

Doritos for Breakfast: A Peek at Happiness

Written by Jack Sparaco
Tuesday, 11 June 2019 11:09



*"Well, I'm not the kind of company you're,
you're accustomed to
You've got such a calmness that, I, I can't break on through
Did everything you wanted me to, to make you stay
Every reason lordy was just an excuse, you know
He was a perfect getaway*

*You're gone, gone, girl
Gone, I know, baby so long
Gone, I know time is gonna roll me on
Thank God you're gone for good"*

– Samantha Fish, "Gone for Good"

One of the great rising blues/rock singers and guitarists around, from Kansas City, Samantha Fish sounds like a woman with a lot of emotional miles on her. When she sings about lost love a frying pan starts to heat in your chest. Yet when she performs this song, often on a guitar made from a kerosene can (seriously), she seems exuberantly happy, even joyful.

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Is there really a difference between the two? New York Times columnist David Brooks recently noted, “Happiness usually involves a victory for the self. Joy tends to involve the transcendence of self. Happiness comes from accomplishments. Joy comes when your heart is in another. People receive joy after they have over-invested in their friendships.” Joy is perhaps divine at its essence, but happiness is more complex if not elusive formula. And the conventional wisdom is often flat out wrong.

Sometimes my own happiness is a fleeting little thief, like when I pause to enjoy a trivial detail. Anticipating appliance instructions, for example. My new Shark iron warns me to use it only for its intended purpose. OK, so no waffle making or ant control. Here’s a really good one: never iron or steam clothes while they are being worn. Cool with me. The little thief came again while I watched a simple breakfast scene. At the next table over from me at Pete’s Café last week sat a young man and woman. Early thirties, white middle class. Between them lay a large bag of Doritos and a couple iced coffees. Mr. and Ms. Doritos were on their phones, scrolling away. Not talking to each other. Good times lay straight ahead, apparently, with those Doritos beckoning.

For decades now, psychologists and sociologists have carefully studied human happiness. Here are twenty main factors. Naturally, they vary somewhat by culture and stage of life and take it for granted that you don’t iron yourself. They would call that a hygiene factor, not a happiness driver. Ready? OK, off we go, fellow smile chasers. In no particular order,

1. Liking yourself. Consider this a building block for happily liking anyone else. Warts and all in both cases. Look in the mirror. What do you see? Now look again.

2. Love and close family relationships. More giant building blocks, or maybe chickens and eggs as it’s hard to really tell which causes which. And yes, we should *ab-so-lute-ly* include dogs in this equation.

3. Strong friendship networks. Find almost any elderly man or woman who is happy and dollars to doughnuts they have a wide seine cast. Some of their absolute best friends will be those they have known the longest, though many times a renewed sense of vigor and purpose can accompany making friends with a Millennial or X-ennial, for example.

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4. Sense of spirituality. Like Ben & Jerry's, all flavors are good to great. To someone. Maybe try to avoid nuts.

5. Having personal control over what's going on in your life. Environmental control is a sure bet when it comes to minimizing stress, in humans and many other species. A Mount Rushmore of research has confirmed this for decades.

6. Good genes. Yeah, good luck with this one; some people have higher biological set points for achieving and maintaining happiness. Born to lose? More like born to brood. Or sing.

7. Sense of engagement with and competency at work. Feeling like you're making a difference makes a big, uh, difference. Most people at various company levels basically just punch a clock and never know the potential joy of work. My doctor believes this is well over 90%.

8. Making, sharing music that is deeply moving. For me, it's blues and blues/rock. Can't make it, love to share it.

9. Even more friendships. Sure, you're thinking, here we go with the iron again. Tell me something I *don't* know.

10. Being married. This works generally better for men than women and I've got no idea about gay marriages.

11. Having enough money to be comfortable. Beyond that happiness is not affected much.

12. Chocolate. Dark chocolate in particular helps deal with stress; World War II soldiers were famous for consuming huge quantities of jungle-safe Hershey's along with endless cigarettes though they were not warned about smoking at the time. It may not have been as crucial when bullets and bombs were flying. Quality dark chocolate is loaded with anti-oxidants, fiber, iron

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and magnesium. It may help serve as an anti-depressant.

Hershey's made three billion field, desert and jungle compatible chocolate (D) bars in the war. They were deliberately formulated to taste awful so the troops wouldn't eat too many of them (true, per US Army specs).

13. Exercise and spending quality time in the outdoors. Maybe that's why Teddy Roosevelt often said he was "bully."

14. Travel. Like to the Galapagos islands or Hawaii, which we're planning, not to a swamp. Paris is good, too, if you like to eat and enjoy art. Just watch your feet when out walking the streets.

15. Sense of gratitude. The thought here is, what good is having pretty much anything if you don't feel grateful?

16. Reluctance to compare yourself with others. If you must compare, do it downward, not up or you may die unhappy.

17. A sense that one's life is meaningful, that one has a reason for living. Thanks to my friend Mary Rogel for this one. It sure beats the "why am I still here?" syndrome that the elderly sometimes feel. Our good friend Kent Speight adds life experiences, such as family vacations where the lovely memories last forever.

18. Give to others. Clothing and shelter for the homeless, offering your time to children who need tutoring or kindly, warm support to someone who could use a smile and someone to talk to. Just to name a couple. The media, thankfully, are often full of terrific examples that can make you feel good just knowing that the world bus still hasn't lost all its wheels. Greta Thunberg's leadership in school strikes for the planet's viability shines. She's sixteen, folks.

19. Lifelong learning. Staying engaged in life often hinges on learning new skills and developing new areas of expertise. Hey, you might even become more interesting, too.

What does *not* seem to make people happy are bottomless money, material possessions, intelligence, education, age, gender and attractiveness. Spending five million dollars to get your kid an inter-galactic makeover, a Maserati, fake rowing credentials, and a new library named after mom and pop ain't gonna cut it.

And if all else fails, rescue a dog. OK, that makes twenty. No, not twenty dogs. Just some ideas.

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There, are we happy now? Pass them danged Doritos.