

# Happiness as Happenstance or Hard Work?

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## Quick Write

Take 3 - 4 minutes to fill out this chart before we compare responses.

Things that give me...

Happiness	Joy	Pleasure

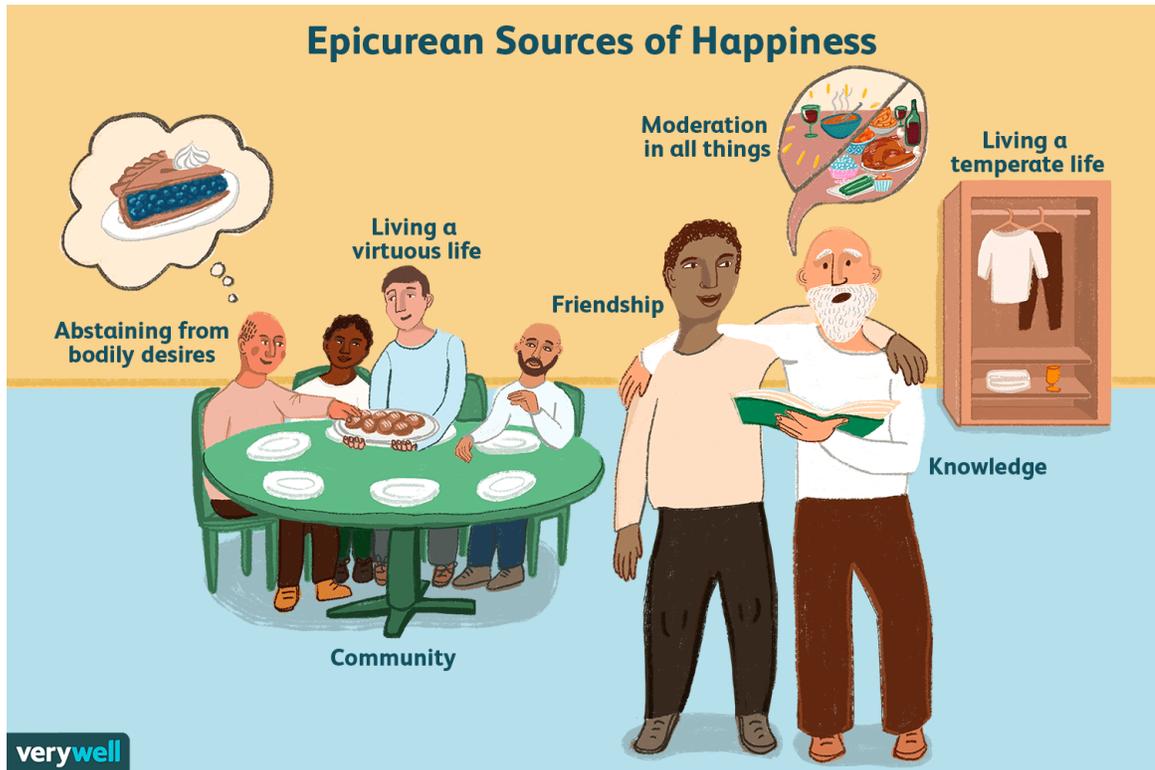
## Consider the following...

1. *Letter to Menoecus by Epicurus* (Greek philosopher and founder of Epicureanism, 3rd century BC)

“... pleasure is the starting-point and goal of living blessedly. For we recognized this as our first innate good, and this is our starting point for every choice and avoidance and we come to this by judging every good by the criterion of feeling.”

“... when we say that pleasure is the goal” [we mean] “the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul.”

It is impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honourably, and justly and impossible to live prudently, honourably, and justly without living pleasantly. And whoever lacks this cannot live pleasantly.”



2. "On Providence," from *The Discourses of Epictetus* (Stoic philosopher, 1st century AD)

26. But there are some unpleasant and difficult things in life.

And are there no such things at Olympia? Do you not suffer from the heat? Are you not short of space? Do you not have trouble washing? Are you not soaked when it rains? Do you not get your share of uproar and shouting and other irritations? 27. But, I suppose, by setting these off against the remarkable nature of the spectacle, you bear and endure them. 28. Well, and have you not received faculties which give you the power to endure everything that happens? Have you not received greatness of soul? Have you not received courage? Have you not received endurance? 29. What concern to me is anything that happens, while I have greatness of soul? What shall disconcert or trouble me, or seem grievous to me? Shall I fail to make use of my faculties to that purpose for which they were granted me, but lament and groan at what happens?

