

Psychology of Social Connections

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Abstract

The ensuing paper addresses a pertinent and an emerging trend witnessed in today's times i.e. the foremost basis for unhappiness is blamed onto failed human relationships and connections. To attend to the question 'What contributes to one's happiness and well being?' the researcher's reply to the question lies in our roots of our existence i.e. our physical bodies which are interwoven with a combination of the five elements of air, water, fire, earth and spirit. We are fed at many levels by the presence of these resources in their various forms, inside and outside of our bodies. Similarly, our human connections revolve around strengths like gratitude, forgiveness, love, compassion, hope and vitality. Happiness lies in being together and it can be fed with these strengths. Also, if the five elements keep us alive, then it's these strengths that keep us thriving. Thus, Positive psychology teaches positive behaviors in form of cultivating gratitude, practicing forgiveness, fostering hope, vitality, love and compassion - started early in life that can help reap benefits for many years.

Keywords: Happiness, relationships, social connections

INTRODUCTION

"Loneliness kills. It's as powerful as smoking or alcoholism."

— Robert Waldinger

Worldwide about 800000 people die because of suicide and for every suicide there are many more people who attempt suicide every year, suggested by World Health Organization. It is considered to be the second major cause of death among young people of 15-29 years. Also, it is vital to mention here that the theme of World Suicide Prevention Day, 2017 was '*Take a Minute, Change a Life*'.

The researcher would like to take spotlight on people who undertook 'Death Bed Test'. In it, they were asked '*what is it that you think about in your last moments of life?*' And surprisingly things that most people haven't thought about were money, designation and fame and most of the people responded in terms of connections, relationships, friends, parents, pets, family and bonding. Several researches has proved that across age, countries and cultures intact and close relationships are better predictors of happy lives than social class, IQ, or even genes (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). To conceptualize the meaning of social connections, which have been found to be related to happiness, can be defined as having a network of associates, maintaining contact with others, experiencing social support, and enjoying a resource of social capital (Cooper, Bebbington, & Livingston, 2011; Cooper, Bebbington, King, et al., 2011). Here, in this present paper, the researcher refers social connections not only to married couples or romantic love rather, it includes relationships which are significant and integral to one's life.

Pondering over questions like, why human connections are so important and why we cannot take them for granted? The answer lies in the fact that it is a huge resource and has a huge impact on us as it is strongly related to one's well-being and well-being takes a broader view of happiness. Happiness is a central criterion that has been associated with numerous tangible benefits, such as enhanced physical health, reduced psychopathology, superior coping skills and even longer life (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). On the other hand, an unhappy person will be more prone to depression, suicide, anxiety and will deliver poor working performance and relations. Since 2013, The United Nations declared 20th March as the International Day of Happiness to recognize the relevance of happiness and wellbeing as universal goals. In 2014, Happy (Pharrell Williams song) became the anthem and inspired clips from around the world. Moreover, The New York Times, on 27 October, 2017 stated that - "**Happiness is other people**". More recently, Dalai Lama launched 'Happiness Curriculum' for students calling it an essential step to produce "good human being" and help overcome "negative emotions" of the mankind (The Tribune, 2018).

The concept of man being a social animal is as old as evolution, yet today there is a dire need to acknowledge the imperativeness of human connections more than ever. Firstly, philosophers and social scientists have applauded the attention given to importance of intact social relationships in one's life. Secondly, thriving empirical literature has emerged in the last twenty years and is acknowledged to have a rich history extending back to the ancient Greeks. Thirdly, it describe processes that are ascribed a central role in social life. Fourthly, it orients the person away from their own selfish interests to the interests of others. Fifthly, interpersonal relationships produce well-being through a combination of reflection, positive emotions, adaptive social behaviors that facilitate happiness (Fredrickson, 2004; Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009). **Therefore, active engagement of strong and meaningful social connections appears to be a viable prescription for happiness and well-being** (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006a).

Furthermore, there is a shift in interest among psychologists within the vicinity of Positive psychology, the first generation of research arriving at investigating the Authentic Happiness Theory (Seligman, 2002) to the second generation of research which draws closer to the Well-being Theory (Seligman, 2011). The well-being theory adds fulfilment and interpersonal relationships to the elements already included in the first theory (positive emotions, engagement and meaning), highlighting that *well-being does not depend only on individual aspects but on issues related to context and interpersonal relationships*.

