

A Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Seniors' Happiness

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Abstract

This paper describes five blocks to seniors' happiness and suggests ways to overcome these. A conceptual framework with nine elements is then presented. Happiness has become an important area of interest as population ageing has become one of the most significant social transformations in the 21st century. The number of people aged 60 years or over in the world is projected to grow from 901 million to 1.4 billion between 2015 and 2030 [1]. Propelled by the "baby boomer" generation, adults aged over 65 now outnumber children for the first time. In Canada, their numbers have increased 20% since 2011, compared to a 5% increase in the general population [2]. In Canada, older adults are projected to make up 23-25% of the population by 2036 [3]. Conditions are similar in the United States: By 2030, 20.1% of the US population will be older than 65, compared to just 10% in 1970 and 13.1% in 2010 [4]. As seniors become much more prominent in our ageing societies, it is important both for their personal wellbeing and for society's benefit that they maximize their quality of life and happiness.

Keywords: Population; Younger generations; Happiness; Seniors; Relationship; Meditation

Introduction

A happy person experiences a more enjoyable life and is a 'beacon of light' to those around them. A beacon of light is someone who inspires or encourages others. They guide and give hope to others and spread their positivity and motivation to people around them. Not surprisingly, however, an unhappy person is toxic to everyone around them. Gordon describes the seriously negative, and even harmful, effects that toxic people can have on others [5]. Unhappiness drives people away, creating a vicious cycle that erodes positive connections with family members, friends, and even strangers. Therefore, happier seniors will help create a more harmonious world and will benefit younger generations.

What is Happiness?

Coming up with a formal definition of happiness can be tricky. We often use the term to describe a range of positive emotions, including amusement, joy and contentment. For most, the term 'happiness' is interchangeable with 'subjective well-being,' which is about how satisfied people are with their lives, how much positive and negative emotion they tend to feel, and their sense of meaning and purpose. Lyubomirsky elaborates, describing happiness as "the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile [6].

What Makes Seniors Unhappy?

Ruminating over the past

It's easy to get stuck in the habit of regretting past events and decisions and telling yourself that you would be happy if only you had a better relationship, a better home, or something else. If your habit is to continually regret something from the past, you can't change it so you will just make yourself feel bad. You need to focus on being happy right now, because there's no guarantee of what will happen in the future.

Complaining

Complaining makes you feel worse rather than better. Endlessly talking and thinking about things you don't like just strengthens your negativity and makes those around you unhappy as well. While talking about what bothers you can help you feel better, too much of it can drive other people away, depriving you of friendships and social connections that could bring you greater happiness.

Being pessimistic

The problem with a pessimistic attitude is that it's hard on your mood and causes you to feel unhappy. Also, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you expect bad things, you're more likely to get bad things. Make yourself look at the facts, alone or with a friend, and you'll see that things are generally not nearly as bad as they seem.

Comparing yourself to others

Jealousy and envy can destroy your happiness, so it's important to give up the habit of comparing your looks, possessions, wealth, trips, or other things to others'. This kind of thinking is destructive and will only keep you feeling unhappy, as there is always someone else who has more or is better than you.

Avoiding fulfilling activities and relationships

Socializing improves your mood, so hiding at home if you feel unhappy just prolongs your misery. If you do this habitually, you are missing the therapeutic effects of enjoyment and building supportive connections with others.

A Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Happiness

The diagram below illustrates a conceptual framework to guide seniors in enhancing happiness. I propose nine elements and addressing any of these positively will affect others and will enhance happiness.

Here is an overview of the elements of the framework (Figure 1).

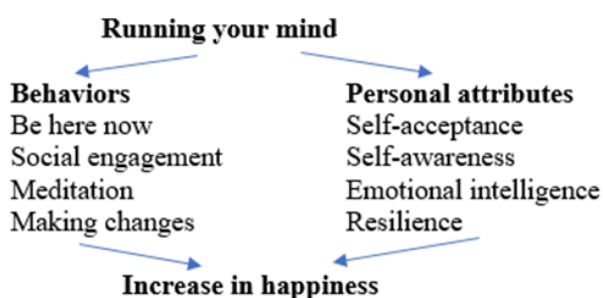


Figure 1: A conceptual framework for enhancing happiness.

Running your mind

This is the most important element of the model, as your mind is the "engine" that controls all the others. Your thoughts are based on beliefs that represent your perception of reality. Your beliefs either enhance or diminish your life and lead you toward or away

from fulfillment and joy. Enhancing your ability to choose your thoughts and beliefs will have a huge impact on your life.

