



WHY BE HAPPY?

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Most people think of happiness as essentially a selfish issue: “I want to be happy – and I want to be happy for me.”

I'd like to suggest that in fact happiness is far, far more than a selfish desire. In fact, it is a moral obligation.

I know that most people have never thought of happiness in this way. Neither did I, to tell the truth, for much of my life. I thought that happiness, and especially the pursuit of happiness, was all about oneself.

But it isn't.

Whether or not you're happy, and most importantly, whether or not you act happy is about altruism, not selfishness – because it is about how we affect others' lives.

And that's what makes it a moral issue. Ask anybody who was raised by an unhappy parent whether or not happiness is a moral issue, and I assure you the answer will be “yes”.

It is no fun being raised by an unhappy parent, or being married to an unhappy person, or being the parent of an unhappy child, or working with an unhappy co-worker.

Our happiness affects others – profoundly. That's why happiness is a moral obligation. We are morally obligated to at least act as happy as possible – even if we don't feel happy. People can't be guided by feelings because it is how we act that affects others – not how we feel.

A good analogy to bad moods is bad breath. Why do we brush our teeth multiple times every day? It's not only because of hygiene, it's because we want to present good breath to anybody who we come in contact with.

Well, the same thing holds true for our moods. A bad mood should be regarded exactly as we regard bad breath. Why are you inflicting it on me? Or, why am I inflicting it on you? It's just not right. That's why one should endeavor as much as possible, to act as happy as possible, as often as possible.

And just about anyone can do this. No matter how unhappy you may feel at any given moment, you can – and have to – make a decision on how to act. We may not be free to control whether we feel sad or happy, but we are free to control whether or not we present a happy countenance to others.

That doesn't mean we don't share how we feel with our best friends, including hopefully, our spouse. Of course we can, and without overdoing it, we should. "You know I'm really sad. I had this problem at work today; I have this problem with my marriage; I have this problem with my kid, I have this problem with my parents." But you don't inflict a bad mood on anybody. That's a different thing altogether.

We all have the capacity to control how we express ourselves, no matter how we feel. I can prove it. Imagine someone who is just acting miserably to his or her spouse when somebody comes to the door. Have you ever noticed how nicely such a person will treat the stranger? How were they able -- in a split second -- to go from inflicting their awful mood on their spouse to acting beautifully toward the stranger who's at the door? Obviously we can control our moods.

Or, how about this? Let's say you are chronically in a bad mood and I offered you ten thousand dollars a week not to be in a bad mood. Do you think this would affect your ability to be in a good mood? I suspect so.

And, to be honest, we even have the power to affect how we feel, not only how we act. Abraham Lincoln famously said that we are as happy as we decide to be. That is exactly what we should decide.

Being happier is good for us and it is what we owe everybody who is in our lives.

Becoming happier is another great benefit of acting happy: the happier we act, the happier we will feel. We think that our actions are determined by our feelings. But we have the power to achieve the opposite -- to shape our feelings by our actions. How we act influences our feelings more than our feelings should ever be allowed to influence our behavior.

So, yes, indeed, we do have a moral obligation to be, or at least to act, happy.

The happy make the world better and the unhappy make it worse.

Happiness is a huge issue. Lincoln was right, we are as happy as we decide to be; and it's time to make that decision.

I'm Dennis Prager.