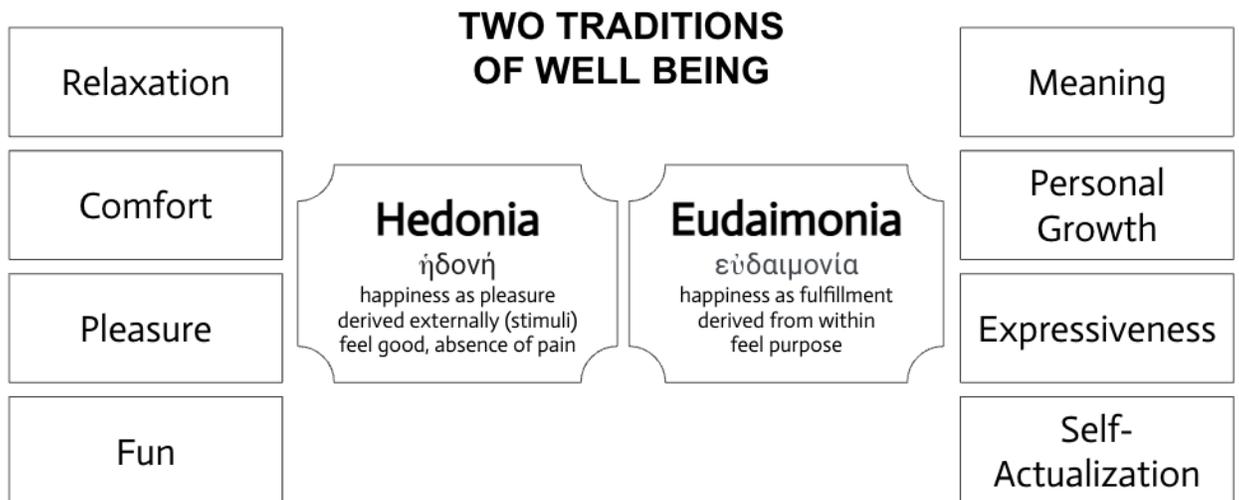
30. Oh, but my nose is running.

And what have you hands for, slave, but to wipe the rheum away with?

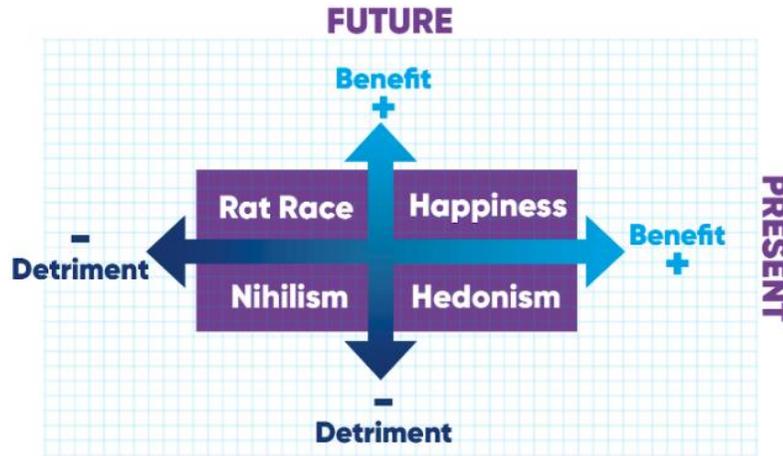
31. But is there, then, any good reason that there should be this rheum in the world?

32. And how much better it would be for you to wipe it away than complain! Pray, what figure do you think Heracles would have made if there had not been a lion like the one they tell of, and a hydra, and a stag, and unjust and brutal men, whom he drove off and cleared away? 33. And what would he have done if nothing like these had existed? Is it not plain that he would have wrapped himself up and slept? In the first place, then, he would never have become a Heracles by slumbering his whole life away in such delicacy and ease; or if he had, what good would he have been? 34. What would have been the use of those arms of his, and his strength overall; of his endurance, and greatness of mind, if such circumstances and opportunities had not stirred him to action and exercised him?

### 3. Two Traditions of Well Being



#### 4. Tal Ben-Shahar



**Tal Ben Shahar**, a Harvard University Professor who gained acclaim for his work on happiness, breaks people down into four general types, with only one of the types achieving happiness.

**The Rat-Racer:** The rat-racer doesn't make time to enjoy life in the present. He works hard to achieve a goal that he believes will make him happier in the future.

