

Talking Therapies: Are we pressured to be happy?

With Martin Weaver

Sally:

Hello and welcome to Talking Therapies, a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and the UK Council for Psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I'm Sally Saunders and I'm the editor-in-chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. We all seek to find happiness in our lives, but we might feel pressured to define happiness based on how others see it, rather than through our own standards. In this podcast, UKCP CEO Sarah Niblock talks to UKCP psychotherapist Martin Weaver to find out how a better relationship with ourselves can help us find real happiness.

Martin:

Happiness, of course, only exists one might argue, in relation to sadness. If we didn't have sadness, how would we measure happiness?

Sally:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Martin Weaver. In 1997, Martin started working as a psychotherapist, and qualified as a supervisor in 2002. Martin went on to supervise the counsellors at the 7th of July Assistance Centre, caring for the bereaved, survivors and first responders after the London bombings of 2005. Now working in private practice, Martin is an author, podcaster and in 2019 released his album of guided meditations called Mindful Happiness, which is available to download free on Spotify and other platforms.

Sarah:

So, Martin, what is happiness? And how do we define it?

Martin:

Well, happiness is clearly a subjective experience. But we could say it's a felt sense of pleasure, wellbeing, and intense joy. In fact, recently, I heard that happiness comes in peaks. We can't be happy all the time and perhaps we should go for contentment, a more balanced state. So right from the start, you may be chasing the wrong goal. And perhaps as we go through this podcast, our listeners could maybe write down a few words that define their happiness to begin to get some focus into what it is that we're all actually talking about.

Sarah:

It's such a loaded term, isn't it? And it's one that's just within popular culture and popular psychology all over the place. I'm interested in your thoughts about how the world that we live in influences our sense of happiness, or whatever that might mean?

Martin:

Well, I've been thinking about how do we learn about this thing called happiness? And as I talk to my clients, how they understand their experience of happiness. And is it what we feel and think, or perhaps, do we learn happiness from those around us?

We see them being happy and we kind of copy that. And perhaps all the while holding up a discomfort because it's not quite us. At a very young age, we have no words to describe what we're sensing. So, we just experience it, and we connect the experience with those around us. And then as we grow, we meet new people, our family, or neighbourhood, school, who may give us different ways to experience or define happiness. And added to that, all the while we're in this soup of culture, from art, TV, the Internet, and advertisers who need us to be happy on their terms so they can sell us things they say make us happy, which I kind of think of as the harmful side of capitalism. And who influences us? Our parents? I was brought up Catholic, I read much science fiction. In the 70s, when I was in my early teens, I watched *The Ascent of Man*, *Civilization*, *Life on Earth*, they all influenced my view of the world that I was in and what therefore was creating that sense of happiness within me. And that I can remember eight years old, in a cinema, watching *2001 The Space Odyssey* and that has given me a sense of the world and a happiness about the world, of grandeur, of purpose, if you like, and of things greater than me and all that creates my sense of happiness. I wonder what yours are. And what our listeners sense of happiness is and where it's coming from? Where it's been given to us? Where we've developed it ourselves?

Sarah:

It's a term that's bandied around so glibly, and yet you're evoking there such a rich array of social contexts, social constructs, as well as role modelling that inflect our experience of happiness. To what extent is our happiness also an expression of our beliefs and values?

Martin:

Oh, yes, the chicken and egg question. Which comes first? I think it's a dynamic mixture of both. They are what I would term mutually interdependent, they influence and change each other. All those things I just spoke about, the people, the models, the culture that we're in, the experiences that we have. They all collide and mix and mould and create within us a response. And it's how we then interpret that response. And one of the things we use to interpret that response are these things we now call beliefs and values. Values are the things that motivate us. They're the things that we try to achieve in our lives, things like love and passion and wealth, forgiveness, happiness, purpose, those things that tell us that the life is worthwhile. And then we have these so-called negative feelings or emotions. And they tell us that we've been moved or pushed away from those values, those things that motivate us through life. I put negative quotes around that word because they're very valuable responses. It's just that we can believe that we are powerless in their grasp because we haven't been shown how we can influence and adjust those physical responses, and how we can identify their meanings. And so, it's useful. I often ask my clients to list their values, to list them in the order of importance. And then to ask themselves, where did they come from? So, was it a parental thing? Was it a teacher thing? Was it a book I read? Was it another experience that I had? And therefore, how is that reinforced a particular value, a particular motivator for me? And is it one that I want? How do I understand how I navigate myself in this world?

