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## Context to the nugget

Raj defines happiness and speaks about the common misconceptions people end up having around happiness. He speaks about the nuances around prioritizing (rather than pursuing) happiness and how one could walk that tight rope.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): So, let's dive into your work on happiness Raj and let's start from ground zero. How do you define happiness and I am also curious about what are some of the common misconceptions you see in the way people think or define happiness and maybe we pick it up from there?

Raj Raghunathan (RR): Yeah, sure. So, for me happiness personally is a state of light-heartedness and it's kind of state of joy if you will, about embracing life and feeling good about life and having a sense of joie de vivre that French talk about and it comes with a light-heartedness. So, even if you are doing something serious not to take yourself too seriously but that light-heartedness, I don't think in my definition should come at a cost to either your rationality or your sanity or at a cost to other people's happiness. So, I don't want to sacrifice compassion in order to be happy myself. Okay, so that's how I personally define it for myself, but more academically I would say that you can think of happiness as being kind of sourced in four different kinds of sources. So, obviously I think we can all agree that happiness is a positive emotional state. Now the question is how does that state get triggered and what are the qualities of that state. And I would say that there are at least four different sources that I can think of. One is a pleasure, just sensory positivity, eating something tasty, smelling something good and so on. The other is just positive emotions because something good is happening around you, you are in a loving relationship for example, or you achieve something that makes you feel proud and we can think of at least 10 maybe as many as 20 or 25 positive emotions, including gratitude and awe and humour and interest and pride, I already mentioned pride, serenity and so on. Then there are two categories that I think are very interesting which seem uniquely human to me and one of those is sense of purpose I call it. So, this is engagement in an activity that is so deeply intrinsically motivating for you that you lose track of time in it, you experience these flow states and that is a source of positivity and then you can think of what I call meaning which is the satisfaction that comes from contributing to other people, helping them out, and all of us have this desire to be agents of positive change, even if we don't recognize it, even if we are hard-core, I don't know economists, not to kind of throw them under the bus or anything. But everybody has even if you really believe in this idea of self-rationality, I mean this idea that you want to enhance your personal goals, I do think that you have a deep desire to help other people out. And, now lots of new studies are coming out and maybe we can talk about a couple of those but basically that is the fourth category, the satisfaction that you get from helping other people out. And I think you can

define happiness as the positivity that comes from one of these four different sources and sometimes... and this is where it gets interesting in my opinion and may be complex in somebody else's eyes, but you can have a kind of mixture of both positive and negative in the sense that in the quest for contributing to other people maybe let's say not even people, animals, protecting animals you might have to take on a fight, you might have to put up with anxiety in facing lobbyists for example, or certain interested parties in order to fight for the rights of animals. And so, in the end it's a meaningful thing to do, but it comes at a cost to maybe your positivity but it's still a better life than to not take on that challenge. So, that's... I don't know if that is in the ballpark of what you wanted me to talk about.

DJ: No, absolutely and maybe to make it real Raj, let's talk about a couple of segments, right? One is the students that you teach, may be just to take a reference point people in their early 20s or late 20s and the other is your peer set, I am guessing 15 plus or minus, right? If I may use the term midlife broadly. As you look around what are some of the themes where you think people get it wrong in the way they frame it for themselves?

RR: Yeah. So, one way in which people get it wrong and it's not a very important way or it's not a big concern but they do I think get it wrong is that they think of happiness as being ephemeral or fleeting or frivolous and not worthy of pursuit. I think that you can think of happiness as an umbrella term that captures a lot of different types of positive emotions, not just pleasure, which would make it I agree somewhat superficial or frivolous and ephemeral but also these other sources that I talk about of pleasure and in particular... sorry positivity and in particular meaning and purpose which can be quite deep and long-lasting. Another way in which people get it wrong is that... first of all, I mean this way that I talked about it's not a big concern because you can just replace the word happiness with say fulfilment or positivity or as some researchers do subjective well-being. So, if it's a definitional thing then you can just use an alternative term and it is not a big concern. But another I think more important concern is that people think that happiness is... they don't really want to be happy or something like that, and I think that that is a bit of a concern because it turns out that happier people are more kind to other people, they are also more healthy and they're also more functional, they end up achieving more, they are more creative, they are more objective. Lots of functional benefits that come from being a happy person and they are foregoing that by not prioritising happiness and prioritising success instead, which is a common phenomenon that happens that people go after money and all the extrinsic yardsticks of what is considered success and sacrificing their own happiness. And maybe at some level that is okay, we use to say that everybody is got to follow this but in the quest of that they end of hurting other people too, they become too greedy and at a personal level maybe more prone to divorces and things like that, but at a societal level causing more harm for future generations or to animals or to poor people and so on. So, that is one problem and maybe at another level another misconception that people have is that pursuing happiness and this is the other extreme, so one set of people deny or decline happiness, but the other set of people become overly keen on achieving it and that is a misconception as well in the sense that that is not the way to enhance your happiness level. So, the important thing is to strike a balance is to prioritise happiness, but not pursue it. And it's a bit of a difficult balance to pull off and what it involves is to identify a set of things that reliably make you happy and then make those habits in your life and then forget about it whether it actually makes you happier at or not, don't chase happiness. But in order for you to evaluate and get to what set of things make you happier on a reliable basis there is a phase in which you got to monitor how happy it makes you and whether it makes you happy and so on. So there you are kind of concerned about and measuring how happy you feel compared to how happy you expected to feel, but once you put a set of habits in place I think it is very, very important not to chase happiness because that ends up reducing your habits.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for reading. For more please visit [playtopotential.com](http://playtopotential.com)

### End of nugget transcription

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#### About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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