

SECRET TO HAPPINESS

Happiness. Everyone wants it – who in the right mind wouldn't? However, most of us have difficulties in attaining happiness.

People have their own definition of happiness – different people have different things that make them happy. To some of us, happiness means having a close knitted family while others might define happiness as having lots of money, being rich and famous. An ambitious person would see happiness as having a great career while a family oriented individual sees happiness as being able to come home early – basically, to each his own.

Parents, especially mothers, usually consider their children as their source of happiness – the happier or more successful the children are, the happier the parents will be. In rare occasions, a person might just be happy for being able to live another day.

Happiness also depends a lot on the situation we are in. A rich person may find happiness by owning luxurious items while a poor person may just be as happy if he or she is able to settle the bills for the month.

These are just some of the many examples explaining that happiness is different and unique to everyone. Let's not even try to attempt to summarise or define a generic meaning of happiness in a single sentence; the definition on its own varies from one person to the next.

In actual fact, a lot of us don't really know what happiness is. We always claim to know the things that would make us happy but when we actually attain those things, happiness sometimes eludes us.

I once heard the story of two couples who are neighbours – one couple is rich and the other is poor. The rich couple had a large house with a big compound, living luxuriously with good food, multiple vehicles and servants. Their house was slightly on top of a hill overlooking the poor couple's house. The poor couple lived in a small house downhill with just a bicycle as a means of transport.

One day, the poor couple rode the bicycle together to go to a nearby shop. The husband was paddling while the wife sat in front of him – they looked like a very warm and romantic couple. The rich couple was having tea outside on their balcony, with the best food served on the table. Both couples noticed the other, and within moments both wives started babbling to their husbands.

“Look at how comfortable and luxurious those two are, enjoying a cup of tea in the morning while relaxing. Both of us have to squeeze together on this bicycle to go to the shop. How I wish we were rich like them, so that I wouldn't have to go through such hardship just to get groceries,” babbled the wife of the poor couple to her husband.

On top of the hill, looking at the poor couple riding the bicycle together, the wife of the rich couple spontaneously said to her husband, “Look at how romantic and close that couple is, riding the bicycle together in the morning. I can't even remember the last time you hugged me. This is the first time since ages we have actually sat down and enjoyed a cup of tea together. How I wish we are more like them.”

Both couples were complaining and wishing to live each other's life, assuming that the other couple was happier compared to them. It just goes to

show how life is fair, although many of us are not able to realise and appreciate this important fact. While we are blessed with happiness in certain parts of our life, there will surely be other parts of it that are challenging.

At the same time, it does not mean that attaining happiness is impossible. In actual fact, the collusion between happiness and challenges itself represents happiness, despite it being contradictory in nature.

And do not extend your eyes toward that by which We have given enjoyment to [some] categories of them, [its being but] the splendor of worldly life by which We test them. And the provision of your Lord is better and more enduring.

Taha 20: 131

Complaints, Complaints, Complaints

If only we could keep track and be honest with ourselves, how many times have we complained about our lives?

Complaining is actually a normal human behaviour. Not a good one, obviously, but it exists in all of us. We either do it intentionally or unintentionally. Most times, it is the situation we are in that influences us to do so. The rally of complaining could even start due to simple reasons such as getting no reply to our messages or emails.

A complaint could start off as a genuine concern such as the misuse of power by leaders or the increasing cost of living, but when it goes overboard, it turns into nothing more than continuous whining of unsatisfied individuals.

Some of us do it so often that it becomes part of our character and attitude, something that we need to avoid. Nobody likes a whiner or a grumbler – they are just plain irritating. To them, everything else seems to be wrong and everyone else is at fault but them.

Although complaining is claimed by some to be a method to release stress, it actually behaves in the total opposite. Complaining takes a lot of energy and contrary to what is claimed, it actually causes stress. Complaining is closely, more so directly linked to dissatisfaction, a dominant negative attitude that can quickly influence the character of a person.

