

# Happiness and Its Association with Mindfulness: A Non-systematic Review

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## ABSTRACT

The concepts of happiness and related engagement practices have attracted common life since ancient times. Happiness is an emotional experience that has evolved over the millennia to accommodate the rapidly changing needs of the individual in particular and the environment at large. It mainly refers to people's subjective appraisals of their lives in terms of well-being and typically includes a global assessment of all aspects of a person's life. Mindfulness, on the other hand, refers to the self-regulation of attention to one's experiences in the present moment with curiosity, openness, and acceptance and thus promotes the adaptations of higher-order needs which in turn lead to positive emotions and ultimately happiness. Available literature points to a positive link between mindfulness and happiness, and this paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge by consolidating the findings. Widespread acceptance and dissemination of mindfulness practice represent the new emerging process of engagement with happiness that provides a beginning empirical foundation. Future research can attempt to throw some light on this relationship and to determine what facets may be correlating and mediating the mindfulness meditation-happiness relationship in terms of life satisfaction and well-being.

**Keywords:** Acceptance, Adaptation, Engagement, Happiness, Mindfulness.

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## INTRODUCTION

Emotions are fundamental to human life and are considered as the critical component of the survival mechanism.<sup>1,2</sup> In addition to several other emotional experiences, happiness was also selected through evolution to promote adaptation.<sup>2-4</sup> From an evolutionary perspective, human emotions and needs evolved to help motivate adaptive behaviors and ultimately happiness.<sup>5,6</sup> With the evolution of humans, the quest for happiness started and later it became the most pervasive attribute of humans. Happiness as an evolutionarily powerful antidote to our survival concerns has evolved overtime to accommodate the rapidly changing needs of the individual in particular and the environment at large.<sup>6,7</sup> Moreover, with the rapid growth in human needs and expectations, the perception regarding happiness has also evolved and transformed accordingly.

Overtime, it is witnessed that life satisfaction has gradually transformed from biological or basic needs to social and other higher needs. However, with the increasing awareness of higher-order needs, i.e., self-actualization needs and authentic happiness as described by Seligman<sup>8</sup> have now become a new evolutionary force. Recently, Geher and Wedberg<sup>9</sup> to understand the link between the concept of survival adaptation and happiness fully stated that psychologists should include both positive psychology and the use of evolutionary psychology principles to help people and communities experience more positive and fulfilling lives. They also described the happiness facet of the human experience in terms of its evolutionary origins and proposed how psychologists can guide people to optimally experience such positive phenomena in their everyday lives. Moreover, through this integration of knowledge, the lives of people can also be advanced by studying the factors that increase positive outcomes such as life satisfaction and happiness.

Mindfulness refers to the awareness that arises through paying attention to purpose<sup>10</sup> and is believed to cultivate the non-judgmental attention or self-regulation of attention to one's

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experiences in the present moment with curiosity, intention, attitude, openness, and acceptance.<sup>11,12</sup> Several studies point to a positive link between mindfulness and optimal adaptation including happiness or well-being<sup>13-15</sup> and mindfulness may directly facilitate happiness.<sup>16</sup> Hence, it can be said that happiness is a proximate goal or outcome of human life which comes only with a healthy acceptance to the satisfaction and achievement of life.

Despite a large body of research that has emerged related to happiness and mindfulness, surprisingly little work has been done in this field on finding an association between these two. The present article, therefore, seeks to address this gap as a beginning evolutionary and empirical foundation. In this paper, we reviewed the evidence of an association between happiness and mindfulness, with a focus on how mindfulness components can be inculcated

to optimize the sense of authentic happiness. To the best of our knowledge, no reviews on this issue have been published to date.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a non-systematic descriptive literature review. Articles were sourced from PubMed and Google Scholar electronic databases and were not limited by date of publication. Only articles written in the English language were considered. Being a non-systemic review, no specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were laid down for this study, and a critical appraisal of the contribution of the found literature was done to conclude.

### Happiness: The Ultimate Quest and Goal of Life

The concept of happiness has a long culturally, philosophically, and psychologically diverse history and there is not a single universally accepted definition that applies to all people at all times. From a western point of view, to facilitate the proper understanding and universal acceptance of happiness, Diener<sup>17</sup> proposed the term subjective well-being (SWB) by pioneering the study of happiness which refers to people's subjective appraisals of their lives in terms of well-being that typically include a global assessment of all aspect of a person's life. Later on, Diener and Biswas-Diener<sup>18</sup> stated that happiness is ultimately not about being happy; it is about being happy to live a rich, varied, and meaningful human existence.

