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Happiness and Self-Esteem: Helping Handout for School and Home

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INTRODUCTION

Happiness and self-esteem are related but distinct concepts. They are similar in that both involve *subjective* judgments of one's self. The only way to know how students feel about their lives or themselves is to ask, because subjective appraisals do not line up neatly with *objective* circumstances. Teachers and parents may overlook a student whose condition at school seems fine or even great—for instance, thinking that a bright, attractive student from a wealthy family *should* be happy. However, personal happiness is influenced by many factors, as described below. Whereas some students who face the most challenging conditions report being happy and satisfied, others who appear to have everything report being unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives.

Happiness refers to subjective well-being or life satisfaction; students who report general satisfaction with their life circumstances and also experience more positive than negative feelings on a daily basis are considered happy. Students' judgments of their happiness with life reflect their level of satisfaction with multiple areas, including family, friends, school, neighborhood, and self. Researchers have found strong relationships between students' reports of their global life satisfaction and their self-esteem.

Self-esteem refers to a person's feelings of worth and competence, and includes self-acceptance and self-respect. School-based strategies to increase students' happiness, including those listed in this handout, have been shown to also have positive impacts on students' self-esteem (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014). Identifying and supporting students

with low happiness and low self-esteem is important, as low life satisfaction and poor global self-esteem are risk factors for later problems such as depression. In addition to preventing later problems, promoting happiness among all youth is worthwhile because of the host of cognitive and social benefits that flow from positive emotions. When people experience positive emotions, it expands the types of thoughts and actions that come to their minds. This openness to new ideas and experiences creates opportunities to develop personal resources, such as self-acceptance and stronger relationships, which benefit overall health and build supports that can be accessed in times of stress (Fredrickson, 2001).

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

When thinking about what can be done to help a student who is unhappy or who is struggling with low self-esteem, it is important to be aware of the multiple factors that influence happiness and life satisfaction. Three major factors are discussed next: biological factors, life circumstances and developmental stage, and intentional activity and environmental factors.

Biological Factors
To a large extent, happiness is biological and somewhat predictable, as it is a function of one's personality and temperament. For instance, individuals who are neurotic (i.e., those who tend to be more anxious, hostile, impulsive, and self-conscious) are less likely to be happy, whereas those who are naturally extroverted (i.e., those who are more

socially oriented, outgoing, warm, and assertive) are more likely to be happy. In other words, the brains of students with low happiness are, to some extent, wired this way. Twin studies have shown that identical twins are more similar in levels of happiness compared to fraternal twins, and this remains true even when identical twins grow up in separate environments (Lykken, 1999). There is evidence that about 50% of an individual's happiness is biologically based. As such, students may not drastically change their experience of joy or self-confidence through intervention, but rather move to the upper end of a genetically set range (Sheldon, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2013).

Life Circumstances and Developmental Stage
Students' demographic features (e.g., gender, race, age) as well as relatively static circumstances (e.g., where one lives, possessions) play a smaller role than genetics in influencing how they feel about themselves and about their lives. Most children report being at least moderately happy, but average levels of life satisfaction tend to decline as they enter adolescence (Helliwell, Layward, & Sachs, 2015). On student surveys, most students in elementary school report that they are at least mostly satisfied or pleased with their lives. It is uncommon for elementary school students to repeatedly agree that they are very dissatisfied or even somewhat dissatisfied with their lives. As students become teenagers, a typical response is closer to a mild agreement with a statement like "My life is going well." Regardless of age, chronic disagreements with such statements about overall quality of life, or descriptions of their lives as terrible, unhappy, or dissatisfied, should be taken seriously, because a minority of youth say that, overall, they feel more dissatisfied than satisfied with life.

Gender does not appear to affect students' happiness, though girls tend to have lower levels of self-esteem than boys. Other life circumstances, such as family income, that are often prized as keys to a happier life actually have little relationship to happiness after basic needs are met (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Thus, although life circumstances may have some impact on how happy students feel, the effect is limited and only accounts for a small amount (about 10%) of a student's happiness.