Theoretical Perspectives on Social Connections

In order to explicate deeper understanding, listed below are a few theoretical perspectives.

- **Evolutionary Perspective:**

The ability to take in compassion, kindness and love is a great human skill and interpersonal relationships are the greatest source of love and happiness and way back Darwin (1859) puts forth it very aptly i.e. it is the natural instinct to care for others. In 1938, Murray proposed a list of needs, among them was the need for affiliation. Also, Maslow (1943) opined Motivational Hierarchy theory of Needs which indicated that emotional support and need to belong may be a sort of prerequisite to higher-order functions such as self actualization. Lieberman, (2007) suggested as to how our most primary need is- the urge to connect. For this reason babies and infants cry from social separation. Further, research implies that isolation activates the pain areas of brain where as a feeling of security with our close acquaintances- be it family, friends, or colleagues makes us happy (Hofer, 2006). However, as per Nadkarni & Hofmann, (2012), a major contributor to the facebook epidemic is also a general human need to belong.

- **Close Acquaintances Perspective:**

Happiness and sadness are two sides of the same coin. And going by the virtue of the meaning of happy times; the happiest times in our life is definitely the time well spent and that is the time when most of us are engaged in fun and experiences with family and friends, thus making us vibrant and energetic. On the other hand, sad times can be considered as the harsh realities of life in terms of feeling lonely and rejected and the worst given to anybody is solitary confinement in prison (Waldinger & Schulz, 2016). What is also remarkable is that the link between social relationships and well-being has been noted at every stage of the human development—children, adolescent, young adults, and older adults (Ronka et al., 2013; Chen & Feeley, 2014). It is the sharing of personal feelings (self-disclosure) which plays a major role in the relief of stress and depression. Listening carefully and responding in encouraging ways (Active-Constructive Responding) is a very effective way to cultivate positive emotions and deepen relationships (Niederkrötenhaler, et al, in press).

- **Positive Psychology Perspective:**

Positive Psychology propagates the fact that good connections are really good for us. Belonging to strong social ties is a fundamental need, and securing strong and supportive relationships early on can provide bedrock for many positive outcomes. Positive Psychology works in the *health model* with a goal of moving from whatever the starting point, beyond neutral and into the plus scale of well-being (quoted by Narula in her book Happiness Quotient, 2016). Given below are some positive psychology's viewpoints on social connections.

- **Hedonic and Eudaimonic Approach to Happiness**

In pursuit of understanding happiness, there are two main theoretical perspectives which focus on addressing the question of what makes people feel good and happy. These are the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to happiness (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Hedonic well-being is based on the notion of increased pleasure and decreased pain. It revolves around a person's current feelings and emotional state. Positive emotions include feelings of pleasure, joy, curiosity, pride, awe, and excitement. Negative emotions include feelings of anger, shame, guilt, stress, or sadness. It is proposed that an individual experiences happiness when positive affect and satisfaction with life are both high (Carruthers & Hood, 2004). Eudaimonic well-being, on the other hand, is strongly reliant on Maslow's ideas of self actualization and Roger's concept of the fully functioning person and their subjective well being. Eudaimonic happiness is therefore based on the premise that people feel happy if they experience life purpose, challenges and growth. This approach adopts Self-Determination Theory to conceptualize happiness (Keyes et al., 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

- **The GREAT DREAM Approach**

Action for Happiness Research (2012) developed ten keys that have a positive impact on people's overall happiness and well-being, the first five (GREAT) relate to how we interact with the outside world in our daily activities and the second five (DREAM) come more from inside us and depend on our attitude to life. It advocates:

(G) Giving – Do things for others

(R) Relating – Connect with people

(E) Exercising – Taking care of your body

(A) Appreciating – Awareness of what you do and the world around you

(T) Trying Out – Doing new thing

(D) Direction – Doing things towards a goal

(R) Resilience – Bouncing back after something negative

(E) Emotion – Being positive about what you do

(A) Acceptance - That we all have faults and that things go wrong

(M) Meaning – Being part of something bigger

➤ The PERMA Model

The PERMA Model is a five-sided model that highlights five elements, together, forming the foundation upon which a happy and flourishing life is build (Seligman, 2011). “PERMA” stands for:

(P) Positive emotions- Research has identified certain skills and exercises that can boost our experience of positive emotions.

(E) Engagement- In Positive psychology, 'flow' describes a state of blissful immersion in the present moment.

