



Sustainable Wellbeing and Happiness

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Q: How do you eat an elephant?

A: One bite at a time.

Wellbeing and happiness shouldn't have to be hard. It shouldn't have to hurt to get it. It shouldn't be the meagre outcome from a slavish path of self-sacrifice. Tackling wellbeing and happiness one bite at a time is sufficient.

Wouldn't it be great to sleep soundly every night, to be free of worry, irritability, frustration, and exhaustion? Wouldn't it be great to wake every morning with more than enough energy and enthusiasm? Wouldn't it be great to have that funny little feeling that tells you that everything will be alright, regardless of the challenges and demands ahead?

For something to be 'sustainable', it must be maintainable. It must be something that you are able to keep going. In other words, while the inputs equal the outputs everything should be alright. Therefore, *sustainable wellbeing and happiness* would have inputs in what we 'do', and outputs in how we 'feel'.

This view of *wellbeing and happiness* assumes that it comes from something; it doesn't just exist from out of the blue. When we say *sustainable wellbeing and happiness* we mean that it's something that has a starting point and then it's kept going. It doesn't just happen once and then continue on its own.

If a smooth ball is rolled out on to a smooth and level surface, for example, it will eventually stop. The ball stops because of the surface-to-surface friction and the air resistance. The only input required to keep the ball rolling is a little push every now and then.

As human beings, interestingly, we are good at spotting the **outcomes**; we will spot the rolling ball every time. At the same time we will not notice the little push that is required to keep the ball rolling. As human beings we are not good at noticing **how** things happen (Nisbett & DeCamp-Wilson, 1977).

Wellbeing and happiness is not just something that we can take for granted in the sense of *how* it happens. The first bite of the elephant is to appreciate the important difference between "how questions" and "why questions".

We don't need to know *why* we're not happy, as much as we need to know *how* to be happy. To ask "how does this happen", is to focus on the **process**. To ask "why did this happen" is to focus on the **outcome**.

The fact of the matter is that once an outcome has happened, it has happened. The observation here is that *outcomes* are due to a *process*. For example, if you bake a cake, **the cake** is the outcome; the process is **the steps it took** to do it. Process means 'the steps it took, or the steps required, or the steps involved'.

Let's take this idea one step further. If you bake a cake and it turns out wrong, you can't change that. The cake is made and that's that. The only way to change the outcome is to start again.

When I was about thirteen years old my mother encouraged me to make a fruitcake. There is a step in that process where you cook the dried fruit, I think to soften it, and then you mix the fruit with the flour. But if you miss one other step in between, you will not be happy with the outcome. The fruit cake will turn out crumbly. This vital step is to let the cooked fruit cool down before you

mix it with the flour. This observation must have been made by many people who at first failed to produce a nice firm fruitcake.

How many times do you think that you need to produce a crumbly fruitcake before you notice that in the process something is missing, or that something is not right? Generally this is how we live our lives. We repeat the same outcome of stress over and over. We get trapped in the Groundhog's Day scenario. We need to change what we do, to stop doing it in the same old subconscious way. We need points of intervention in the process.

Points of intervention in the process

How do we achieve an outcome of depression, anxiety, panic attack, or plain old stress? All outcomes are due to a process. All processes are made up of steps. There are four steps that are sufficient to produce an outcome of depression, anxiety, panic attack, or plain old stress. These are as follows...

1. A stressor, internal or external, that is left unresolved
2. Head-chatter that reflects the unresolved status of the stressor
3. The autonomic response that is triggered by the head-chatter that reflects the emergency in the unresolved stressor
4. The emergency chemicals of adrenalin and cortisol remain in the body at elevated levels over an extended period of time
5. Outcome: the unresolved over-use of the emergency chemicals is sufficient to explain the outcome of stress, depression, anxiety, panic, etc.

If we interfere with this process, we change the outcome.

So broadly speaking we have two points of intervention to interfere with the process that otherwise causes stress. In other words, when our stress is the outcome from a well oiled machine, we need to find the places to stick a spanner in the works.

- Ψ We need effective strategies to resolve the stressors in our lives.
- Ψ We need Mindfulness Skills to take control of our mind's head-chatter.

Strategies for Stressors

Stressors are the first step in the process that will end with either suffering or satisfaction. A stressor-event is the first step on the way to either outcome. By taking-on effective strategies to manage the stressors in our lives we are not leaving our wellbeing and happiness to chance. If nothing were ever to go wrong in your life, then this would be pure luck.