Happiness has also been conceptualized based on two general approaches: hedonic and eudaimonic.<sup>19,20</sup> Hedonism is related to the importance of positive emotions and life satisfaction, whereas the eudaimonic aspect refers to the optimal psychological functioning of a person, which depends on self-fulfillment and includes the concepts of personal growth, purpose in life, a sense of autonomy, and actualizing one's potential.<sup>20-22</sup>

There are several other perspectives on happiness and well-being literature like Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi's<sup>23</sup> concept of flow, Ryff and Singer's<sup>24</sup> concept of psychological well-being, Ryan and Deci's<sup>25</sup> self-determination theory, and Seligman's<sup>8</sup> concept of authentic happiness are other prominent contributions on the conceptualization on happiness. Seligman<sup>8</sup> proposed the term "authentic happiness" and suggested that we can develop unprecedented levels of happiness by identifying and cultivating existing fundamental "signature strengths" such as kindness, generosity, originality, optimism, and humor.

Though the major contribution to happiness has developed from Western literature, other significant conceptualizations exist in Eastern literature. From an eastern perspective, the concept of happiness varies across cultures and has vast literature in Vedas, Upanishads, Yoga, Bhagavad Gita, Buddhism, and other various schools.<sup>26</sup> In eastern literature, the word "*Sukha*" is often referred to as the concept of happiness that exists in both Pali and Sanskrit literature (ancient Indian languages) and occurs frequently in ancient Indian and Buddhist literature. Though it seems that Indian and Buddhist literature has a detailed description of happiness, the concept of *Sukha* does not seem to capture the concept precisely as compared to the concept "*Dukkha*". Teasdale and Chaskalson<sup>27</sup> in their paper beautifully described Buddha's four noble truths which elaborate the analysis of "*Dukkha*" with great details in terms of nature, origin, and cessation. "*Dukkha*" is a Pali and Sanskrit word that is often translated into suffering. "*Dukkha*" has been considered a central existential or survival question of human life since time immemorial. According to Buddha, life is suffering and suffering is universal and unavoidable. He further described that all human

beings do experience *Dukkha* or suffering that is inseparable and an inherent part of our life. Therefore, though *Dukkha* is related to a wide range of experiencing physical or emotional pain, the experience of *Dukkha* is itself not a problem rather adding or attaching the meaning and further giving reactions to the ongoing experience of *Dukkha* is the main source of unhappiness.<sup>27,28</sup>

The pursuit of happiness has been one of the utmost quests and ultimate goals of human existence since time immemorial. The human survival or existential quest for genuine happiness has a long past but the history of the new meaning of happiness is short.<sup>29</sup> The purpose of our life or existence is to seek happiness<sup>30</sup> and throughout the history, happiness has been considered to be the ultimate motivation for a human being, therefore, it is a highly subjective state of mind which resides within the experience of the individual. Happiness is also related to optimal growth, SWB, and overall life satisfaction.<sup>17,31</sup> According to Maslow,<sup>31</sup> once the basic needs are satisfied, a deep desire for self-actualization rises and the human quest ultimately ends with the achievement of self-actualization and he referred to this peak experience as the experience of happiness.

### Mindfulness: A Process of Engagement with Happiness

Though happiness is a scientifically cumbersome term, it has three distinct defined ways; positive emotion, engagement, and meaning in life<sup>8</sup> through which people orient their pursuit toward happiness especially the engagement and meaning in life;<sup>32</sup> and that can be achieved through the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness practice has its roots in the Buddhism analysis of the concept of *Dukkha* which can be transformed into *Sukha* or happiness through mental training.<sup>27,33</sup>

Mindfulness and happiness constructs are increasingly emerging as crucial interrelated constructs in mental health research. Though both mindfulness and happiness are a relatively new area of research, historically they are rooted in ancient wisdom traditions.<sup>13</sup> Buddha's analysis of the nature and origins of *Dukkha* or suffering emphasizes the role of mindfulness in happiness and provides a basis for understanding how mindfulness can alleviate suffering and ultimately can lead to *sukha* or happiness.<sup>27,34-36</sup> Furthermore, mindfulness practice is related to positive emotions,<sup>37,38</sup> positive reappraisal,<sup>39</sup> life satisfaction,<sup>40</sup> psychological health,<sup>41</sup> and psychological well-being.<sup>16,42,43</sup> Campos et al.<sup>14</sup> studied the relationship between meditation and happiness and found that the facets related to mindfulness and happiness, i.e., self-compassion are better predictors of happiness.

