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It's time for happiness

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Spotlighting the logistically and existentially foundational resource of *time*, this review identifies that the extent to which people focus on time, the amount of time people have, and the ways people spend their time all have a significant impact on happiness. This synthesis of the past decade of research on time and happiness advises that people should (1) focus on time (not money), (2) have neither too little nor too much time, and (3) spend the time they have deliberately.

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In the pursuit of happiness, Americans tend towards money. Yet, time is at least as (and probably more) critical for achieving this goal [1^{••},2]. Time underlies a person's constant stream of experiences, it structures one's daily schedule, and it is ultimately time that measures a person's life. Perhaps it is because time is so pervasive that it so often gets ignored. This review spotlights this logistically and existentially foundational resource to show that the extent to which people focus on time, the amount of time people have, and the ways people spend their time all have a significant impact on happiness.

People, of course, want to be happy. As the 17th century French philosopher and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, observed, 'All men [and presumably he also meant women] seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end.' What's sought are not merely momentary instances of pleasure [3]. By definition, happiness does involve feeling more positive than negative in one's daily life, but it also involves an assessment of one's life as a whole as being satisfying and meaningful [4–7]. In addition to being a worthy end in itself, happiness has positive

consequences across life's domains: improving professional performance, interpersonal relationships, and health [8]. While a substantial portion of people's happiness is determined by their natural disposition [9–11] and such life circumstances as age [12], income level [13], and marital status [14], a sizable portion remains subject to what people think about and do in their day-to-day [15]. To maximize this malleable piece, the reviewed research advises that people should (1) focus on time (not money), (2) have neither too little nor too much time, and (3) spend the time they have deliberately.

Focus on time

Both time and money are scarce and precious resources [16^{••}]. Americans report high levels of stress from lacking in either time [18–21] or money [17], and often find themselves wishing for more. Additional resources could be spent to meet obligations (e.g., bills and chores), as well as to achieve life's joys (e.g., vacations, hobbies, and relationships). 'Unfortunately, time and money are frequently traded off in life's decisions: Should you pay more for the direct flight that gets you to your destination sooner? Should you accept the higher paying job that requires more hours in the office? Should you take on the huge financial burden of receiving the best medical care available for the possibility of extending your life several years?' [16^{••}].

To examine people's preferences between time and money, Hershfield, Mogilner, and Barnea [16^{••}] directly asked thousands of Americans, 'Which do you want more of — time or money?' The majority (64%) answered 'more money.' This preoccupation with money is similarly evident in what people search for on Google (searching for 'dollar' 60% more frequently than 'hour' and for 'save money' twice as often as 'save time') [22]. Even though a greater number of people chose more money over more time, those who did choose time were happier. The positive effect of choosing time held even after the researchers statistically controlled for the amount of time and money individuals already had — suggesting that happiness follows from the relative value people place on each resource, not just the quantity they have [16^{••}].

People do not need to be naturally disposed towards time to enjoy the resulting happiness. For instance, experiments that situationally induced people to think about time instead of money demonstrate that people *led* to focus on time (vs. money) are subsequently happier, because they become more motivated to spend their time in happier and more fulfilling ways [23^{••}]. Similarly, consumers led to think about their time spent with a

product (vs. their money spent on a product) feel happier with those products, because they believe those products more clearly represent who they are as people [24]. Focusing more on time (vs. money) seems to make individuals more self-reflective, compelling them towards behaviors that are highly aligned with their ideal self [22]. Together these findings show that whether chronically [16^{••},25^{••}] or situationally [23^{••},24] induced, when people place greater value on time than on money, they are happier.

Amount of time

Though people are happier when they choose options that promise more time [16^{••},25^{••}], it is not clear whether actually having more time would always make people better off.

People feel less happy when they perceive themselves as having too little time to get their work done or complete their to-do list [26[•]], let alone have a spare hour or two to do what they *want* to do. Indeed, people who feel time-constrained are not only less healthy (i.e., exercising less and eating more junk food [27,28]), but they also report feeling more emotionally exhausted [29], more depressed [30], and less happy [31]. Sharif, Mogilner, and Hershfield are extending this investigation from the impact of *feeling* time-constrained to test the impact of actually being time-constrained [32]. Their analysis of data from tens of thousands working and non-working Americans reveals that having limited discretionary time is indeed linked to lower levels of life satisfaction.

Another undesirable consequence of being time-constrained is that it makes people stingy with their time. Despite this tendency, research surprisingly shows that giving a little time away can serve to make people perceive themselves as having more time [33]. This happens because, compared to spending time on oneself or receiving a windfall of free time, spending time to help another increases one's sense of efficacy. Apparently, realizing just how much they can accomplish with their time expands people's sense of having time more generally [33].

Beyond behaviors that make people *feel* they have more time, to combat the threat of actually having too little time, researchers have identified the value of spending money to buy time. In particular, studies reviewed in this issue [34] show that people who spend money to buy themselves out of such chores as cooking, shopping, or housework report greater life satisfaction [35].

Another version of buying time is the purchase of experiences. An established body of work advises that despite the allure of acquiring material possessions (e.g., electronics, jewelry, handbags), people should acquire experiences (e.g., vacations, meals out, concert tickets) to enjoy

greater happiness [36,37[•],38–40]. The benefit of buying experiences over possessions has been observed not only across genders, ages, employment status, marital status, and regions of the United States [37[•]], but also when making a purchase for someone else [41[•]]. In the context of gift-giving, for example, recipients of experiential gifts report feeling closer and more connected to their gift-giver than do recipients of material gifts [41[•]].