Nevertheless, it is difficult for us to avoid the act of complaining or at the least, having thoughts of it. From time to time, I do the same as well and a lot of my closest brothers or sisters do come and confide in me about their problems. But it never made them a terrible person. It was through those sessions that I actually realised and discovered the secret to happiness.

Envy – Seeds of Ungratefulness

One of the biggest contributors and root cause to complaining and dissatisfaction is the natural human habit of comparing with one another. In most cases, this bad habit would result in us becoming envious of people's advantages or superiority. This is the start of a never ending evil cycle of comparing and complaining about what we don't have, which gives birth to jealousy. This is the reason Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) reminded us to never envy one another.

Abu Hurairah reported Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) as saying: Avoid suspicion, for suspicion is the gravest lie in talk and do not be inquisitive about one another and do not spy upon one another and do not feel envy with the other (either longing to have what others have or hoping that others lose what they have), and nurse no hatred, and nurse no aversion against one another. And be fellow-brothers and servants of Allah.

Muslim

Do you notice that we tend to compare ourselves with people who are more fortunate than us? It is very seldom that we compare ourselves with people who are less fortunate. Both actions have different and opposite effects on our mindset, attitude and behaviour – depending on how we see things, this may result in either a positive or negative outcome.

Referring to the same example cited earlier about the rich and poor couple, when we compare upwards we might think that the other party has more than us but in actual fact, they are facing their own set of challenges. They might even think that we have more than them. A continuous habit of comparing and complaining would turn the bad i.e., jealousy into an even worse trait, i.e., ungratefulness.

However, there are situations when comparing with another could bring about a positive impact. When comparing downwards with people who are less fortunate than us, it is natural for us to feel a sense of gratitude for all the things we have instead of complaining about those that we don't.

I wrote this chapter in early November 2015, when there were so many misfortunes around the world due to various circumstances and situations – some caused by man and there were those caused by nature. These included innocent victims of war continuously terrified and oppressed in countries such as Palestine and Syria, people dying of hunger due to the poverty and draught in Africa, people losing everything due to catastrophe or natural disasters in various parts of the world. Closer to home, but often taken for granted, are the orphans and poor families within our own backyard. These are some of the group people who would trade whatever they have just to live a day of our lives.

There are also situations where comparing with others who are more fortunate could produce positive effects – when we treat another person's success as an inspiration and motivation for us to become better. We take the

lessons learned from their success stories and try to emulate it. There are actually specific instances where envy is allowed in Islam as mentioned in an authentic hadith of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ).

Ibn Mas'ud reported: The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Envy is permitted only in two cases: A man whom Allah gives wealth, and he disposes it rightfully, and a man to whom Allah gives knowledge which he applies and teaches it."

Bukhari and Muslim

But in most cases, it is difficult to deny that we often compare with others by looking at what we don't have – most of the time it is done subconsciously or unintentionally.

Negative Effects of Excessive Complaining

It is not difficult for us to pinpoint the negative effects of excessive complaining. The various negative emotions arising from such a negative habit would result in us becoming demotivated and unhappy. Some of the major effects of continuous and excessive complaining are:

1. Complaining hinders actions.

Complaining is among the biggest barriers stopping us from taking action. Instead of acting on something, we find it easier to avoid it by finding faults. This cycle results in us remaining stagnant in our present condition. We fail to move forward because we decide to live in denial and refuse to take action. Instead we prefer to continuously complain about it even after knowing that it would not change anything – it brings us nowhere close to resolving our issues.

If you took one-tenth the energy you put into complaining and applied it to solving the problem, you'd be surprised by how well things can work out. Complaining does not work as a strategy. We all have finite time and energy. Any time we spend whining is unlikely to help us achieve our goals. And it won't make us happier.

Randy Paush, professor of computer science, human–computer interaction, and design at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh

2. Complaining slows down productivity.

When we are in a state of complaining, we will not be able to give our best in whatever we do. This results in reduced productivity levels with mediocre outcome, which hinders our progress in becoming a better person. Because of this, we are stuck at the same level while others leave us behind and move forward.