Intentional Activity and Environmental Factors
Biology and life circumstances make up around 60% of life satisfaction ratings, leaving about 40% of what makes up happiness available for intervention (Lyubomirsky,

Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Although happiness is rooted in factors that are largely fixed, changes are possible for students who participate in various intentional activities that are outside of their regular routines and that are intended to help students encounter and savor the good in life. Thus, many of the recommendations described in this handout involve ways of promoting a student's positive mind-set about the past, present, and future, because greater levels of gratitude, hope, and optimism predict greater happiness.

At home, positive parenting practices that co-occur with greater youth happiness and self-esteem include conveying warmth and support, encouraging age-appropriate independence, and monitoring youth whereabouts. Parenting from a strengths-based approach—that is, purposefully attending to and fostering positive qualities, states, and processes within children—is linked to adolescents' own higher awareness and use of their own character strengths as well as greater happiness and self-esteem (Waters, 2015). Youth who feel close to and accepted by their parents, and who feel that they can speak to them openly, tend to have higher levels of happiness. Healthy relationships at home provide good examples for positive friendships with peers outside the home, providing further opportunities for connection and the formation of positive self-concepts and identities.

At school, factors related to student happiness include school climate and academic success. Supportive relationships with people at school are essential for students to perceive a positive school environment as well as navigate stressors by turning to others for comfort and assistance. Those relationships are also important in developing students' self-esteem as it relates to students' need to belong. Students' happiness tends to have a small, positive relationship with their *actual* academic performance, and a large association with their *belief* that they are capable of doing well academically (regardless of current test scores and grades). Instructional practices and learning opportunities in the classroom that foster students' feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness at school—as well as messages at home that highlight effort and capability (vs. success)—provide the foundation for both secure self-esteem and optimal functioning (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are for teachers and parents to consider when they are seeking ways to

increase a student's happiness and self-esteem at school or home. The strategies are divided into four categories: (a) forming foundational healthy practices, (b) focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses, (c) facilitating brief interventions from positive psychology, and (d) strengthening relationships.

Forming Foundational Healthy Practices
The recommendations below flow from theory and research relevant to factors that influence happiness and self-esteem.

1. *Prioritize your own happiness.* A student's happiness is partially genetically based and partially a result of the student's environment. A student who experiences caregivers who think about situations in a positive light, and who feel and act differently as a result, may also be more likely to adopt those strategies. Keep in mind that effectively caring for another person is far more difficult when you have not first cared for yourself.
2. *Encourage healthy practices in relation to the student's diet, sleep, exercise, and stress management.* Challenges with body image and chronic stress can suppress self-esteem. Focusing on the functional aspects of a student's body, as opposed to aesthetic appeal, can help the student develop a healthy body image. Participation in sports programs can also foster this mind-set.
3. *Provide opportunities for the student to develop competence in and out of school.* Opportunities might be created through extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, clubs, music lessons) and specialized classes (e.g., yearbook, band, college-level courses) that are matched to the student's interests and strengths. Avoid viewing after-school activities solely as privileges to be earned. Given the many social and emotional benefits of participation in extracurricular activities, they should be taken away as punishment for misbehavior only rarely and should not be eliminated to free up maximum time for schoolwork. Participation in one or more extracurricular activities provides the student with a broader network of prosocial peers and adult leaders, chances to hone time management skills, and pathways to experience accomplishment and develop expertise and purpose.
4. *Provide additional support during transitions, including school transitions and changes in family structure.* Preparing students for change by providing information on what to expect in a new environment allows them to anticipate more positively and practice meeting expectations. Providing access to positive peer models who have gone through similar transitions and are willing to discuss their experiences provides students with an opportunity to consider potential advantages of the new setting as well as suggested strategies for adapting to and coping with the changes.

Focusing on Strengths Rather Than Weaknesses
Adults tend to have a wide vocabulary for describing weaknesses and problems, and they often tell students what they should stop doing. Shifting the focus to what people do well, encouraging students to purposefully cultivate their strengths, and arranging the environment to showcase strengths are hallmarks of a positive approach.