But as you are probably only too well aware, you need more than luck to ward-off stress. This is because every day brings challenges and demands of one kind or another, and sometimes we also face threats and danger.

Consider some of the things that can go wrong for anyone of us at any time. Some of us face dreaded loss, chronic illness or pain. Accidents happen and sometimes we are left with unwanted anxiety or trauma. Or on a more mundane level, we might have a deadline to meet at work. You might have the neighbour from hell. The boss might be a real so-and-so. You might be working with a workplace-psychopath. You might have a teenage son or daughter that seems to come from another planet. You might have traffic-jams every morning getting to work. You might be facing big debts. These are external stressors.

Consider some more challenges closer to home. You find that you have to be obsessed with the details to avoid criticism. You might find that you are constantly in conflict with people because of you can find fault in them. You might find that you are always the one who puts out and never

gets back. You might find that you are constantly saying “yes” when you know you should be saying “no”. You might find that the people around you are very inconsiderate but you just don't want to make a fuss. You can't see why you shouldn't just get what you want. You might feel that someone close to you is never really there for you. You might find that you know the answers but no one listens to you. These are internal stressors.

The adverse events described in the two paragraphs above are challenges, threats, demands, dangers, or emergencies of one type or another. These are stressors. Sometimes stressors occur in our lives purely due to bad luck. Sometimes stressors occur due to our bad judgement. Sometimes stressors are part of our personality. One thing is certain; our lives are never free of stressors of one kind or another.

If the question is “do stressors cause stress”, then the answer is “no”. If the question is “do unresolved stressors cause stress”, then the answer is “in general terms, yes”.

The observation is simple; an unresolved stressor is likely to lead to stress. To be overwhelmed in life by unresolved stressors (real or perceived) is likely to result in serious depression and/or anxiety disorders and/or panic attacks. These are all outcomes that can be avoided, or even turned around, one bite at a time, through observation and the application of *effective strategies* for resolving stressors. It's never too late to start. Of course it's never too late to start.

It's not as if you don't use strategies right now in any cases. Think about it. The common strategies for dealing with stressors are avoidance, escape, suppression, denial, or blame. In most cases these are the quick-fix strategies. Generally these are the strategies for the feel-good-now and suffer later.

To the extent these common strategies are effective for any given person in any given situation, I dare not question. There certainly are examples where avoidance, escape, denial, and suppression are effective as strategies. It does depend upon the context. For example, sometimes avoidance and suppression are good stopgap-strategies in the short-term.

The proof of the pudding will always be in the eating. It will always depend upon the context as to whether a particular strategy is effective for resolving a stressor. Likewise there are graveyards full of people who had a limited repertoire of effective strategies.

In general terms there are three major categories of strategies for resolving stressors...

1. An action.
2. A plan for an action
3. An attitude

External stressors require an action or a plan for an action. An attitude might be required in order to access an action or a plan. For example, an attitude of non-judgmental acceptance might be required before the action or plan can be considered. For internal stressors we only have attitudes. There are no actions or plans that will resolve an internal stressor. Further reading material is available on these subjects.

Mindfulness Skills

Mindfulness skills are not far from reach. The basic component of Mindfulness is how you focus your attention. Do you focus, for example, on the donut or the hole? Do you allow yourself to get sucked in your head-chatter or do you focus in the present moment? Have you noticed the connection between head-chatter and stress? Don't be surprised if you haven't.

Again, when we talk about ‘the process’, we're talking about how something happens. Stress is an outcome due to a process. A process is a series of events. The process is living. One key event in the process on the way to stress come depression, anxiety, panic, etc, is head-chatter. There's no getting around this one.

Some people will deny head-chatter exists in their lives. I suppose this is like denying that you have dreams. We all have dreams, but not all of us remember them. Some people never ever remember one dream. So I suppose that there are people who will be stressed, depressed, anxious, etc, and who will deny head-chatter.

Head-chatter has two defining qualities to distinguish it from thinking or to mark its presents. The first is the visible presence of stress. In other words there are signs of autonomic activity denoted by symptoms such as nausea, or sweaty palms, dry mouth, fatigue, subventilation, etc, or just feeling weird and sick, or just "not right". In other words, over all, there is stress. The second is some form of consciousness-detachment from the present moment. This detachment is sometimes fleeting and moment by moment.