3. Complaining breeds jealousy.

As mentioned before, jealousy is among the main reasons that people start complaining. But the act of continuous complaining itself increases jealousy to an unhealthy level that ruins our relationship with others and also with ourselves. It shows our low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority.

The jealous are troublesome to others, but a torment to themselves
William Penn, philosopher and founder of the Province of Pennsylvania.

4. Complaining promotes bad mouthing.

Complaining literally involves us blabbering and spreading negative words around us. Complaining is subtle enough that people do not notice how bad the action actually is – we condone and accept complaining as part of our

lives. No matter how “widely accepted” the action is, it does not change the fact that complaining develops the habit of spreading negative and bad information around. We promote a culture of hatred and dissatisfaction, creating distrust among people.

The tendency to whining and complaining may be taken as the surest sign symptom of little souls and inferior intellects.

Francis Jeffrey, Scottish judge and literary critic

5. Complaining initiates unnecessary questioning.

An excessive or extreme questioning habit is never good for the soul; it detaches us from reality and stops us from dealing with the matter. It also develops and encourages the habit of giving excuses. This is why Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) prohibited us from excessive and persistent questioning.

Abu Hurairah reported Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) as saying: Verily Allah likes three things for you and He disapproves three things for you. He is pleased with you that you worship Him and associate nor anything with Him, that you hold fast the rope of Allah, and be not scattered; and He disapproves for you irrelevant talk, persistent questioning and the wasting of wealth.

Muslim

As we continue to complain, we will try to persuade others to agree with us by justifying and forcing our opinions across to others. The easiest way to do is to start questioning all the things around us, including the things that are not even relevant to the matter.

When there are no longer tough questions to be asked, people then tend to question the Almighty Himself with questions such as “why does this happen to me?” or “why can’t I have it like them”. These are proclamation of

ungratefulness to our Creator, an act that displeases Him, which brings us further away from Him and weakens our faith.

Gratitude is riches. Complaint is poverty.

Doris Day, actress, singer, and animal rights activist

In summary, complaining gives birth to various negative traits, behaviours and feelings. On the extreme end of the negative scale is the killer of it all – ungratefulness; the negative attitude that blackens the heart and soul of a person. We fail to see that we already have so much compared to what we don't and this negativity ruins our relationship with others, ourselves and more importantly, with Allah. Because of all these, it brings us further away from a main objective of life – happiness.

What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it. If you can't change it, change the way you think about it. Don't complain.

Maya Angelou, author, poet, and civil rights activist

The Secret to Happiness

The secret to happiness might not seem special or extraordinary but in essence, it is. It is something that all of us already know, taught to us from when we were children by our parents as well as religion, but always taken for granted.

I coincidentally realised and discovered this secret while comforting a friend, who was sharing what was happening in her life. It consisted of a series of genuine concerns, which were mostly beyond her control. As much as it wasn't intended to be a complaint, there were a lot of frustrations that needed to be addressed quickly in order for her not to be demotivated and carried away by her feelings.

***Very little is needed to make a happy life;
it is all within yourself, in your way of thinking.***

Marcus Aurelius, Roman Emperor

The secret of happiness in life is relatively simple. Instead of complaining or counting all the things we do not have, we do the total opposite – be grateful for all the things we have, even the smallest and littlest ones.

If you have to find happiness, find gratitude.

Steve Maraboli, Bestselling Author and Behavioral Science Academic

This was clearly mentioned by our beloved Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ).

***Fadalah bin 'Ubaid Al-Ansari reported: I heard Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) say:
"Happiness is due to him who is guided to Islam and possesses provision that
suffices him for his day and remains content."***

At-Tirmidhi

Simple, isn't it?

Being grateful is an act that literally represents our appreciation and love to our Creator as well as life itself. It relinquishes any feelings of arrogance or pride that we may have, realising that everything in this world and whatever that we have achieved are all gifts and blessings from Allah.

