



Susan Allen

What makes us happy?

We're better together

We help you connect to other people, learn about yourself and develop honest and mutually fulfilling relationships.



visionworks

What makes us happy?

I want to think about happiness in this assembly.

People can be happy for all sorts of reasons. Let's think about some of the things that make us happy. Turn to your neighbour and tell him/her one thing that makes you happy.

Brief pause

Some people say chocolate makes them happy. Put your hand up if chocolate makes you happy.

(If well prepared you could have actual things to wave at students to focus their attention. Do this with a number of things eg: new designer clothes, favourite TV programme, party, going on holiday, being with friends ...)

Some people say money makes them happy. Put your hand up if money makes you happy.

I was interested to hear that Anita Roddick, the woman who started The Body Shop, left millions of pounds when she died. However she didn't leave it to her family, she left it all to charity. She said she didn't want to "burden" her children with loads of money. I wonder what she meant? I mean, why would loads of money be a problem? Sounds wonderful to me.

I am going to read you a story that helped me begin to understand why Anita Roddick did what she did.

An old man bought a lottery ticket for a lottery worth more than a hundred million dollars. A short time after buying the ticket, he developed a heart problem and went to hospital where his doctor ordered strict bed rest and absolutely forbade anything that would cause undue excitement. While the old man was in hospital, his ticket actually won the lottery. Since he was in hospital, of course, the old man didn't know about his good fortune, but his children and his wife found out and went to tell the man the news.

On the way, they met his doctor and told him all about the old man's good fortune. The doctor pleaded with them not to say anything just yet. "He might get so excited," the doctor explained, "that he could die from the strain on his heart." The man's wife and children argued with the doctor, believing that the good news would help improve his condition. But in the end they agreed to let the doctor break the news, gently and slowly so as not to cause the man undue excitement.

While the man's wife and children sat waiting in the hall, the doctor went into his patient's room. He began by asking the man all sorts of questions about his symptoms, how he was feeling, and so on; and after a while, he asked, very casually, "Have you ever bought a ticket for the lottery?"

What makes us happy?

The old man replied that, in fact, he had bought a ticket just before coming to the hospital.

"If you won the lottery," the doctor asked, "how would you feel?"

"Well, if I do, that would be nice. If I don't, that would be fine too. I'm an old man and won't live much longer. Whether I win or not, it doesn't really matter."

"You couldn't really feel that way," the doctor said, in the manner of someone speaking purely theoretically. "If you won, you'd be really excited, right?"

But the old man replied, "Not really. In fact, I'd be happy to give you half of it if you could find a way to make me feel better."

The doctor laughed. "Don't even think about it," he said. "I was just asking."

But the patient insisted, "No, I mean it. If I won the lottery, I really would give you half of what I won if you could make me feel better."

Again, the doctor laughed. "Why don't you write a letter," he joked, "saying you'd give me half?"

"Sure, why not?" the old man agreed, reaching over to the table next to his bed and picking up a pad of paper. Slowly, feebly, he wrote out a letter agreeing to give the doctor half of any lottery money he might win, signed it, and handed it to the doctor. When the doctor looked at the letter and the signature, he got so excited over the idea of getting so much money that he fell over dead on the spot.

As soon as the doctor fell, the old man started shouting. Hearing the noise, the man's wife and children feared that the doctor had been right all along, that the news really had been too exciting, and the old man had died from the strain on his heart. They rushed into the room, only to find the old man sitting up in his bed and the doctor crumpled on the floor. While the nurses and other hospital staff rushed around trying to revive the doctor, the old man's family quietly told him that he had won the lottery. Much to their surprise, he didn't seem all that excited about learning that he'd just won millions of dollars, and the news didn't do him any damage at all. In fact, after a few weeks his condition improved and he was released from the hospital. Certainly he was glad to enjoy his new wealth, but he wasn't all that attached to it. The doctor, on the other hand, had been so attached to the idea of having so much money, and his excitement was so great, that his heart couldn't bear the strain and he died. ⁽¹⁾

When I read this I thought about it and remembered that actually no amount of money can make someone happy on its own. It can be very useful and can be a part of making someone happy, but it depends how it's used and how we feel about it.

What makes you happy?

The same can be said about chocolate. What happens if you use chocolate badly?

(Pause for answers. Look for “If you eat too much it makes you feel sick. You might put on loads of weight.”)

In fact you could say the same about all the things you mentioned earlier.

So, if happiness doesn't come from the things that you mentioned, where does it come from?

Brief pause

According to some recent research by the BBC ⁽²⁾ these are some of the things which truly make us happy:

(Ideally these would be on an OHT and revealed one by one so that students could look at them, think about them and take them in. See separate sheet.)

1. Have a good laugh at least once a day.
2. Exercise for half an hour, three times a week.
3. Cut your TV viewing by half.
4. Spread some kindness; do a good turn for someone every day.
5. Count your blessings – at least five – at the end of each day.
6. Plant something and nurture it.
7. Take time to talk; have an hour-long conversation with a loved one each week.
8. Give yourself a treat every day and take the time to really enjoy it.

Ask yourself “How many of these things do I do already?”

Choose at least two that you don't normally do and see if you can introduce them into your daily life. It will be interesting to see if your life feels happier. I'm prepared to bet it will.

⁽¹⁾“from The Joy of Living by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche

⁽²⁾“10 Steps to Happiness” resulted from an experiment conducted in the United Kingdom in the town of Slough. The BBC had a television series on the happiness project called “Making Slough Happy”<http://news.bbc.co.uk>

What makes you happy?

1. Have a good laugh at least once a day.
2. Exercise for half an hour, three times a week.
3. Cut your TV viewing by half.
4. Spread some kindness; do a good turn for someone every day.
5. Take time to talk.
6. Count your blessings – at least five – at the end of each day.
7. Plant something and nurture it.
8. Take time to talk; have an hour - long conversation with a loved one each week.
9. Give yourself a treat every day and take the time to really enjoy it.