**The Hedonist:** The hedonist primarily chases things that will make him happy in the present and flees from anything that requires hard work — even if it could lead to future happiness.

**The Nihilist:** The nihilist neither enjoys the present moment, nor has a sense of future purpose. He negates any meaning or value in the world and sees happiness as a lost cause.

And **Happiness**...?

#### For Discussion:

How does Epicurus suggest human beings achieve happiness (or the good life)?

What does Epictetus argue is the best way to respond to pain or unpleasantness, thereby maintaining happiness or eudaimonia?

Do you agree/disagree with these strategies? Which, if any, do you implement in your daily living?

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#### Consider the following from *Tehillim*

אֲשֶׁר יוֹשְׁבֵי בֵּיתְךָ עוֹד יְהַלְלוּךָ סֶלָה:

Happy are they that dwell in Thy house, they are ever praising Thee. Selah (84:5)

עֲבֹדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה בְּשִׂמְחָה בְּאוֹר לִפְנֵי בְּרִנָּה:

Serve the L-rd with gladness; come before His presence with singing. (100:2)

#### Psalm 16

מִכְתָּם לְדָוִד שְׁמֵרֵנִי אֵל כִּי־הִסִּיתִי בָּךְ: אָמַרְתָּ לַיהוָה אֲדֹנָי אַתָּה טוֹבָתִי בְלֹ־ עָלִידָה: לְקַדּוֹשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־בָּאָרֶץ הַמָּה וְאֲדִירֵי כָל־הַפְּצֵי־בָבֶם: רַבּוּ עֲצָבוֹתָם אַחַר מְהֵרוּ בְלֹ־אִסִּיף נִסְפִיקֵהֶם מִדָּם וּבְלֹ־אֲשָׂא אֶת־שְׁמוֹתָם עַל־שִׁפְתָי: ה מִנְתַּחֲלָקִי וְכוֹסֵי אַתָּה תוֹמִיף גּוֹרְלִי: חֲבָלִים נָפְלוּ־לִי בְנַעֲמִים אֶף־נִחַלְתָּ שִׁפְרָה עָלַי: אֲבָרָךְ אֶת־יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲצֵנִי אֶף־לִילוֹת יִסְרוּנִי כְלִיּוֹתֵי: שׁוֹיִתִּי יְהוָה לְנִגְדֵי תְמִיד כִּי מִיַּמִּינִי בְלֹ־ אֲמוּט: לְכֹן שָׂמַח לְבִי וְנִגַּל כְּבוֹדִי אֶף־בְּשָׂרִי יִשְׁכֹּן לְבִטָּח: כִּי לֹא־תֵעֹזֵב נַפְשִׁי לְשֹׂאוֹל לֹא־תִתֵּן חֲסִידְךָ לְרֵאוֹת שְׁחַת: תוֹדִיעֵנִי אֲרַח חַיִּים שְׁבַע שְׁמַחֹת אֶת־ פְּנִיךָ נַעֲמֹת בִּימִינְךָ נְצַח: Michtam of David. Keep me, O God; for I have taken refuge in Thee. I have said unto the Lord: 'Thou art my Lord; I have no good but in Thee'; As for the holy that are in the earth, They are the excellent in whom is all my delight. Let the idols of them be multiplied that make suit unto another; Their drink-offerings of blood will I not offer, Nor take their names upon my lips. O LORD, the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup, Thou maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; Yea, I have a goodly heritage. I will bless the LORD, who hath given me counsel; Yea, in the night seasons my reins instruct me. I have set the LORD always before me; Surely He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth; my flesh also dwelleth in safety; For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to the nether-world; Neither wilt Thou suffer Thy godly one to see the pit. Thou makest me to know the path of life; In Thy presence is fulness of joy, In Thy right hand bliss for evermore.
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### For Discussion

Compared to Epicureanism and Stoicism, how is happiness (or the good life) presented in Psalm 16?

To what extent is happiness something we can control?

If you asked your 8-year-old self, "What will make you happy?" what might she have said?  
How has your understanding of happiness changed since then?

How does the experience of happiness (osher, simcha, sasson, etc) as portrayed in Tehillim influence your understanding of happiness?