***Abu Bakrah narrated: When anything came to the Prophet (ﷺ) which
caused pleasure or, by which he was made glad, he prostrated himself in
gratitude to Allah.***

Abu Dawud

In this matter, there isn't anyone else better who we could take example from than our beloved Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). Even though he is protected from any forms of sins, he works the hardest among us to express his appreciation and love to his Creator.

The Prophet (ﷺ) used to offer night prayers till his feet became swollen. Somebody said, to him, "Allah has forgiven you, your faults of the past and those to follow." On that, he said, "Shouldn't I be a thankful slave of Allah?"

Bukhari

Allah's blessings can be in various forms, directly or indirectly, perhaps through an intermediary. It proves an important fact – we would not be able to achieve anything entirely on our own. There will always be people around us who contribute to our happiness and for all the right reasons; we should be thankful and grateful for it. Being grateful calls for the expressing of our appreciation to others as Islam also strongly emphasises on the relationship between men.

Abu Hurairah narrated that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "Whoever is not grateful to the people, he is not grateful to Allah."

At-Tirmidhi

The importance of thanking others is also acknowledged by prominent leaders of different cultures and beliefs.

We must find time to stop and thank the people who make a difference in our lives.
John F. Kennedy, 35th President of United States

Gratitude releases positive energy internally and externally, we automatically become contented and happy with our lives. And not only is that, because of its strength, the positive energy also spread to the people and things around us, influencing our surroundings to also be positive.

When you are grateful, fear disappears and abundance appears.

Anthony Robbins, motivational speaker and self-help author

A Clear Call to Gratitude

For Muslims, gratitude is a clear call from Allah.

So remember Me; I will remember you. And be grateful to Me and do not deny Me.

Al-Baqarah 2: 152

Verses relating to the call of expressing gratitude to Allah are repeated in various parts of the Quran and for obvious reasons. In surah *Ar-Rahman*, “The Beneficent”, which is one of my personal favorites, the same question was asked 31 times – “so which of the favors of your Lord would you deny?”

Allah has created us, the world and everything in it for us. We benefit from His creations; the sky, sun, moon, rain, clouds, lands, animals, plants, rivers, oceans – countless bounties of the world. We survive this life through a natural chain and cycle that Allah has put together for us.

Then eat of what Allah has provided for you [which is] lawful and good. And be grateful for the favor of Allah, if it is [indeed] Him that you worship.

An-Nahl 16: 114

We have not even touched or discussed on our senses, mind and body; the greatest gift that literally defines us.

And it is He who produced for you hearing and vision and hearts; little are you grateful.

Al-Mu'minun 23: 78

We were created through a process that is so delicate and beautiful that can never be replicated.

And Allah has extracted you from the wombs of your mothers not knowing a thing, and He made for you hearing and vision and intellect that perhaps you would be grateful.

An-Nahl 16: 78

After realising all this abundance, how can a sensible person be anything but thankful to Allah?

Then is He who creates like one who does not create? So will you not be reminded? And if you should count the favours of Allah, you could not enumerate them. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.

An-Nahl 16: 17-18

We can never count the favours given by Allah, what more to return the favour in any way; not that it matters because He is never in need of our favours. We are the ones who are forever in need of His favours and for that sole reason, we should be grateful and thankful to Him at all times.

And We had certainly given Luqman wisdom [and said], "Be grateful to Allah." And whoever is grateful is grateful for [the benefit of] himself.

And whoever denies [His favor] – then indeed, Allah is Free of need and Praiseworthy.

Luqman 31: 12

We were called to be thankful on numerous occasions by our beloved Prophet (ﷺ).

It was narrated that Thawban said: When the Verse concerning silver and gold was revealed, they said: “What kind of wealth should we acquire?” Umar said: “I will tell you about that.” So he rode on his camel and caught up with the Prophet (ﷺ), and I followed him. He said: “O Messenger of Allah what kind of wealth should we acquire?” He said: “Let one of you acquires a thankful heart, a tongue that remembers Allah and a believing wife who will help you with regard to the matter of Hereafter.”