Behaviors

Be here now

Being in the present moment, or the "here and now," means that we're mindful of what's happening at this very moment. We're not distracted by replaying the past or worrying about the future but focused on the here and now. All our attention is focused on this present moment.

Social engagement

Social engagement refers to how people come together and interact. When you connect with friends and family through fun and engaging activities, you help to maintain your sense of well-being. There are two aspects to social engagement: quantity and quality.

Meditation

Meditation is a wonderful practice that has been shown to have many benefits. Research has shown that it's good for your health, emotional well-being, and performance. It reduces stress and anxiety and improves your mood and sleep. The key benefit of meditation is greater clarity and peace of mind. It also greatly increases your ability to "be here now."

Making changes

Making changes in your life isn't always easy and requires you to change the old habits that have brought you to where you are now. Fortunately, there are techniques that can help you do this and that will increase your probability of success.

Personal Attributes

Self-acceptance

When you're self-accepting, you're able to embrace all facets of yourself, not just those you judge positively. You can recognize your weaknesses or limitations, but this awareness in no way interferes with your ability to fully accept yourself. Without self-acceptance, your negative view of yourself blocks your ability to grow and change.

Self-awareness

Most of the time, we aren't paying attention to what's going on inside or around us. We're operating on automatic pilot and are unconscious of what we're doing or how we are feeling as our mind wanders. Self-awareness lets us see how our behaviors and personal attributes are either contributing to our unhappiness or enhancing our happiness.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. It consists of at least three skills: Emotional awareness, harnessing emotions (to apply them to tasks like thinking and problem solving) and managing emotions. Emotional intelligence provides a strong foundation for personal growth.

Resilience

Everyone experiences hardships, setbacks, and unforeseen disappointments in their lifetime. Any one of these is often enough to cause us to lose hope, faith, or optimism. Resilience lets us overcome these obstacles and is essential if we are to continue the journey to greater happiness.

Conclusion

In this paper, I outlined some key causes of senior's unhappiness and suggested some ways to alleviate these. I then presented a framework for enhancing seniors' happiness and argued that making improvements in any element of the framework will affect others and enhance happiness. Finally, I present some specific suggestions below related to three aspects of the framework that will enhance seniors' happiness.

Learn to run your own mind

This can be difficult for most of us, since we have many years of experience in letting our thoughts drive our behaviors, even when our actions could be harmful to ourselves and others. Three helpful methods for gaining more control over your thoughts are: doing meditation, developing self-awareness, and interacting with a close and trusted friend who can do co-counselling or run the option method with you. Meditation is a simple, yet not easy, practice that is best learned from an experienced meditator. You can start with guidance from a YouTube video, or, better yet, with face-to-face instruction in a meditation group. Self-awareness is a critical skill, as it allows you to replace unresourceful thoughts with resourceful ones. Simple methods such as reframing can help you to become more aware of your negative thoughts and to replace these with more life-enhancing ones. Working with a close friend can encourage you to go deeper into your thinking patterns, which will bring you more awareness of your unhelpful thoughts.

Focus on the here and now

Focusing on the present moment as much as possible is a method that can help you enormously. It frees you from ruminating about the past or worrying about the future. Staying in the present gives you a sense of peace and helps you to appreciate the many things happening around you that you routinely miss. Also, it helps you to become aware of your thoughts. Eckhart Tolle sums this up most beautifully, as follows: Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry-

all forms of fear-are caused by too much future, and not enough present. Guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness, and all forms of non-forgiveness, are caused by too much past and not enough present (p. 61) [7]. You can practice being here now using techniques such as focusing on your breath, meditating, and just paying attention to what's around you. Savor whatever you are doing now and notice new things that you may have missed in the past.

Develop your social connectedness

Social connectedness is associated with better mental functioning and a higher level of physical health. Conversely, a lack of social connectedness tends to cause loneliness and depression, which have been shown to negatively affect your overall health. There are many ways to enhance your social connectedness, such as volunteering, joining a group or club, and exploring a new activity. To have a more successful social life, you also need to develop your social intelligence. This is your ability to get along well with others and get them to cooperate with you.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed the rationale for why enhancing the happiness of seniors is important for this group as well as for society as a whole. Five common blocks to seniors' happiness were described with suggestions for overcoming these. A conceptual framework then was discussed which can enhance the happiness of seniors as well as younger adults. If this framework were applied in seniors' daily lives, the world would be a more joyful and peaceful place.

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