

THE KEY TO HAPPINESS (IS CHEAP)

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MEDIA

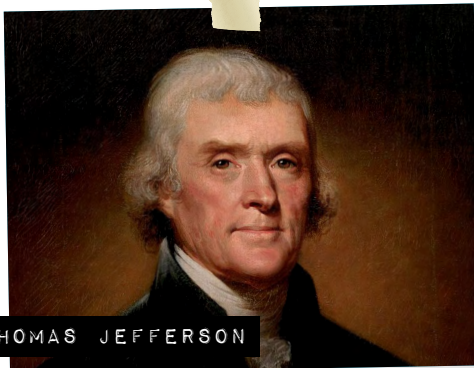
[SCRIPT]

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They're the foundational rights we enjoy as Americans. And ... that's kinda wild?

I mean, sure, "life" makes sense. It's generally a good sign if government is ... you know, not killing you.

"Liberty?" Again, great call. Given the choice, you'd rather be in a country that doesn't, say, seal you inside your own home in the case of a pandemic.

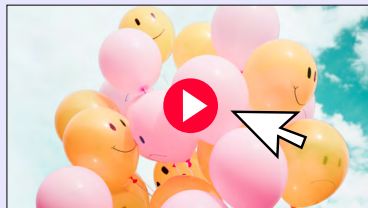
But "the pursuit of happiness"? That's a pretty bold choice. Imagine writing *the Declaration of Independence* and making a point to say "you have the **right** to pursue good vibes."



THOMAS JEFFERSON

Thomas Jefferson's use of the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence was notable partially because it put a new spin on a familiar phrase. The Founders were deeply influenced by the English political philosopher [John Locke](#), who had famously declared that man has natural rights to "life, liberty, and property." Jefferson's decision to replace "property" with "the pursuit of happiness," - a phrase he likely cribbed from fellow Founding Father George Mason - has been interpreted by some historians as a subtle [rebuttal to slavery](#).

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That's how seriously Americans take happiness. In fact, we're a little obsessed with it.

And there's positive news on that front: We actually have a pretty good idea of what makes people happy.

There's bad news though, too, which is that Americans are spending a lot of time and money ... on things that won't do the trick.

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Happiness in America is big business. In 2018, it was estimated that Americans spent about \$10 billion per year on programs or products that promised self-improvement.ⁱ And if you look around ... well, it's not hard to see where that money's going.

While the self-help business may seem like a thoroughly modern affair, it's actually got a long pedigree. How to Win Friends and Influence People, a self-help volume by Dale Carnegie published all the way back in 1936, is one of the best-selling books of all time, having moved over 30 million copies. Though Carnegie passed away in 1955, the book continues to sell over 250,000 copies a year.



Books and seminars from self-help gurus. Gratitude journals. Life coaches. Elaborate quests for 2,000-year-old chalices.

But is any of it working? Across 50 years of surveys, the percentage of Americans who say they're "very happy" has only ever been about one-third.ⁱⁱ And in 2021, it reached all-time lows.

Now, the picture isn't entirely dire. COVID was probably a big part of the recent downturn. And there is a much bigger chunk of Americans – consistently around half – who say they're "**pretty** happy."ⁱⁱⁱ

But even that's a little weird. We're spending \$10 billion a year and all we have to show for it is "Yeah ... I'm fine"?

Well, at least part of the problem might be that we're looking for happiness in all the wrong places. Many of us, after all, have a bad habit of defining happiness in terms of things that are extremely hard to come by: wealth, fame, Taylor Swift tickets.

But research suggests that those dreams about life-changing opportunities don't actually match up with the facts.

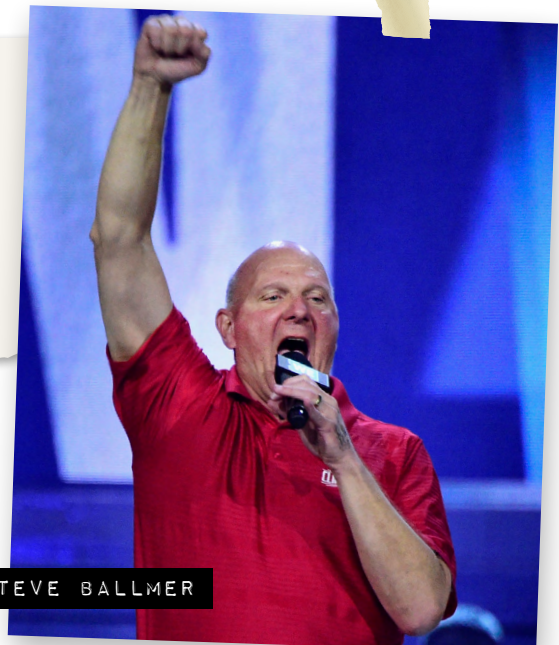
For proof, consider the mother of all windfalls: winning the lottery. It's easy to imagine that a huge infusion of cash would change your life. But in reality? **Researchers have actually studied lottery winners** and discovered ... it's not as transformative as you'd think.