Sarah:

There seems to be so much pressure now to be happy. And I'm just wondering where that comes from, mainly from what you've seen with your clients.

Martin:

Well, we're social creatures, so the pressure comes partly from all around us, because obviously, we live together. And also, from this thing I've been trying to describe, it comes from within us. When we are grounded and confident, we can separate what is us, and what is other people. And therefore, those negative sensations are incredibly important. I think a lot of my clients or people experienced those negative sensations and interpret them as 'I must be wrong. I can't be right.' Rather than saying, 'this is what I believe,' or 'these are my values,' or 'this is who I am.' And therefore, you disagree with that, that tells me something about me.

Yes, we can learn by diversity and there's lots about diversity in our culture today. But also, lots of commonality, things that we share. And so, the pressure, the demand for to be happy comes from the people that were around, but also from ourselves in defining who we are.

Sarah:

Can we end up depending on others' thoughts and feelings about what it is to be happy?

Martin:

Oh, yes, yes, very much so. And that's what today's society is teaching us. We depend on so many others for our basic needs. Now, I was 60 last year, so I've got that whole story of 60 years to reflect on. But I look at my mother, she's 92 and I think, well she wouldn't understand it today, but what would be so different, and I'm thinking of things like Deliveroo, Amazon, video streaming, ASOS, WhatsApp. All those things that are categories of, you know, food, deliveries, clothing, texting, communication, an overabundance of choice, which means that we don't need to know how to cook. We don't need to know how to make simple repairs and clothes, we don't need to know how to make our own entertainment. And there were those other people who will tell us we don't need to know how to think, because someone else will do it for us. So, then we become dependent on others. Now, clearly, we're dependent as children. But as we grow and find this independence, we then develop a way of expressing ourselves. But in this world, people are beginning to believe that happiness should be packaged and delivered to us, like Amazon, you know, within two hours or within a day or so. Which means that if one is not happy, if I'm not happy, it's somebody else's responsibility. And if they're making me unhappy, maybe I do what seems to be happening more and more in the world is 'I'll just cancel them, I'll just turn them off, I'll just blame them.' It's not that people are denying their own responsibility, it's just that they haven't been taught the tools to express that responsibility. I think Jean Piaget said it best in the last century. He said, 'we organise the world by organising ourselves.' So, we choose our values, we choose our beliefs, we choose where we spend our money, where we spend our time. And in doing so we shape the world around us because people respond to that. However, I think in recent times, we've kind of turned that statement around, and we now organise ourselves by organising the world. So, we depend on others' thoughts and feelings to be happy. And if those thoughts and feelings of others don't create in us a sense of happiness, then we ignore them when we find people that do, and maybe we blame those that make us quote, 'unhappy.' And so, there's something about coming back to ourselves, something about defining for ourselves what happiness is, and noting that other people do it differently. And that's where perhaps the thing that has been lost is curiosity.

Sarah:

There's such a strong current coming through in what you're saying there, which is fascinating, is that happiness has been reduced to some kind of concept within modern society. That you're either happy, or you're not happy, there's no kind of grayscale, and also, that somehow sadness or unhappiness is somehow wrong. What is so wrong with unhappiness?

Martin:

To believe that negative sensations can simply be medicated away, or maybe nowadays, can be meditated away. You know, feeling bereaved, take an antidepressant; feeling anxious, do some meditation; feeling sad, do something else. But what happens when the medication or the meditation stops working? If you've not got the knowledge or skills to understand your emotional responses, you can't make new choices. And as I said earlier, all those uncomfortable, negative responses are important information.