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### Rabbi Sacks on Happiness

1. *Studies in Spirituality*, (Koren, 2021), p. 258.  
“Happiness is about a lifetime, but joy lives in the moment. Happiness tends to be a cool emotion, but joy makes you want to dance and sing. It’s hard to feel happy in the midst of uncertainty. But you can still feel joy.”
2. *Studies in Spirituality* (Koren, 2021), p. 112.  
“Happiness is largely a matter of satisfying needs and wants. Meaning, by contrast, is about a sense of purpose in life, especially by making positive contributions to the lives of others. Happiness is largely about how you feel in the present. Meaning is about how you judge your life as a whole: past, present, and future.”
3. *Morality* (Basic Books, 2020), p. 103.  
“Happiness, or blessedness – the terms are almost interchangeable – means living in accord with the word and will of God, which is how the Bible construes the moral life. It means doing well, living in harmony with the fundamental values embedded in the universe by its Creator.”
4. [‘Collective Joy,’ Re’eh](#), Covenant & Conversation, 5779  
“*Simcha* is usually translated as joy, rejoicing, gladness, happiness, pleasure, or delight. In fact, *simcha* has a nuance untranslatable into English, Joy, happiness, pleasure, and the like are all states of mind, emotions. They belong to the individual. We can feel them alone. *Simcha*, by contrast, is not a private emotion. It means happiness shared. It is a social state, a predicate of “we,” not “I.” There is no such thing as feeling *simcha* alone.  
Moses repeatedly labours the point. When you rejoice, he says time and again, it must be “you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows in your towns.” A key theme of Parshat Re’eh is the idea of a central Sanctuary “in the place the Lord your God will choose.” As we know from later Jewish history, during the reign of King David, this place was Jerusalem, where David’s son Solomon eventually built the Temple.

What Moses is articulating for the first time is the idea of simcha as communal, social, and national rejoicing. The nation was to be brought together not just by crisis, catastrophe, or impending war, but by collective celebration in the presence of God. The celebration itself was to be deeply moral. Not only was this a religious act of thanksgiving; it was also to be a form of social inclusion. No one was to be left out: not the stranger, or the servant, or the lonely (the orphan and widow). In a remarkable passage in the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides makes this point in the strongest possible terms:

And while one eats and drinks, it is their duty to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor and unfortunate people, for those who lock the doors to their courtyard, eating and drinking with their family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter in soul – their meal is not a rejoicing in a Divine commandment, but a rejoicing only in their own stomach. It is of such persons that Scripture says, “Their sacrifices shall be to them as the bread of mourners, all that eat thereof shall be polluted; for their bread is a disgrace to their own appetite” (Hos. 9:4). Rejoicing of this kind is a disgrace to those who indulge in it, as Scripture says, “And I will spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your sacrifices.” (Mal. 2:3) [Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yom Tov 6:18.]

Moses’ insight remains valid today. The West is more affluent than any previous society has ever been. Our life expectancy is longer, our standards of living higher, and our choices wider than at any time since Homo sapiens first walked on earth. Yet Western societies are not measurably happier. The most telling indices of unhappiness – drug and alcohol abuse, depressive illness, stress-related syndromes, eating disorders, and the rest – have risen by between 300 and 1,000 per cent in the space of two generations. Why so?

In 1968 I met the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of blessed memory, for the first time. While I was there, the Chassidim told me the following story. A man had written to the Rebbe in roughly these terms: “I am depressed. I am lonely. I feel that life is meaningless. I try to pray, but the words do not come. I keep mitzvot but find no peace of mind. I need the Rebbe’s help.” The Rebbe sent a brilliant reply without using a single word. He simply circled the first word of every sentence and sent the letter back. The word in each case was “I.”

Our contemporary consumer is constructed in the first-person singular: I want, I need, I must have. There are many things we can achieve in the first-person

singular but one we cannot, namely, simcha – because simcha is the joy we share, the joy we have only because we share. That, said Moses before the Israelites entered their land, would be their greatest challenge. Suffering, persecution, a common enemy, unite a people and turn it into a nation. But freedom, affluence, and security turn a nation into a collection of individuals, each pursuing his or her own happiness, often indifferent to the fate of those who have less, the lonely, the marginal, and the excluded. When that happens, societies start to disintegrate. At the height of their good fortune, the long slow process of decline begins.

The only way to avoid it, said Moses, is to share your happiness with others, and, in the midst of that collective, national celebration, serve God.[2] Blessings are not measured by how much we own or earn or spend or possess but by how much we share. Simcha is the mark of a sacred society. It is a place of collective joy.

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**Reflective Question:**

What role do you plan in your personal happiness and the happiness of others?