These two defining qualities will be on different time scales. For example, the body symptoms will be there already, overall, ongoing as it were. The second is fleeting and most likely present during times of low mental demand. Like when you are driving, or walking to the shops, or having a shower, or walking up the stairs, or just staring out the window.

It is possible to be detached consciously from the present moment in various ways. For example: It can be a blank stair into nothing like catatonia. Or it could be a dissociative contemplation or daydream. In other words, it can be like a jaw clench or a tooth grind. It could be a conversation with your self. It could be a stream of images and/or words. In other words, you are elsewhere in your headspace. You are elsewhere other than the present moment.

Head-chatter denotes the existence of an unresolved stressor. The stressor can be external outside our heads, from the environment, from the people and things around us. Or the stressor could be internal from within side our heads, from our personality, perceptual distortions, or unrealistic expectations. It makes no difference because if you buy into the head-chatter, the result is likely to be stress.

The fact of the matter is that we will always have a range of stressors at various levels of resolution. Therefore, head-chatter is always likely to be present one way or another. To be mindful, however, we only need to develop two skills, noticing and focusing. These simple skills involve firstly **noticing the head-chatter** and then **focusing back in the present moment**. The Two Minute Breathing Meditation described practiced daily is sufficient to develop the skills of noticing and focusing. See the Mindfulness Skills article through the Self-Help menu above.

By mindfully disarming our head-chatter we assure our ongoing wellbeing and happiness. In other words, we won't be leaving your wellbeing and happiness to chance. The elephant disappears one bite at a time.

Interpersonal-Effectiveness Skills

One of our major stressors can be other people. Remember that a stressor is any event that creates for us a **demand, a challenge, a threat, danger, or an emergency**. If I don't fit in, or if no one likes me, than this is an emergency. It's not a bell-ringing, running down the street type of emergency, but it is a potential threat to my sense of self all the same. If our 'self' is attacked, or in danger, then we have an emergency.

You sometimes hear people say, "I don't care what people think about me". If someone says this, and you know it's true, you know for sure that the person doesn't care what people think about him or her, then you have a psychopath on your hands. Best if you keep away from such a person. But usually when someone says that they don't care what people think about them, it is bravado or sour-grapes. Of course we care, of course we want to fit-in, and of course we want to belong.

Interpersonal interactions or social situations are difficult, at varying degrees, for most of us. Why do you think that work is such a stressor? Most likely it's not the job so much, but the people we work with, or the customers, or the boss.

To be as comfortable as we can be in any social situation, whether it be at a barbeque, a footy match, at home with the family, or at work, we need a certain level of interpersonal competence. We were not necessarily born with this competence and for some more so than others, for whatever reason, this competence is not necessarily easy to develop. As a matter of fact, some of us have been taught to be incompetent in the social context.

To understand interpersonal incompetence, we need to begin with emotional sensitivity and how it was managed as we grew up. If we look at the variability of emotional sensitivity in the population as a whole, we will find some people who are sensitive and others who are non-sensitive. The majority of us are in the middle. This is called a normal distribution.

Being at either end of this spectrum is not the problem. People with emotional sensitivity, with all things being equal, are able to be creative and win Academy Awards. Those who are not at all emotionally sensitive are grounded and are able to make tough decisions more easily. Don't mistake emotional sensitivity with caring. Don't mistake non-emotional sensitivity for not caring.

Then we can add another dimension to do with how our parents managed our level of emotional sensitivity. Did our parents validate us or were they invalidating? The combination of high emotional sensitivity and an invalidating upbringing is a potent combination for creating interpersonal incompetence (Linehan, 1993a, 1993b).

A person with a high level of emotional sensitivity who also experienced an invalidating upbringing is prone to emotional explosions. Such a person is likely to be highly defensive. Such a person might also be prone to over compensate with impulsiveness, Narcissism, or an over developed sense of entitlement. Such a person is also likely to have a range of triggers into an emotional explosion that you may not be able to understand or even control. You might have such a person in your life because this person is your partner, wife, husband, neighbour, boss, employee, etc. To maintain your own wellbeing and happiness you need the ability, the skill, to defuse these emotional explosions.

There's no way around this if you are in this position. The emotional explosions of other people in your life are a stressor event. If you see yourself as having no control or see yourself as being in an impossible situation, then stress is inevitable. To defuse an emotional explosion you need the skill to firstly validate the exploding person's point of view, and then you need the skill to say what you want without making it sound like a complaint.