Discovering that a big financial windfall doesn't radically change your happiness is actually the least of the problems facing people who get a sudden infusion of cash. Research has found that much of the money is often lost to excess spending or bad investments. One study estimated that 1/3 of lottery winners eventually go bankrupt.

A famous study in the 1970s showed hardly any difference in happiness between people who had won the lottery and people who hadn't.^{iv} And, in fact, another study of lottery winners in 2007, found that the things that *actually* made them happy were things that are just as accessible to non-millionaires: going for a walk, listening to music, having some wine with dinner.^v **(A reasonable amount of wine.)** !

How much alcohol is too much? That's a question that even bedevils corporate America. The tech world gave us the concept of the Ballmer Peak (named after former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer): The idea that alcohol is actually a performance-enhancer for coders ... but only up to a point. By reducing inhibitions, the theory goes, alcohol allows levels of creativity that otherwise wouldn't occur ... until overconsumption leads to a total breakdown in productivity.



STEVE BALLMER

And that gets to the bigger principle at work here: For all the money we spend trying to live our best lives ... most of the things that are actually proven to bring us happiness are **surprisingly cheap**.

In fact, the quickest way for *money* to buy us happiness is to spend it on someone else.

One study of workers who received bonuses found not only that they were happier if they spent the money on others, but that the very act of giving it away had more effect on their happiness than the *size of the bonus*.^{vi}

In addition, one of the researchers involved calculated that **the happiness that comes from giving to charity** is about the same as the happiness that comes from *doubling* your own income.^{vii}



When it comes to happiness, not all charity is created equal. Elizabeth Dunn, the scholar cited in this passage, argues that three factors are necessary to maximize the **satisfaction** we get from giving: (1) A personal connection to the person or cause receiving the gift; (2) Being able to see the impact of the gift; and (3) having freely chosen the gift. As Dunn notes, "The quickest way to strip the joy of giving ... is to make people feel like they've been forced to give."

And the more you look around, the more you'll find that it's **simple behaviors** – achievable for almost anyone – that provide the most happiness.

Climbing the ladder in your career? Research finds that the happiness that comes from pay increases tends to fade away over time.^{viii} And that while success definitely has its benefits, it can also lead to dissatisfaction with other aspects of life. After all, as happiness scholar Arthur Brooks notes, a lot of successful people are also stressed-out people – and people who don't have as much time for their friends and family.^{ix}

The factors that actually make you happy with work? Things like working at a place that aligns with your values,* and working in a job that provides you with a sense of accomplishment^{xi} – which is something you don't need to be a CEO to experience.

As for fame? Better to have a handful of good friends than millions of fans you'll never meet.

Studies suggest that nearly 60 percent of the difference between how happy people are can be attributed to their friendships.^{xii} Not that you have to be the life of the party: because the **quality of friendships** actually matters more than the quantity.

Also, it's worth noting that there's one other thing that's not actually good at bringing happiness, which is ... trying too hard to be happy. Because when people feel too much pressure on that front, they actually end up spending more time focusing on why they're *not* happy^{xiii} – a phenomenon that scholars refer to as "Instagram."

We kid ... but not by much. A 2017 study by Britain's Royal Society for Public Health attempted to analyze the effects of **social media** on the mental health of young people. Researchers found that Instagram and Snapchat were the two platforms that tended to generate the most negative effects. The most positive? YouTube.



Bottom line: We could all go a little easier on ourselves. We don't have to become fundamentally different people to be happy. It's not something that's reserved for the rich and famous. It's something that's **achievable** for all of us through relatively easy steps in our everyday lives.

No need to search for the grail. Besides, it can get ... complicated.

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SOURCES:

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- iii Ibid.

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- xi ["Job Satisfaction Determinants: A Study Across 48 Nations"](#)
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