

Happiness at All Levels

By Randy Heller, Ph.D. , LMFT, LMHC

Last year, I wrote an article for the *Wellness Made Simple* about being happy. I suggested that happiness is not a destination, but a journey to enjoy along the way. The idea of postponing happiness until one reaches a certain point in the life (i.e. getting the right job, meeting the right partner, making the right amount of money, achieving the right degree) wastes precious time and opportunity.

As a doctoral student of family therapy at NSU's Department of Family Therapy, I am always fascinated by the way that people think about happiness. So this year, I toured around campus in an effort to find out what happiness means to different people in different levels in life.

My journey put me in contact with people working at all levels in our university: from the Office of the President to the Dean's office and places in between.

At the very top of the NSU ladder is President George L. Hanbury II, Ph.D, who is in charge of an organization with more than 29,000 students and 4,000 employees.

He seemed to share my notion of making a decision to be happy. "Happiness is a state of mind that does not come about by happenstance." Hanbury believes achieving happiness requires creating a plan for what you want and enjoying the benefits of the journey as you work at achieving it "It takes time, and in order to carry out that plan, one must be mindful of what they must do to accomplish their goals. Dr. Hanbury points out the importance of establishing priorities, which requires self discipline and balance. "You've got to be your own personal trainer...and keep going at it with perseverance and integrity," he said,

From the beginning of my academic career at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (SHSS), I have been struck by the way SHSS Dean Honggang Yang, Ph.D. smiles every time we cross paths. To me, his smile conveys a simple message: "I am happy to see you, and happy to be here; I am a happy man." I was curious about what it is that he does to create that happiness.

Yang is a Chinese American who grew up in China before coming to the U.S. in 1986. He brought his Eastern philosophy to his life and work here to NSU. For him, happiness is not about any one thing or person. "Happiness is about defining oneself in

interrelationship with family, friends, peers, colleagues, and the environment,” Yang said, “Happiness is relational and is a complex idea that varies across cultures, is subjective, and individually defined.” He pointed out that happiness is fluid and changes in time and space.. For example, some people may feel happier in the morning because they are morning people or others may feel happier being outdoors. Yang seemed to imply that people can change their state of mind or physical location to be happy.

Tammy Graham, assistant to the Department of Multidisciplinary Studies at SHSS is another person who I notice has a perpetual smile that brightens the halls of the Maltz Building at NSU. When I asked her about her understanding of happiness she said, “I am basically a very happy person because negativity doesn’t accomplish anything...I don’t think about the fact that I go around with a smile on my face; it’s just there.”

Graham said that when things get tense she giggles, which allows her to refocus on the fact that she’ll get through it. “It is very rare that your whole world falls apart at once,” she said.... “If you focus on the positive, you don’t spiral down.” After facing illness and the loss of her husband a few years ago, Graham decided that life is uncertain and tomorrow is not a guarantee, so why be unhappy if today could be your last?

Being a successful student is a rigorous process. Although quite stressful at times, I have been extremely happy in my doctoral program. Similarly, I have crossed paths with many colleagues who experience difficulty managing the challenges of juggling the demands of academia and other areas of their professional and personal lives. Some suggest they will be happy when “it is over and they have their degree.” I speak with them about the possibility that they can make some changes in their approach to the process and effectively strategize in order to enjoy the process and be happy with what they are doing while they are doing it; instead of postponing their joy until they reach their goal. .

As you can see, happiness is pervasive on many levels. So next time you feel you down, learn from the examples of others and cheer yourself up by doing something different to bring happiness to your life. Think about it...What will you do?