The other major difficulty most of us seem to have in varying degrees is the ability to ask for what we want or to refuse what we don't want. The ability or skill to do these is often overlooked as unimportant. Or we shy away from asking for what we want because we don't want to be seen as pushy or needy. Or we don't refuse when asked to do something we really don't want to do because we want to please all the time. Again I am describing stressor events. The stressor event, in either case, is that we live with unfulfilled or frustrated needs. The stressor remains unresolved. The head-chatter is on the themes of either resentment or blame.

To be effective in asking or refusing is to be assertive. To be assertive is to have a skill. A skill is something that requires your attention and practise. See the handout on Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills for the details.

I am no longer surprised when people recoil from the idea of developing assertiveness skills, or skills for defusing emotional explosions. It sounds like egg-sucking. It sounds too basic to be bothered with. Yet these same people will continue to suffer with their resentment, blame, and frustration. Sitting in a narrative of complaint about a bad situation is like trying to put together a crumbling fruit cake that wasn't made properly to begin with.

Summary

"Anything is easy once you know how to do it" says Max Walker, an ex-Australian Test Cricketer, sports commentator, and motivational speaker. Sustainable wellbeing and happiness should follow

the same rules. Once you know what to do, then doing it should not be difficult. It is, though, a matter of doing it.

How many ways are there to achieve wellbeing and happiness? To begin with there are over 400 brand-name forms of psychotherapy. Each type of psychotherapy promises to be bigger and better and all the others. Then there's the medical industry backed by the multimillion dollar drug companies who promise you peace of mind. How many hundreds of religions are there? All claim to be bigger and better than the others and the only true path. How many hundred or thousands of life-style and 'spiritual' gurus are there? All say that they have what you want. Then there is the TV and other media outlets pumping out wellbeing and happiness through consumer advertising. Does your head spin?

The thing about all these choices is that they all exist because we humans are looking for something like what is being offered. We look, search, find, try, become disillusioned, and start looking and searching again; we find, try, and become disillusioned, *ad infinitum*, over and over. We seem to believe that all we need is the right technique, the right practice, the right beliefs, the right diet, the right location, etc, and everything will be alright.

In the search some of you do seem to find what you are looking for. As the Mortine ad says, "If you're on a good thing, then stick to it". But do you know of people who have spent their youth, say as a vegetarian, travelling in India, devoted to yoga and a guru, who later in life, get married, settle down into a main-stream life, give up vegetarianism, and get a job in a bank? Someone in the early stages of a journey of the type that I described here will obviously be offended by my choice of example. Nevertheless, the parallels are many; we get devoted, and then we get disillusioned.

You can only become disillusioned if you were in an illusion to begin with. Life is like that. We are all capable of falling for the perceptual distortions. We are all capable of creating blind-spots in our vision. We are all prone to desire the path of least resistance. Why not? Why not indeed?

In the meantime do we really need to suffer? Well I suggest not. Do what you like because you will experience sustainable wellbeing and happiness with these five principles in your life.

1. Sustainable wellbeing and happiness happens one step at a time bite by bite, like eating an elephant one bite at a time.
2. Sustainable wellbeing and happiness is found in the 'how' questions not the 'why' questions.
3. Sustainable wellbeing and happiness is not due to chance when you use strategies to resolve the emergencies in stressors.
4. Sustainable wellbeing and happiness is not due to chance when we develop Mindfulness Skills to focus your attention in the present moment, not in your head-chatter.
5. Sustainable wellbeing and happiness is not due to chance when you have interpersonal skills to effectively ask for what you want and refuse what you don't want, and to effectively manage other people's self-serving manipulations of your emotions.

The other Self Help pages expand on these ideas and provide practical examples.

References

- Linehan, M. M. (1993a). Skills training for treating borderline personality disorder, The Guilford Press: New York
- Linehan, M. M. (1993b). Cognitive-behavioural treatment of borderline personality disorder, The Guilford Press: New York
- Nisbett, R. E., and DeCamp-Wilson, T. (1977). Telling more than we can know: verbal reports on mental process, *Psychological Review*, 84(3), 231-259.

WARNING

For very serious psychological problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, specific phobias, addiction, conduct disorder, or personality disorders, I strongly recommend that you seek out a local psychologist to tackle those problems in face-to-face consultations. For serious psychiatric disorders such as psychosis or bi-polar or schizophrenia you will need to consult with a psychiatrist face-to-face about suitable medication.

