



HAPPINESS

QUICK NOTES

THE FOUR LEVELS OF HAPPINESS

Happiness Level 1 is **physical pleasure and possession**. It is the most basic level of happiness, and comes from physically stimulating the five senses in a positive way. It is experienced as “feeling good” or “having things.” For example, biting into a thick steak cooked to perfection, or cruising around in a brand-new car may make you happy.

Happiness 1 is good. The desire for physical satisfaction gives us increased incentive to keep our bodies healthy and to populate the world.

But there is a serious problem if human beings begin to seek physical pleasure and possessions as if they were the only, or the most important good. The happiness of Level 1 is immediate and then gone. It is shallow (it does not use any of our deeper powers to create, to care for others, or to unite persons). And it does not allow us to connect to anyone beyond ourselves in any meaningful way. If we live only for this type of happiness, we will find ourselves constantly driven to obtain more, and we will be exceedingly unhappy in the long run. We will become bored, restless, lonely, and afraid of material loss; we will experience a lack of self-worth and direction; and we will feel like we are living beneath ourselves.

This unhappiness (called “Crisis 1”) occurs because the human person is made for something deeper. The key to a healthy pursuit of Level 1 is to keep it directed toward the higher levels. In other words, use Level 1 as a tool to get to Level 2.

Happiness Level 2 is **ego-gratification**. We experience it when we gain competitive advantage over others, or when we are successful, admired, popular, powerful, or in control. These are not bad desires, and pursuing them can be good. For example, if you are a teacher of young children, having authority and maintaining control is important for organized learning. If you are a successful business owner, having a healthy sense of being “better than” the competition can lead to employee morale, more effective systems, and better products which will help people in the end. Level 2 is higher than Level 1 because it is longer-lasting and requires more skill.

But problems arise again when we seek Level 2 as our “end” – as the most important thing in life. Can you imagine what would happen if a large business owner began to believe that “being better than the competition” was what made his life worth living? How quickly would he begin to sacrifice the good of the greater community in order to gain a larger share of the market? There are many real-world examples of this, and of the devastation it causes to innocent lives.

Aside from the cultural consequences, overemphasizing Level 2 also leads to personal consequences (called “Crisis 2”). If a person’s entire view of happiness comes from gaining a comparative advantage, the result is not happiness, but suspicion of others, fear of losing,

resentment toward those who are better, contempt for those who do not achieve as much, withholding information, anger, emptiness, depression, anxiety, aggression, passive aggression, jealousy, an exhausting drive to achieve more and to look better at the expense of personal relationships and growth, and a crippling dread of being viewed as “inferior.”

In short, seeking Level 2 as an end in itself will lead to serious dysfunction and profound unhappiness. To extract ourselves from the downward spiral of the comparison game, all we need to do is direct our Level 2 desires toward the higher levels. For example, use Level 2 as a means to a Level 3 end.

Happiness Level 3 is [commitment and contribution to others](#). It is the kind of happiness that comes from trying to make the world a better place, or to make a positive difference in the world through self-sacrifice (great or small). This might come from belonging to an organization that is trying to help disadvantaged people, donating to a charity that cares for vulnerable populations, taking care of our families or friends, or even doing or saying something kind to a passing stranger. Level 3 happiness results from our attempts to bring truth, love, justice, beauty, and unity into the world. It is higher than Level 2 because it can last for a very long time, requires more from us, and leaves a greater effect on the world.

But, as good as Level 3 is, we run into a problem here as well (called “Crisis 3”). It doesn’t take long for human beings to discover that what we really want is perfect, absolute, unconditional, infinite, and eternal Truth, Love, Justice, Beauty, and Unity. But if we are stuck in Level 3 – expecting that ultimate happiness will come from our own contributions in the world – we will begin to believe that we, as human beings, must be able to fill this very real desire for perfection and ultimacy. Of course, this will inevitably lead to disappointment, crushed ideals, dashed expectations, and maybe even despair, because none of us is perfect, and we simply can’t find ultimate fulfillment in other human beings, no matter how hard we look for it. Nor can we give ultimate fulfillment to others. In order to satisfy our need for unconditional happiness, it is necessary to respect the difference between what is perfect, absolute, unconditional, infinite, and eternal, and what is not. We can prevent our Level 3 desires from descending into an “I have to save the world all by myself” mentality, by allowing our Level 4 desire to direct Level 3.

Happiness Level 4 is [surrendering to unconditional, infinite, perfect, and unrestricted Love, Truth, Justice, Beauty, and Unity](#). For people who have faith, this might be translated as “surrender to the unconditional love of God.” It is the happiness that comes from letting go and letting God direct our desires toward eternal happiness. It is higher than the other levels because it requires complete trust and self-surrender. It requires that we believe that God always wants what is best for us, and it is eternal and ultimate in its ability to fulfill us. Our desire for Level 4

is sometimes seen as a proof for God's existence; that is: our desire for unrestricted Love, Truth, Justice, Beauty, and Unity leads to a reasonable and responsible belief that such a Being must exist in order to be eliciting that desire from us. People without faith may get some relief from the crisis of Level 3 by avoiding the error of trying to extract perfection from other people or from ourselves. But there will still be the desire for perfection to contend with. The only logical satisfaction of the Level 4 desire is the leap to faith.

It is not necessary to abandon the lower levels of happiness in favor of the higher ones. Access to each of the levels is necessary and good for becoming healthy, whole, and free human beings. Rather, the point is to identify how we can frequently frustrate our own pursuit of happiness by making the mistake of placing the lower levels above the higher ones, or by pursuing the lower levels without allowing them to be guided by the higher ones. When we keep our eyes focused on the higher levels, we begin to live happier, healthier, freer lives. We begin to live lives that are truly worthy of us.

SIX BASIC PRINCIPLES

There are six basic principles that can be deduced from the four levels of happiness. They are called Level 3-4 principles because they come from Level 3 and Level 4 definitions about meaning and purpose in life. People who place a priority on Levels 3 and 4 will generally live according to the six principles laid out below.

You are free to live according to the definition of happiness you choose. But your decision to accept or reject the following principles will have a huge impact on whether you live a life focused on others or focused only on yourself, and whether you use your life to help build up community and social justice or to help break those things apart.

Principle #1:

Happiness Levels 3 and 4 (making a positive difference to others and/or having faith in God) are more worthy of our time and energy than Levels 1 and 2, because they allow us to achieve much more of our potential in life. They also lead to greater personal happiness than Levels 1 and 2 (physical pleasure and ego-gratification).

Principle #2:

Levels 1 and 2 are not bad, but anything that tempts us to ignore Levels 3 and 4 in order to focus more on Levels 1 and 2 creates a risk that we will fail to achieve our life's full potential. So it is best to steer clear of these temptations.

Principle #3:

Success is defined as the degree to which we are working to make a difference to other people or to building the kingdom of God. It is not ultimately defined by how many things we own, or by how smart, talented, beautiful, or able-bodied we are.

Principle #4:

The highest quality of life comes from experiencing the love of other human beings and the love of God. It is not ultimately defined by the accumulation of wealth and riches, or by being better than others.

Principle #5:

True love looks for what is ultimately good for the other person and for the kingdom of God, over and above our own Level 1, 2, and 3 desires. This attitude about love directs and complements how we love ourselves. ("Love your neighbor as yourself" – Mark 12:31.)

Principle #6:

All of the principles above can be summarized with the principle that Jesus taught in Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31, called the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (By this, Jesus means, "Do good to others.")