5. *Label the student's strengths.* An early contribution of positive psychology was the development of the VIA classification of human strengths. The following methods can help the student learn more about his or her character strengths: (a) review names and definitions of various strengths, (b) have the student to take the VIA survey (Web-based surveys can be accessed through the recommended resources below), (c) recall times the student was at his or her best and discuss the strengths the student demonstrated in that situation, or (d) hear how others describe what they view as the student's strengths.
6. *Become a strength-spotter.* Commenting on the actions and accomplishments of students and allowing them to recognize their strengths can change how students think about themselves. This method works in ways that enhance learning, motivation, satisfaction, and feelings of competence. Modeling the approach by spotting, and calling attention to, someone who is demonstrating a strength teaches the student how to focus attention on what people do well, rather than on their difficulties. Strive for a strengths-oriented approach to educating or parenting by calling attention to the student's signature character strengths (i.e., top strengths as identified by the VIA survey) and activity strengths (i.e., things the student is able to do well), and by encouraging the student to use and develop current and potential strengths (Waters, 2015).
7. *Help the student identify ways to flex and develop character strengths by applying a particular*

strength at school, at home, and with friends. For example, each week encourage the student to identify a strength, then brainstorm ways to use that strength across different school and home settings. Ask the student to track his or her feelings related to using the strength, so the student can see how positive emotions flow from use of the character strength.

8. **Set the student up for success.** Focusing on the student's strengths helps with engaging in meaningful activities that may result in success. For example, a student whose signature strength is humor may plan to apply that strength at school by writing a short comedy for language arts class, a story that goes on to receive a ribbon. Experiencing success builds self-esteem. Opportunities for success can be deliberately set up so that the student is using the identified strengths to work toward an achievable goal. Achieving small goals can enhance the student's motivation and belief that he or she can attain greater goals in the future.

Facilitating Brief Interventions Using Positive Psychology

The activities described below are intended to foster the student's positive emotions—feelings such as serenity, gratitude, pride, hope, and joy. Negative feelings such as fear, disgust, sadness, and anger are inevitable. Having high subjective well-being doesn't require one to avoid or prevent all negative emotions; instead, the aim is to experience more positive emotions relative to negative emotions. Positive psychology interventions are intended to increase a student's happiness to the upper end of his or her personal set range, through intentional thoughts and behaviors that lead to positive feelings (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

9. **Incorporate mindfulness.** Helping students train their minds to come back to the present moment can have a positive effect on students' self-esteem as well as on their positive feelings in the present. Using a simple bell reminder is one way to train a student's attention to a sound. Direct the student to continue to focus on the ringing for as long as possible, prompting the student to return to the bell should his or her mind wander. Mindful eating is one way to bring the student's attention to taste, for instance, by walking the student through the act of savoring a raisin or a piece of chocolate.

Loving-kindness meditation is one way to calm the student's mind while nurturing compassion and goodwill for oneself and others by steady, purposeful breathing combined with generation of kind thoughts.

10. **Foster gratitude.** A student's happiness can be enhanced by increasing his or her attention to what the student has in life, as opposed to what is missing or going wrong. A common method for improving gratitude involves keeping a gratitude journal. Encourage recording a short daily entry of three to five things for which the student was grateful that day. Or have the student make a gratitude visit, which involves writing a letter to someone the student is grateful to but has not properly thanked. The student can then arrange a time to meet with the person and read the letter aloud.

11. **Encourage and catch kindness.** Performing and reflecting on kindness increases positive feelings about life and strengthens social connections. Help the student plan when and how to perform five acts of kindness on a specific day, for example, the following Tuesday. When you see the student being kind at school or at home, acknowledge it! Praise the student with specific statements about how the act of kindness made you or someone else feel. Ask the student about the emotions he or she felt when displaying kindness.

12. **Facilitate hope.** Hopeful thinking involves setting goals, identifying multiple ways to meet the goals, and staying motivated while pursuing those goals. Hopeful thinking generates positive feelings about one's future life, and enhances happiness, confidence, and resilience to stress. One way to foster hope is by having the student imagine what life will look like in the future once the student has worked hard to achieve all his or her goals. After visualizing, direct the student to draw or write about what this future scenario looks like and what steps need to be taken to reach those goals.

