

How important is control in our lives? Are we happier when we are in control or when we “let go”? How can we be truly happy and what are the causes of our stress? Does stress ultimately come from trying to be in control?

I started my research by trying to understand the chemical processes of happiness, stress and the effects those processes have on us. According to webmd.com, stress is our bodies’ reaction to any change that requires an adjustment or response. It is our brain telling the body that a significant change is happening and we need to react. So according to this definition, the purpose of stress is to help us react to a situation. Even though stress is helpful in theory, its effect on the body can be detrimental. 77% of people in the United States regularly experience physical symptoms of stress. These symptoms can include headaches, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, chest pain and sleeplessness. A lot of people blame stress on circumstances that seem to be out of their control, but this isn’t where all stress comes from. There are two types of stress: self-induced and circumstance-induced stress (reydonstandford.com). Self-induced stress is the result of our own thinking or mishandling of issues that are in our control. When you work yourself up and don’t know what to do about a situation, the brain works faster and faster to solve the problem, creating even more stress. This type of stress is counter-productive because it fabricates problems that weren’t there in the first place. On the other hand, circumstance-induced stress is when something happens in life that is out of your control and causes you to stress, such as a loved one dying or your car breaking down. According to studies, there are certain people who are more prone to stress. For example, redheads are twice as stressed as someone with darker hair because they have a lower pain tolerance; and Detroit is the most stressed out city based off of various factors such as low income, high crime rate, lack of sunshine, and a high unemployment rate.

I also researched the opposite of stress: happiness. In chemical terms, happiness is what we experience when neurotransmitters send messages in our brain that tell us to be happy. The chemicals involved are serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine (Chemistryislife.com). You need all of these chemicals in order to feel happy. According to research, you should not rely on one way to make yourself happy. Your mind basically becomes immune to the method and it won’t make you happy anymore (psychologytoday.com).

Even though there is evidence that stress is physically harmful to our bodies, our society has built up stress to be something far worse than it is. According to studies, if you simply think that stress will benefit you, it will (TedTalk.com). When you start to feel anxious and stressed, instead of letting it get to your head, think of it as your body and mind giving you energy to meet the challenge you are facing. Usually when someone is stressed, their heart rate rises and blood vessels constrict. However, studies show that when people have a positive mindset about their stress when they are “stressing out” their heart rate rises, and their blood vessels stay relaxed. This allows more blood to flow to their brains, allowing them to think more clearly. Therefore, stress can help. A lot of people also look for happiness in the wrong places. Some people think that they need others’ approval, a perfect past, a stress-free life, money, and ideal circumstances. But you cannot find true happiness in these places (markandangel.com).

Even though circumstances do contribute to our happiness and stress levels, it isn’t the main contributor. 50% of our happiness levels are up to our genes— how active our chemical receptors for happiness are naturally—and only 10% of our happiness is affected by circumstance. So, there are some contributors of our happiness that are hard to change such as the activeness of our “happy chemicals” naturally, our personality and social skills, and the fact that

these chemicals get less active with age (Content.time.com). However, 40% of the equation is still missing. 40% of our happiness is directly related to our own thinking. So, we can either utilize that 40% by thinking positively or we can waste that potential happiness by thinking negative and cynical thoughts. So, we do have some control over our happiness (*Happy*).

What can we do exactly to make the most of this 40%? There are some different ways to approach our happiness; overall, you first have to live in the present. Also, lose control, trust the process, have a new perspective and ask yourself if the issue you are facing is going to affect you in ten years. Is it as important as you are making it out to be? I found that there are also small tasks you can do to make yourself happy in the moment, such as expressing your feelings through a creative outlet, crying when you need to, making a list of your accomplishments, and changing your perception to see the root problem (tinybuddha.com).

There are also scientific studies about how to raise your happiness levels, chemically and naturally. One way is exercise. Exercising is a healthy and natural way to release serotonin, as long as you are doing it to *feel* good, opposed to exercising for the sole reason of *looking* good and losing weight. Diet also affects serotonin levels. Eating fats, some carbohydrates, protein and fish oil supplements naturally releases hormones such as serotonin and dopamine. Sleep is also important and quality over quantity applies here. Sleeping a lot won't necessarily make you happy but having a good restful night of sleep can help raise serotonin levels. Another instant way to increase happiness levels is positive and healthy physical contact. Oxytocin is a hormone released when we feel love, trust and comfort, which is why it got its nickname, "the cuddle hormone." It is also important to avoid temporary stimulants such as caffeine, alcohol, and sugar. Although they can make you happy in the moment, in the long run, they can blunt natural hormones that make us happy (marksdailyapple.com). According to apa.org, these stimulants can also become addictive and tamper with one's decision-making abilities and reasoning skills, and can increase impulsive behavior. Overall, these stimulants do not lead to happiness in the long run and should be avoided.