(R) Relationships- It is not enough to surround ourselves with 'friends' - we must also listen and share, make an effort to maintain our connections, and work to make those connections strong.

(M) Meaning - To feel that the work we do is consistent with our personal values and beliefs.

(A) Accomplishments- Positive psychology encourages us to identify our ambitions and cultivate the strengths we need in order to reach them. Also, it is vital to cultivate resilience against failure and setbacks.

➤ Materialism Perspective:

Unfortunately, in recent decades, nations and societies have become richer in terms of income but not connectedness, as they are focusing on the wrong things and neglecting meaningful social relationships (Hicks, 2012). Most important to note here is that The World Happiness Index takes into account six variables i.e. GDP levels, life expectancy, generosity, freedom, corruption, and, perhaps most interestingly, *social support*. Lack of social support can directly affect our potential for experiencing happiness. Golden triangle of happiness, Cummins, (2015) explained the key facets of happiness as financial security, sense of purpose in life and good personal relationships.

Benefits of having strong social connections are many, but to name a few, the following points elucidates on it:

- **Prevent loneliness:** Physiologically, not having a social support system is actually a source of chronic stress for our bodies, Simon-Thomas explains. Studies show that when people feel lonely, they have higher levels of stress hormone i.e. cortisol which raises risk of cardiovascular disease and other challenges to health and wellness. Research dating back to 1970's suggests that people with weaker social networks actually die younger (due to any cause) than people who have more extensive social networks. A more recent review of 148 studies concluded that on average having stronger social ties increased likelihood of an individual's overall survival by as much as 50 percent (Magen, 2018).
- **Better cognitive function** - Brain actually function better when we're interacting with others and experiencing togetherness. Social interaction is among the most complex functions humans perform. Listening and participating in a two-person conversation is actually less mentally taxing for the brain than giving or listening to a monologue. Also, children learn better by interacting with other rather than observing (DiGiulio, 2018).
- **Greater happiness** - Not only does happiness increase when we have social connections, but we gain trust in others. Moments spent with our loved ones are truly well thought of as opportunities for growth and transformation, which can ultimately be a more poignant source of sustained happiness. It expands our capacity to feel good (Lucas, Le, & Dyrenforth, 2008).
- **Better environment** - Environmentalist Bill McKibben states that we won't have sustainability without community. When we see people as a main source of security and entertainment, we will stop turning to “things”.

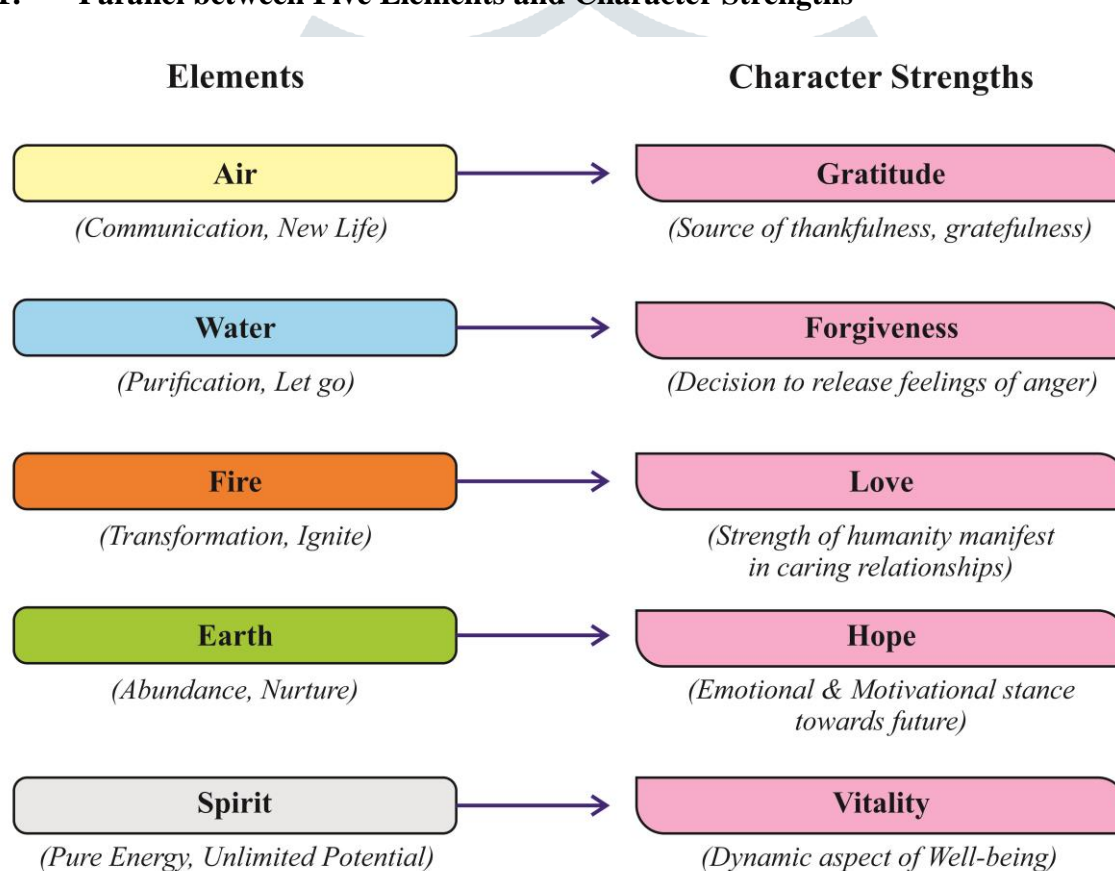
Furthermore, the researcher has made an endeavour to pull out the essence from various conceptualizations listed above. At the onset, query about social connections and human bonding was quoted and towards the end too another interesting reservation is given a thought i.e. whether happiness is an “outside-in” or an “inside-out” phenomenon? i.e. is happiness influenced by external conditions or is it a matter of personal attitude?