There are several reasons for the greater happiness from buying experiences, including the fact that experiences are more unique and thus harder to compare against forgone alternatives (which minimizes buyer's remorse) [42,43]. Experiences also elicit more intense emotions when consumed. For example, people *feel* more while attending a concert than while carrying a handbag [41[•],44]. Another noteworthy reason is that experiences are subject to slower rates of hedonic adaptation [45]. While people quickly habituate to their shiny new toys (which stay neither shiny nor new for long), experiences live on in people's memories and are often revisited through photographs and the stories people tell [46]. Perhaps most importantly, experiences are often shared with other people, thus offering the great amount of happiness that comes from interpersonal connection [47].

While having too little time can undermine happiness, so too might having too much time. Indeed, the researchers examining the relationship between people's amount of discretionary time and life satisfaction have found an inverted U-shape: not only does having too little time seem to lead to lower happiness levels, but having more time does not continually translate to greater levels of happiness, and can even reduce it [32]. Perhaps this potential slump is driven by insights covered in this issue [48,49], which show that people are averse to idleness [50], and busyness has become a status symbol (signaling competence, ambition, and being in high demand) [51]. With wide-open days, people may infer lack of purpose or meaning in their life.

It may also be that perceiving an abundance of time leads people to take their time for granted. For instance, people who view their future time as expansive (vs. limited) typically extract less happiness from the ordinary experiences that comprise their daily lives [52^{••}]. Indeed, young people who view their time as limitless require high levels of excitement to feel optimally happy, whereas older people who are more aware of their finite number of years left are more appreciative of the present moment and find happiness in calm contentment [53,54[•]]. With an overabundance of time, people are less prone to savor life's pleasures.

Spending time

Even more integral than the amount of time people have is *how* people spend their time. To identify which

activities are associated with the most and least happiness, researchers have tracked how people spend their days along with how these people feel over the course of their days. The results show that on average, even more than when engaging in passive leisure (e.g., watching TV and taking a nap), people feel happiest when engaging in active leisure (e.g., socializing, volunteering, and exercising). People feel least happy, however, when doing housework, being at work, or commuting to work [55–58]. Notably, these averages obscure some idiosyncrasies in the potential happiness from activities. For instance, although socializing provides greater happiness than working for most [23**], some individuals in the data felt happiest while working [55].

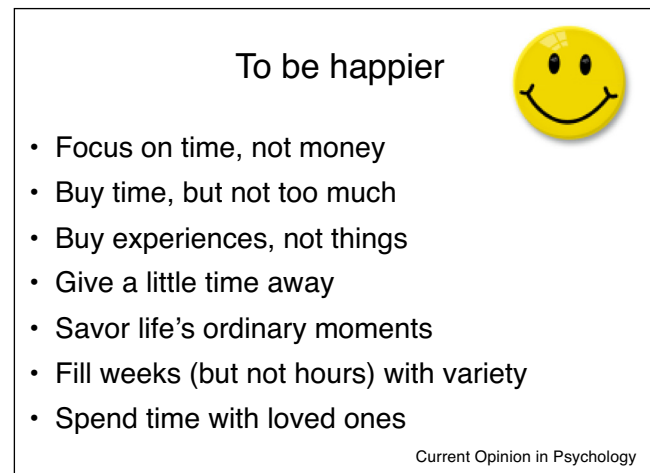
In spite of the individual variation in happiness across activities, the potential happiness from social connection seems more fundamental. The time people spend connecting with others is often the happiest part of the day [55], and experiences that are shared produce greater happiness than those experienced alone [47,52**]. Strong social relationships are essential for mental and physical health [59,60], and even brief chats with strangers (e.g., a Starbucks barista or fellow commuter on a bus) can engender feelings of connection and happiness [61,62].

Zooming out from specific activities to assess the potential happiness from combinations of activities reveals the significant role of variety. In particular, over the course of a day or longer, more varied activities increases happiness by keeping things exciting [26*]. On the other hand, packing a variety of activities into shorter time-periods reduces happiness by making people feel as though they cannot actually get anything accomplished [26*]. In order to feel happy when looking back on their time, Westerners are compelled to make their hours productive [3]. This is ironic, because when considering longer time-frames (including their life overall), it is the happiness people experience in the moment that most believe they should maximize [3].

Not only do these findings imply that multitasking can undermine happiness [26*], but even more importantly, they highlight the value of being thoughtful when piecing together the activities that comprise one's schedule. Developing this theory, Mogilner, Hershfield, and Aaker [63] proposed the potential benefits from assuming an elevated perspective on time, which is much like looking down on one's calendar — where each moment in the past, present or future is equally visible and important. By contrast to the more typically assumed ground-level view (where one is absorbed in the present), this bird's-eye view of time might help nudge people towards better decisions and alleviate the guilt from supposed tradeoffs [63].

Whether it is individual activities or the combination of activities that fill people's hours, days, and lives, the

Figure 1



Insights culled from reviewed research to increase happiness.

reviewed research points to the importance of individuals being supremely deliberate in how they spend their apparently most precious resource of time. Being deliberate involves both allocating more time to (or at least protecting time for) activities that generate happiness, as well as savoring those activities, whatever they may be [64].

Conclusion

Surveying the past decade of research on time and happiness shows the consequences of focusing on time, having time, and particular ways of spending time. Its synthesis offers a surely incomplete (but hopefully still helpful) set of guidelines to increase happiness (Figure 1). Even though far more empirical investigation is needed to further unpack the complex construct of time and to inform human's utterly aspirational pursuit of happiness, this set of findings teaches that by turning attention to time as the ultimately precious resource, people become more deliberate in spending their time — thus creating happier hours, days, and lives. In short, it seems that it is time for happiness.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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