Human life can never be understood until or unless its highest desires are taken into account. Concerning these needs, mindfulness practice promotes the adaptations of higher-order needs which lead to the ultimate sense of achievement or happiness.<sup>31,44</sup> Considerable research evidence has found a positive link among mindfulness, positive effects, life satisfaction, and purposeful engagement with life, well-being, self-esteem, and self-actualization needs of a person which finally leads to the ultimate happiness.<sup>16,40,45-50</sup>

Mindfulness meditation has also shown to be a great predictor of psychological well-being and happiness.<sup>14,42,51</sup> With respect to happiness, Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi<sup>23</sup> described "Flow" as a psychological state of complete absorption in the current experience that suits well with the concept of mindfulness. Moreover, to achieve genuine or authentic happiness, mindfulness

may play a crucial role as a mediator in identifying and cultivating a person's most fundamental strengths and can facilitate distinct ways of experiencing happiness in the present moment such as positive effects, hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of well-being.<sup>13,16,47,52,53</sup>

Hollis-Walker and Colosimo<sup>15</sup> found that mindfulness is related to psychologically adaptive variables and that positivism is a crucial attitudinal factor in the mindfulness–happiness relationship. Therefore, people who focus on their present moment experience in other words remain happier than those people whose minds wander away from the moment. However, further studies are needed to explore this relationship and to determine what facets may be correlating and mediating the meditation–happiness relationship. Future research can also be planned to explore the mindfulness–happiness relationship and examine which mindfulness facets are better predictors of happiness.

## DISCUSSION

In this paper, we tried to explore the association between happiness and mindfulness, and how practicing mindfulness can lead to acceptance of authentic happiness. The main goal of human survival or strivings is the pursuit of happiness and therefore it is considered as the ultimate goal, purpose, and outcome of life. Striving for happiness and associated social well-being can be better facilitated or achieved through the practice of mindfulness and can also be considered as a royal road to achieving ultimate happiness. Mindfulness promotes the adaptations of higher-order needs and better cognitive and affective evaluations of lives which in turn lead to positive emotions and ultimately happiness. However, in the present era, it is somewhat difficult to explain what constitutes the universally accepted concept of happiness. The present paper offers an insight into what is currently needed is a wider vision of happiness that is reflective of the totality of things. Just like the concept of happiness, the concept of mindfulness is also a much wider concept that can be applied to almost every aspect of human life.

One of the most universal and distinctive features of mindfulness and happiness is acceptance and self-acceptance is also one of the most important characteristics of a self-actualized person.<sup>31</sup> New emerging research is shedding light on the pursuit of and engagement with happiness as it is not found in external things at all but is a sense or attitude of acceptance we develop and hold within ourselves. Recent studies have shown that mindfulness may play important roles in well-being and positive emotions associated with happiness. Though current scientific psychological research cannot directly answer the ancient philosophical question of how to live well, it can provide ways to achieve it. Moreover, mindfulness is a new concept and can answer all those philosophical questions related to happiness.

It is only recently, however, that researches in this area have begun to understand the adaptive advantages engendered by positive and negative feelings and thereby contributing to the human evolutionary process. However further investigation is required to resolve some of the outstanding issues in happiness research which seems empirical but is not always directly answerable by scientific inquiry. In essence, the present article provides an advanced understanding of the new emerging ideas of overall well-beings concerning mindfulness and happiness. Finally, it can be said from the paper that if self-actualization and happiness

are the utmost need and ultimate goal of life then mindfulness can be considered as the ultimate optimal solution.

## CONCLUSION

A wide range of views has been expressed in this paper about the extent to which mindfulness can ideally facilitate the process of happiness. The present article not only offers an insight into omissions and gaps within the research area of scientifically unwieldy umbrella terms of happiness and mindfulness but also provides an empirical base and hypothesis for future research attempts especially engagement and meaning in life component of happiness with respect to mindfulness. One important conclusion that emerged from this paper is that happiness can be achieved through realizing our potentials to engage meaningfully in life by applying the practice of mindfulness. Research in this area is still lacking and warrants further investigations that can provide a strong empirical basis for happiness and mindfulness as two new emerging interrelated processes. Future research can also attempt to throw some light on happiness by addressing the question that whether achieving happiness can be an evolutionarily feasible or adaptive phenomenon through the practice of mindfulness.

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