Ibn Majah

Gratitude = Positivity, Positivity = Happiness

During the first module of the Certificate in *Shariah* class that I attended, we were given an assignment to fulfill the module’s completion requirement. Our lecturer, Dr. Maszlee had asked us to listen to two lecture videos by prominent English speaking scholars whom we could get our hands on through the internet. After watching the videos, we were required to write a 1 page summary on key points captured from the lecture.

For one of the videos I had chosen a *tafsir* lecture by the well-known Quran scholar, Nouman Ali Khan. In this particular video titled “Gratitude: A Way of Life”, he was providing commentaries on verses from Surah Ibrahim. The verses were revealed during the later days of Makkah, which were difficult times for Muslims in the early years of Islam.

The Quran relies heavily on history to teach its lessons. There are a lot of case studies of Prophets mentioned throughout the Quran in the context of a situation. An example is the story of Prophet Musa elaborated in Surah Ibrahim.

The approach is not focused on learning history but more on learning about ourselves. During the time the verse was revealed, it was a difficult time for Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and his companions, which was similar to the situation faced by Prophet Musa.

Prophet Musa's sermon highlighted that if we were to be grateful, even for only one instance, Allah will absolutely increase His favours to us. This was His promise to us.

And [recall, O Children of Israel], when Moses said to His people, "Remember the favor of Allah upon you when He saved you from the people of Pharaoh, who were afflicting you with the worst torment and were slaughtering your [newborn] sons and keeping your females alive. And in that was a great trial from your Lord.

And [remember] when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you are grateful, I will surely increase you [in favor]; but if you deny, indeed, My punishment is severe.'

Ibrahim 14: 6 - 7

If you notice, the word "grateful" was used in the verse when logically speaking, the expected word to be revealed during such difficult times would be the call to patience. At that point in time, baby boys were being routinely killed following the decree by the Pharaoh who intended to kill the person who would bring him down in the future. Little did he know it would be Prophet Musa; his own adopted son.

But Allah knows best; in order for us to be patient, we need to first be grateful and subsequently be contented.

As we have discussed, humanity will never be free from problems; everybody has their own sets of problems. Worse still, it is difficult for us to stop from consistently thinking about it. This results in making us unhappy – spoiling our mood and also those around us.

Also, we are so used of measuring gifts from a tangible perspective. When Allah has given us precious and irreplaceable gifts like our eyes, hands, legs, mouth – none of it we will never want to part with. But because of this, a lot of us forget and fail to be grateful, taking for granted the gifts that were given to us since birth. By simply changing our mindset and approach, everything changes.

Positive attitudes are built upon by being grateful – it is the starting point of all other great, positive and happy things. A key learning point that really caught me from Nouman Ali's lecture was the point he had highlighted about Islam being a religion of attitude. Islam is 90% attitude. This claim is supported by various hadiths of Prophet (ﷺ).

Abu Hurairah reported: Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, "The most perfect man in his faith among the believers is the one whose behavior is most excellent; and the best of you are those who are the best to their wives."

At-Tirmidhi

Masruq narrated: We were sitting with `Abdullah bin `Amr who was narrating to us (Hadith): He said, "Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) was neither a Fahish (filth talker) nor a Mutafahhish (pretend to talk filthily), and he used to say, "The best among you are the best in character (having good manners)."'

Bukhari

Abu ad-Darda' reported: The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Nothing will be heavier on the Day of Resurrection in the Scale of the believer than good manners. Allah hates one who utters foul or coarse language."

At-Tirmidhi

Islam is a religion that is positive. We are taught to start everything by first reciting *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* – “In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”, a beautiful phrase that reflects the highest level of positiveness of our Creator – love.

We are also taught to be thankful for all the good things that happen to us even for the smallest ones by uttering the phrase *Alhamdulillah*, which basically means “all praise and gratitude belongs to Allah”. For practicing Muslims, we would at least utter this phrase 17 times a day during the 5 times a day obligatory prayers. We are also taught the proper method for supplication; to first open it up with praises to Allah, which again falls back to the phrase *Alhamdulillah*.

