I'm both an existentialist and egalitarian. How the two reconcile, I'm not entirely sure. While I believe in the existentialist creed or concern around meaning, isolation, freedom/taking responsibility and death (and ultimately a non-deterministic life), I'm also conscious of '...the damaging effects of an unequal society',[16] which David Smail used to articulate so well.

Politicians and business are wont to demand that we become '...more resilient and more productive, [afterwards] blaming – and medicating – individuals for their own misery and ignoring the context that contributed to it'.[11] This is, of course, a self-serving and callous attitude towards people who occasionally throw their arms up in despair because life's treadmill becomes too much. But then, the older you get, the more careful you are in trusting others with your welfare. And, as Yalom points out: 'The experience of the other is, in the end, unyieldingly private and unknowable.'[1]

Where is happy?

So *where is* happy? Did we make any progress? Did we get anywhere? Hoffman, Maslow's biographer, refers to *The happy family*, (1938) by David Levy and Ruth Munroe, in which popular, rosy stereotypes ('They lived happily ever after') are dismissed and psychological realism encouraged with the necessity for compromise.[9] The Ansbachers, in selecting from Adler's writings, include words which still appear valid 65 years later: 'Each partner must be more interested in the other than in himself... If there is to be so intimate a devotion, neither partner can feel subdued nor overshadowed.'[17] And, finally, Fromm: 'The sham *in the field of man's salvation*, of his well-being, inner growth, and happiness... lies in the fact that there are almost no words left that have not been commercialized, corrupted, and otherwise misused... by writers and advertising'.[18]

I'm glad that we have ended on love and keeping life real. Because that is all that happiness can ever truly be. ●

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