If, or when I should say, a loved one dies, the uncomfortable feeling you have, the sadness, the bereavement is in direct proportion to the importance of that relationship. And that tells you about how important it was, and it gives you information about how the importances of the relationships you have today. So, you can make new and different choices. Things are really good, happiness of course, only exists one might argue, in relation to sadness. If we didn't have sadness, how would we measure happiness? And so, as we go through life, we achieve things, we fail at things. And these responses, these internal responses that we have, and our interpretation of them, gives us that purpose in life, and guides us, navigates us through 'this is what we want to do, this is what we don't want to do. This is what happens when we don't make the best use of what we have.' So, let's have a look around and see what we've got today. And maybe adjust our behaviour, our thoughts, our responses, our activities, our businesses, so that we reinforce the stuff that's useful, that's positive, that gives us that sense of contentment. And we stay away from the stuff that's harmful, the stuff that's uncomfortable, the stuff that makes us anxious, the stuff that makes us sad, so that we can then be the masters of our own destiny.

Sarah:

I like the way that you point out how consumption in a way, works in lots of different ways. This sense that we need to consume or do things immediately to kind of remove this discomfort. And I also like the fact that you pointed out that yes, that might come through buying things, which you can do on the same day these days. Or it might actually come through looking for the wrong type of support or kind of plaster, sticking plaster approach as opposed to necessarily sitting with the feeling, sitting in your own muck, as it were. You would advocate that we need to have a better relationship with ourselves and with others if we're going to have a better relationship with our happiness. Can you tell me, as a psychotherapist, what that might look like?

Martin:

Yeah, I think it's important to recognise dare I say the reality of the world we live in. And that thing about relationships, having better relationships, is about communication, about listening to ourselves. Ultimately, you know, clients sometimes tell me that they pray to their god, when I say that's fine, do you ever listen to your god? And this usually gets me a blank stare. Because they think 'what?' As if prayer is about talking all the time, but not actually, as you just said, sitting in our own stuff, and listening to what's happening. We don't listen to ourselves, each other or indeed our gods. Because we don't know that we need to, and we haven't been taught how to. And one of the positive things about meditation is it teaches us not only how to listen, but the value of listening. And it gives us that extra skill. So, we can then in that space where we sit in the discomfort, ask ourselves other questions. Do I really want this? Is this the direction I really want to be going in? What's going to be the consequence of chasing this particular thing? What about the people around me? What about the connections with my partner, my children, my family, my community, my culture? What about the connections with people halfway across the world? What about connections with people who I feel there is no connection? And some of those can be incredibly close to us. So yeah, I think better relationship with ourselves, questioning in a curious kind of way, rather than this kind of hectoring sort of way. But wondering what that might lead to and taking just a bit of time to listen.

Sarah:

Are healthy relationships, then perhaps an expression of our happiness, or our relationships important to ensure happiness? Do we need them for happiness? Or are they an expression of something within ourselves?

Martin:

Isn't it interesting that a few minutes ago you asked me, you know, is happiness a binary concept? And a lot of our discussion, I think, has been about this distinction, which has been divided up into this on or off, one or the other. And relationships, this is another one, they're both true. I think, if you look at your relationships, and you say, actually, am I in these relationships in the hope they'll give me happiness?

Or are you saying, actually, I'm in this relationship, because I'm happy and it adds to my and the other person, or other people's happiness. Perhaps most importantly, relationships help us grow. They help us feed ourselves and each other. And actually, one of the things I try and keep in my mind when I'm responding to something on Twitter is that although I'm responding to somebody directly, I know, or I believe there's a huge audience of people out there who are watching as well. And so in some senses, I'm also trying to talk to them, you know, and actually show a different way of interacting, especially when there's a heated argument going, where people are taking binary positions. And the relationship can develop, because the world will change, because I will change, because the people I'm in relationship with will change and therefore, I need to be curiously attuned to that. And my values will give me the boundaries that I'm willing to stretch, if you're like, or am I willing to stretch in order to maintain what I've got? or maybe having to do it differently because I'm now 60, rather than 20, because I'm now in a relationship rather than being single, because my parents have died rather than being alive. So, they all require a different sense of relationships, and a different intensity, mixture, integration of those relationships. So yes and no is the answer to that question.