Hence it does not make sense for us to be pessimists. We are naturally and religiously optimistic people – always being thankful to Allah.

Abu Malik Al-Ash'ari reported: The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "Purity is half of iman (faith). Alhamdulillah (all praise and gratitude belong to Allah) fills the Scales, and Subhanallah (how far is Allah from every imperfection) and Alhamdulillah (all praise and gratitude belong to Allah)' fill that which is between heaven and earth."

Muslim

Gratitude can transform common days into thanksgivings, turn routine jobs into joy, and change ordinary opportunities into blessings.

William Arthur Ward, writer of inspirational maxims

Gratitude Guiding Principles

Although being grateful is rather straightforward, it is always good to have some guiding principles so that we can continuously remind ourselves to be consistently grateful. I personally find the best guiding principles to be the guidance provided by Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) himself.

Abu Yahya Suhaib bin Sinan reported that: The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, "How wonderful is the case of a believer; there is good for him in everything and this applies only to a believer. If prosperity attends him, he expresses gratitude to Allah and that is good for him; and if adversity befalls him, he endures it patiently and that is better for him".

Muslim

The hadith clearly tells us how to approach and react towards both good and bad things that happen to us – being grateful during good times and persevere during bad times. Complaining was never in the equation.

If we manage to live our life according to the simple formula that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) had taught us, happiness would be at our fingertips. No matter how difficult times may be, we would still be able to be happy.

When you meet obstacles with gratitude, your perception starts to shift, resistance loses its power, and grace finds a home within you.

Oprah Winfrey, talk show host, actress, producer, and philanthropist

1. Being grateful starts within us and needs to be expressed outwards.

Being grateful is an act that focuses on our intentions and feelings; it is initiated from deep within us. Being grateful does not work by just saying – “I am grateful”, it must be felt deep down inside and accompanied with sincerity in order for us to be happy.

Gratitude is a quality similar to electricity: it must be produced and discharged and used up in order to exist at all.

William Faulkner, writer and Nobel Prize winner

2. Be grateful for all the good things that happens to us and to all that contributed to it.

There should not be any exceptions to being grateful. We should be grateful even for the smaller or general things in life. Things that we usually take for granted such as living another day, eating a favorite food, meeting up with friends, all of them deserves a big thank you. It is important for us to express our gratitude to everything that contributes to our happiness, directly or indirectly. At the top of it is thanking Allah, followed by the various people in our life. We should also be grateful for all the material or abstract things that helped bring happiness to us such as a good car, a good read or even a good advice.

Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your gratitude.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, essayist, lecturer, and poet

3. Look downwards and count your blessings.

As mentioned before, it is natural for us wanting to compare with people who have more than us. However, we should always remember and realise that there are people who are worse off than us. For this reason, whenever we start complaining and feeling that we don't have enough, we should compare downwards and count our blessings. Only then will we realise how fortunate we are and learn to be contented.

I was complaining that I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.

Confucius

4. It is a matter of mindset – we decide how we see things.

Ultimately, like many other solutions, it is all in the mindset. It is how we see things from the right perspective. There are always two sides to the coin, it can be positive or negative depending on how we look at it. Being grateful would enable us to accept and acknowledge things that are beyond our control – living the concept of “*redha*”. Once we are able to see the good side of things or at least believe that there is a reason behind everything that happens, the closer we are to happiness.

***Some people grumble that roses have thorns;
I am grateful that thorns have roses.***

Alphonse Karr, critic, journalist, and novelist

Continuous Happiness – A Choice

The secret to happiness lies within a very simple concept – being grateful. However, as simple as it may sound, in real life it is difficult to continuously do so. But it does offer us a fundamental solution; it provides us with the choice to be happy.

It is up to us whether we want to take the life-changing step to happiness or continue to live a life full of dissatisfaction – happiness made simple.

Happiness is itself a kind of gratitude.

Joseph Wood Krutch, writer, critic, and naturalist