After doing research on what happiness and stress is and how we can control them, I am still left with my original question: Do you need to be in control in order to be happy? According to understandinghuman.com, people who have "self control" are ultimately happier. This confused me because it seemed to go against the philosophies of "letting go" I found in my research. But then, I read an article on thoughtsbynatalie.com. She talked about the difference between being controlling of your life and being *in control* of your life. Basically, the idea is to be the leader of your life but don't be so controlling that everything has to go perfectly and the way you want it to. I agree with this idea. It is important to be aware of your feelings and what is happening in your life, but to also know you can't always control it. So, if I had to answer my question, "Are you happier when you let go of control or stay in control?" I think the answer would be indirect. You need a balance.

I also found a strange paradox regarding control throughout my research. Letting go of control over your life ironically gives a sense of control and power. Simply making that decision lets you relax and be more flexible. You end up being more in control than if you were trying to control your life. However, when you try to fight your problems and control every situation, life ends up consuming you and wins the fight. It seems that letting go of control every once in a while gives you a less frantic and tense mind.

After doing my research, I wanted to do darkroom photography. I was going to take pictures of strangers on the street without asking them. I would be able to capture some moments when the subject wouldn't notice I'm taking their picture, and other times when I would get a

shot of them reacting to me sticking a camera in their face. The idea behind it is that the subject, strangers on the street, are completely out of my control because I don't know how they will react. However, the process in the darkroom was very meticulous and I ended up wanting to control every aspect of my project. So, I changed my project completely to represent the struggle of control. Now, I'm making a mountain of fabric with figures climbing up it. A figure at the top will be holding a flag, about to plant it into the mountain. The mountain represents an overwhelming amount of anxiety, stress and problems in life and the figures are overcoming them by climbing that mountain. The person at the top with the flag represents overcoming and conquering the problems of life. They aren't letting life control and consume them. Some of them will be hanging on with one hand and falling off the mountain, representing failed attempts to overcome stress. Overall, the sculpture represents how we can conquer our problems and be in control of our lives, even if it's a long process with failures and successes along the way. Some of the fabric will be neatly and strategically placed on, while others will be thrown on and ripped up to represent the balance of control and lack of control. Draping the fabric on will not be planned out and controlled, but instead a process that happens in the moment and is always changing. This goes along with the idea of letting go and living in the moment.

From experience, I know that trying to be in control of life isn't easy, and isn't beneficial. From my research, I learned that happiness and control are linked. I found that having control of your life is important, but it's all about perspective and positive thinking. Stressing about stress and circumstances only makes matters worse and leads to unnecessary anxiety. I've learned from my research that I can change what I can and let go of what I can't; to have control over the grand scheme of things but to not worry about aspects that are out of my control. When it comes down to it, the simple and cliché saying "Don't worry; be happy" turns out to be very wise advice.

Bibliography

- "40 Ways to Let Go and Feel Less Pain - Tiny Buddha." *Tiny Buddha*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013. <<http://tinybuddha.com/blog/40-ways-to-let-go-and-feel-less-pain/>>.
- "5 Lessons Bruce Gilden Has Taught Me About Street Photography." *Eric Kim Street Photography RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Nov. 2013. <<http://erickimphotography.com/blog/2013/08/24/5-lessons-bruce-gilden-has-taught-me-about-street-photography/>>.
- "7 Ways to Let Go | World of Psychology." *Psych Central.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013. <<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2011://12/17/7-ways-to-let-go/>>.
- "The Chemistry of Happiness - Wwww.ChemistryIsLife.com." *The Chemistry of Happiness - Wwww.ChemistryIsLife.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.chemistryislife.com/the-chemistry-of-happiness>>.
- "Happiness & Self Control." *Thoughts By Natalie*. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://thoughtsbynatalie.com/2013/07/happiness-self-control.html>>.
Happy. Dir. Roco Belic. 2011.
- "Is Our Happiness Preordained." *Time.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. <content.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1721954,00.html>.
- JSTOR*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.jstor.org/>>.
- "Kelly McGonigal: How to Make Stress Your Friend." *TED: Ideas worth Spreading*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013. <http://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend.html>.
- "Marc and Angel Hack Life." *Marc and Angel Hack Life RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.marcandangel.com/2013/09/15/9-things-you-do-not-need-to-be-happy/>>.
- "New York Photographer Turns Strangers into Friends." *CBSNews*. CBS Interactive, 02 Aug. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013. <http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18563_162-57596845/>.
- "Self-Induced Stress." *Self-Induced Stress*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013. <<http://reydonstanford.com/id40.html>>.
- "Stress Statistics." *Statistic Brain RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.statisticbrain.com/stress-statistics/>>.
- "WebMD - Better Information. Better Health." *WebMD*. WebMD, n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.webmd.com/>>.
- "Who's The Most Stressed." *The Daily Beast*. Newsweek/Daily Beast, n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013.

<<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/11/15/stress-levels-rankings-for-city-age-job-weight-holidays-more.html>>.

"Why It's Hard to Let Go of Things We Cannot Change." *Why It's Hard to Let Go of Things We Cannot Change*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.pendlehill.org/archive/244-eileen-flanagan>>.