Sarah:

Somebody will be listening to this inevitably and chiming with a lot of the things that you've said. So, if somebody is finding their relationship with the concept of happiness difficult, how can psychotherapy help them to resolve that?

Martin:

Well, we provide a space and a curious space. And I've been working with clients, couples and individuals recently, and we've been discovering their values, and not only their values, but the importance of the values and how the values have changed, how they've chosen to keep some and let others go. And one thing we haven't been able to talk about today is a narrative, is our story. How have our values changed over our lifetime? Which ones have we reinforced? Which ones have we let go? Which ones were given to us, thrust upon us perhaps, and which ones have we decided to pick up, to actually choose for ourselves because they fit with the way we want to live our lives. I think also, there are three other aspects. In psychotherapy, I say we, I can teach, and my colleagues can I'm sure, a lot of people don't know how their bodies work. They don't know the structures that are inside them, and how those structures affect and effect our responses from day to day. And our interpretation of those responses. There's a psychological aspect. Our thoughts, how we engage with our thoughts and where our thoughts come from. A language that we use, I often interrupt my clients because they use so much negative language about themselves. And I engage with them and ask them to stop that. And then there's a kind of less tangible mental, spiritual aspect - the internal relationships - how people structure, their thoughts, how they structure, their narrative, how they carry, or how we carry around with us constantly a virtual map of reality. And very often, it's to that internal understanding and map that we refer to, rather than experiencing the world as it is, and seeing how the two match or don't match. So, it's providing that space and that chance to explore for an hour a week, or 50 minutes a week, or however long you've got, time which is for the client. Which in our fast-moving world, people often either don't have or don't - and here's an interesting word - they don't value for themselves. And once that gets readjusted, I say this to people, I asked them 'who's the top of your list? Who is the most important person for you?' And they'll say, 'my partner, my children, my parents, my boss.' And I'll say, 'actually, you need to be at the top of that list. Because if you're not looking after yourself in the ways that I've just described, you can't have a healthy, happy relationship with yourself, or anybody else.' And our values make sure that that sense of self doesn't override everything, but becomes part of the whole system. In a nutshell, that's what I do.

Sarah:

Those 50 minutes are a absolute lifesaver. I mean, why wouldn't anyone need that just to make sense of what's going on in the world right now.

Martin:

Well, exactly. And I think that's because we have been taught to value other things. I went through the AIDS crisis back in the 80s. And so, people were panicking about COVID-19, and I kept saying, 'we're going to get through this because we've been through it before, it's going to be fine.' Everybody has examples of resilience within them. Everybody has examples of happiness. And now it's taking the time to learn from that, to value those experiences, to build upon them. I think as humans, we're naturally inclined to think about the negative stuff in the belief that if we prepare ourselves for the negative, then we'll be safe. The trouble is that kind of self-fulfilling prophecy kind of way, that's what we kind of create. And therapy gives us that space, yes to acknowledge the negative, but more importantly, to acknowledge the positive stuff that we've done, the resilience that we have, and how we can define happiness on our own terms.

Sarah:

I think listeners will take huge comfort from what you've said here, Martin, because our capacity to feel joy and happiness stems from within. It's recognising and unlocking, and identifying our own inner resources, our own sense of self, our own kind of groundedness in this world, that will take us through changes. Where we remain somehow constant, but able to evolve and flex with those things that are going on in the world.

Martin:

Yeah, I see myself as an educator, not as a medic. I didn't believe I treat conditions. I teach people, partly what I've been taught, and partly what I've learned. And I'm learning and researching all day, every day, new ways and building on the old way to actually understand all of that and so that I can own my own happiness and help my clients recognise it and own it for themselves.

Sally :

That was UKCP psychotherapist Martin Weaver speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy. If after listening to that you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist, then go to the Find a Therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychology.org.uk and use the Find a Therapist tool. We'll also be discussing happiness and the pressure we feel to obtain it in this month Psychologies magazine. You can find us online at www.psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCP psychotherapists, so remember to like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first. It also helps others to find us too. So, join us again next month. Till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.