

# THOUGHTS ON HAPPINESS

## Can Happiness Be a Decision We Make?

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Happiness is inarguably one of the most elusive and sought after conditions of the human experience. It has motivated us during primeval times when it meant being a part of a pack who could satisfy your physical and emotional needs, it has sat within the minds of some of the greatest thinkers of all time, like Socrates and Aristotle, it has prompted the overthrow of entire civilizations for the rise of newer ones, and it continues to permeate everyday life, from being the subject of cheery radio tunes that top international charts to being the subject of suicidal ideation. Happiness seems at the same time ubiquitous and unreachable. But is it really? I personally do not think so. Happiness is a decision that we can make at any point of our lives, even in the worst of times.

Ancient philosopher Epictetus once wrote, “It’s not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters,” and the saying holds true. Consider this: a teenage girl who seems to have everything. She’s rich, popular, dresses to the nines and is so persuasive that teachers boost her final grades after a quick chat in the hallway. She’s happy...but only conditionally. Soon, her popular friends start turning their backs on her, she fails a huge exam--a final--for the first time in her life, and all of her smooth talking does not translate into her love life, leaving her directionless and miserable. Despite feeling on top of the world at one moment, when life gets difficult, she feels the loneliest that she’s ever felt. At this point, she has two options: a) continue to wallow in her sadness, and dig herself into an even deeper hole or b) do something about it. In an epiphany, she acknowledges her situation and chooses the latter. As a result, she throws herself into charity work, using her popularity, wealth, and newly found wisdom for good. She proves to herself that she is responsible for her own destiny, and can positively impact others as well. In the end, she is actually even happier than before, because her happiness is self-made, not a result of her environment.

I just described the plot of *Clueless*, the 1995 cult classic film that is loosely inspired by Jane Austen’s

novel *Emma*. Despite Cher’s ever-present valley girl speak (*whatever!*) and her ardent love for shopping, partying, and matchmaking, the protagonist’s plight is not to be dismissed. There is a reason why it remains an ardent favorite among teenagers 25 years later (despite its outdated lingo), and a fixture in modern pop culture, from fashion pieces resembling the movie’s iconic outfits to entire music videos placed in its 90s world: Her character inspires others to take control of their lives. She admits that she needs to “makeover” her soul, and after apologizing for inadvertently hurting a friend, organizing a donation drive to help those suffering from natural disaster, and telling her crush how she truly feels, in the end, she becomes truly self-fulfilled. Though she lives a much more glamorous life than the rest of the world, she nonetheless illustrates how a dejected emotional state can be improved by simply deciding to be happy, and doing as much as possible to get there.

And her trajectory is not a fluke. The realization that happiness is a choice is the reason why impoverished children living in third world countries still make time to play, why prisoners of war, who have seen the worst of humanity, can still crack jokes and touch numerous lives with their kindness, why communities ravaged by drug abuse and crime can still create some of the most vibrant and expressive art in the world. I do not write this to diminish their monumental struggles, or somehow say that they are living painlessly despite dealing with trauma, mental illness, and death all the time. But, they still make an effort to treasure the good that comes into their lives above all else; they do the best they can with the life that was handed with them.

To conclude, even though happiness today seems to be reserved for sitcoms and cat videos, it could not be any more accessible: Committing to happiness is the best thing we can do for ourselves. When we choose to take control of how we respond to life rather than fall victim to life itself, true happiness can be found.