The researcher reappraised to have a bigger picture in understanding our own selves, family, friends and most importantly interpersonal relationships and the reply to which lies in our roots of our existence. To illustrate, ever since time immemorial great emphasis is laid on the five classical elements of nature i.e.

Air, Water, Fire, Earth and Spirit which explains complexity of almost everything in the world. Everything is formed by these five elements and they are the basis of all things. Mapping the similarities between these five elements and character strengths from Positive psychology suggests that these strengths have the potential which effects at the transpersonal (broader) level which produces change at the interpersonal (specific) level (Fincham & Beach, 2007). One cannot have a sustained life without a balance of these five elements, in a similar manner, one cannot have bonding, trust, good interpersonal relations until strengths like gratitude, forgiveness, love etc are inculcated in our daily lives as though it may sound 'old-fashioned' but our ancestors laid great emphasis on strengths like gratitude, kindness, hope, empathy and forgiveness and even possessed them in abundance. Message from our ancestors which holds relevance till date is that the motivation for doing virtuous acts begins by experiencing the virtue of people we interact with (suggested by Narula in her book Happiness Quotient, 2016).

Therefore, in order to have a clear view of interplay of the five elements of nature and the character strengths, the author explains the relationship through a pictorial presentation.

Figure-1: Parallel between Five Elements and Character Strengths



Further, mapping connections between the two constructs appear to share the following general features: *Air* includes communication, new life, breath; *Gratitude* is a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty.

Water symbolizes let go and purification; *Forgiveness* represents a suite of prosocial changes that occur within an individual who has been offended or damaged by a relationship partner. Individuals with a strong disposition to forgive don't hold a grudge for very long.

Fire signifies ignite, transformation; *Love* represents a cognitive, behavioral, and emotional stance toward others that takes three prototypical forms. One is love for the individuals who are our primary sources of affection, protection, and care. Another form is love for the individuals who depend on us to make them feel safe and cared for.

Earth indicates abundance and nurture; *Hope* represents a cognitive, emotional, and motivational stance toward the future. Thinking about the future, expecting that desired events and outcomes will occur, acting in ways believed to make them more likely, and feeling confident that these will ensue given appropriate efforts sustain good cheer in the here and now and galvanize goal-directed actions.

Lastly, *Spirit* refers to pure energy and unlimited potential; *Vitality* describes a dynamic aspect of well-being marked by the subjective experience of energy and aliveness. At the psychological level, it reflects experiences of volition, and integration of the self at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels.

CONCLUSION

True happiness isn't about being happy all the time and concepts like wellbeing and happiness is not permanent; rather it is dynamic, it is changing and transitory. Thus, one's life experiences with our close acquaintances help firstly in experiencing and secondly in augmentation of happiness for most of the times.

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