13. **Model an optimistic explanatory style.** Talking aloud—the cognitive process of how we frame positive and negative situations—can serve as a model that students then internalize and apply to their own lives. Show the student how you talk in a certain way about your thoughts concerning a good or bad situation. Demonstrate how *positive events* can be reframed—as permanent or stable, widespread, and resulting from personal effort, traits, and abilities. Have the student frame

negative events as temporary, limited to the incident, and not entirely his or her fault (perhaps caused by mood or low effort).

Strengthening Relationships
Achieving happiness is virtually impossible in the absence of healthy relationships; that is, satisfying social relationships are necessary to ensure high levels of happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002) and to help students navigate stressors.

14. ***Consider how adults at school and home affect student happiness.*** Although the student may increasingly prioritize daily interactions with other youth—peers, friends, and romantic partners—support from teachers and parents remains a crucial predictor of happiness throughout childhood and adolescence.
15. ***Facilitate positive interactions.*** Relationships can be developed in the classroom or at home through relatively small actions, such as passing along supportive messages to students on sticky notes, incorporating secret acts of kindness into the day, or ringing a bell in the classroom to acknowledge when someone in the class has demonstrated a character strength.
16. ***Show how personal happiness is affected by others' behavior.*** Having the student tell about a good experience with a caring person can reinforce feelings of connection. Make a habit of asking the student, and others in the class or at home, to share examples of when someone has done or said something that showed the person cared. As a follow-up, ask the student to share how the caring action or comment affected his or her mood, outlook, or behavior.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR SCHOOL

Websites
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/
   how_to_teach_happiness_at_school

   The Greater Good Web-based magazine provides videos, quizzes, and podcasts about a host of topics related to well-being.

http://kidshealth.org/en/teens/self-esteem.html

   The website TeensHealth provides practical guidance for teachers, students, and parents interested in a variety of health-related topics, including promoting self-esteem, positive

emotions, gratitude, and optimism, among other targets.

Books and Articles
O'Grady, P. (2013). *Positive psychology in the elementary school classroom.* New York, NY: Norton.

   This book for teachers of K–5 students integrates the principles of positive psychology with research on neuroscience to recommend how educators can address the needs of the whole child through creating a healthy classroom environment.

Shankland, R., & Rosset, W. (2017). Review of brief school-based positive psychological interventions: A taster for teachers and educators. *Educational Psychology Review, 29,* 363–392. doi:10.1007/s10648-016-9357-3

   This journal article provides a comprehensive description of several brief positive psychology interventions that teachers can implement in their classroom. Teachers can integrate the strategies preventively with all children in their class or use the interventions with targeted children.

Suldo, S. M. (2016). *Promoting student happiness: Positive psychology interventions in schools.* New York, NY: Guilford Press.

   The initial chapters of this book summarize the body of scientific studies on youth happiness in relation to measurement, determinants, and outcomes. The book's manualized program of 10–15 lessons can be used with individuals, small groups, or classes, to develop students' skills in positive thoughts and behaviors that lead to happiness.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR HOME

Websites
http://www.viacharacter.org/

   The website of the VIA Institute on Character describes the VIA character strengths framework and links to online surveys that youth and adults can complete to identify their character strengths.

https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/

   Maintained by the original Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, this website provides historical and updated information about positive psychology. Users

can monitor their personal well-being by taking surveys in the Questionnaire Center and see the recommended resources for ways to improve happiness.

Books

Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *The how of happiness: A new approach to getting the life you want.* New York, NY: Penguin Press.

Written by a leading researcher, this book explains the genetic basis for happiness as well as why lasting positive changes in happiness are possible. In self-help style, the book describes activities that are both practical and highly effective in increasing happiness.

Waters, L. (2017). *The strength switch: How the new science of strengths-based parenting can help your child and your teen to flourish.* New York, NY: Avery.

This book for parents explains why parents are prone to a negativity bias, and explains why and how to train oneself to focus on children's strengths instead. The book includes practical suggestions for how to raise children in a way that draws attention to strengths and talents, which in turn builds their happiness, confidence, and resilience.

Related Helping Handouts

Improving Teacher–Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Peer Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for School

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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