Cognitive Approach: A Mirror to One's Happiness

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Abstract:

The author's approach has been to explore the impact of cognitive approach/process on one's happiness by citation of real life sketches amongst whom some could conquer challenging situations in life by creating positive belief system and getting engaged in several positive intentional activities, contrary to it some of the cases cited here either possessed negative approach to various situations or could not overcome there perceived emotional pressures. Thus, to understand why some people are capable of dealing with complex situations effectively, and remain happier than others, one must understand the cognitive and motivational processes that create immense difference in one's level of well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

The **Cognitive Process** in psychology is a relatively modern approach to human behaviour that focuses on how we think, how we perceive, and how we analyse people, situations and events in our day to day life, which are simultaneously influenced by our past memories, events and experience, these all ascertains ones belief system, prejudices, biases and makes a person judgemental, and finally it is reflected through ones behaviour, the way we act and react, sometimes spontaneously and sometimes intentionally.

Research studies show that our enduring level of **happiness** (H) is determined by our happiness set point (S), life circumstances (C) (influenced by aspects of temperament and character such as depression and sleep quality) and intentional or voluntary activities (V). Seligman proposed an equation for happiness: $H = S + C + V$. Further, Lyubomirsky, a prominent researcher in the field of happiness and author of The How of Happiness, attached percentages to these components. She suggested that our ? set point, or happiness level determined by birth or genetics, accounts for 50 percent of happiness; circumstances such as marital status, earnings, and looks determine 10 percent; and the remainder of our happiness comes from intentional activities or things we can do to change our happiness level.

Figure 1. Three primary factors influencing happiness level
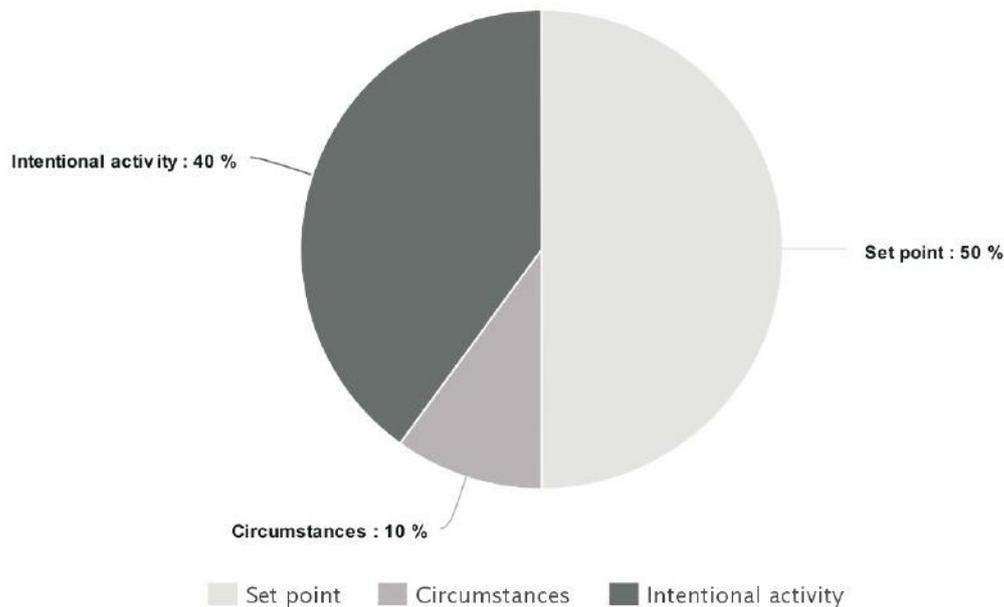
From this research, we draw real life examples of people who have turned their way of life by there perception, positive or negative, and how this 40 percent plays a decisive role in determining our level of happiness. We consider a reflection on the following:

- There are things we can do? voluntary and intentional activities? to increase our levels of happiness and meaning.
- Real life cases showing the reaction of people as per their cognitive process and how it has affected there life and of those around them.
- There is a strong correlation between ones cognitive process and happiness.

Intentional Activity (Cognitive Approach)

One of the most promising means of altering one's happiness level is intentional activity. By 'intentional', we mean discrete actions or practices in which people can choose to engage. We also assume that intentional activities require some degree of effort to enact, which in turn is related to one's cognitive process. A person has to try to do the activity; it does not happen by itself. Intentional activity can influence well-being, in terms of cognitive activity, such as reframing situations in a more positive light or pausing to count one's blessings.

Relevant Prior Theory and Research

People's cognitive responses to both ordinary and extraordinary life events have also been found to be associated with different levels of well-being. For example, happier and more satisfied people are relatively more likely to be characterized by optimistic strategies and biases shown in response to life's victories and defeats-that is, tendencies (a) to perceive and frame life circumstances in positive ways (e.g., DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; McCrae & Costa, 1986), (b) to expect favourable life circumstances in the future (Scheier & Carver, 1993; Seligman, 1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988), (c) to feel control over one's outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Seligman,

1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988) and (d) to possess confidence about one's abilities and skills (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 2000; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In addition, inclinations to encode into memory the negative aspects of events (e.g., Seidlitz & Deiner, 1993) and to dwell and reflect excessively on oneself and on one's problems (Lyubomirsky, Caldwell & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998; Lyubomirsky, Tucker, Caldwell, & Berg, 1999; Pierce et al., 1998) have been inversely related to well-being.

Finally, theoretical models of coping with stress or trauma (e.g., Folkman, 1997; Ryff et al., 1998; Taylor & Aspinwall, 1996) describe cognitive and motivational processes that people use- whether actively and consciously or through habit- in ways that appear to diminish distress and to enhance happiness. For example, studies reveal relatively greater well-being among people (a) who show positive illusions, that is, bolstered perceptions of themselves, their futures, and the extent of their control (e.g., Armor & Taylor, 1998; Scheier & Carver, 1993; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Armor, 1996), (b) who derive positive meaning from negative events (e.g., Folkman, 1997; McCrae & Costa, 1986; Taylor, 1983), (c) who use humour and spirituality and faith (e.g., Folkman, 1997; McCrae & Costa, 1986; Myers, 2000) in coping with adversity, (d) who do not engage in repetitive, self-focused rumination (e.g., Noel-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994), and (e) who use social comparisons in adaptive ways (e.g., Taylor & Lobel, 1989). [iv]

Research Evidence: Presenting, Analysing and Comparing the Cognitive Process of happy and unhappy people (Real life sketches)

Following are the examples of people who have pursued their dreams in-spite of obstacles and challenges. There grit, determination and strong belief system reflects their cognitive approach to situations, adversity and have bolstered perceptions of themselves, and their future.

Case I: Ira Singhal, IAS Topper (2014): A woman who was diagnosed with rarest spinal cord disorder during her childhood, struggled from getting an admission in a school to being accepted as civil servant, but it was her determination and her belief system which kept her going. She challenged the beliefs of discouraging people and situations, battled discrimination and conquered disability by her single minded perception of accepting herself as any other person who can dream, pursue and achieve their goals. If we observe closely, it was her positive perception, belief system, faith, attitude to cope with adversity that has made millions of people applaud her success and create inspiration for those in pursuit of one.

Case II: Sai Vishwanathan, Limca Book of Records and Consultant: Sai is one of those rarest individual who although suffers from disability, but his sheer grit to challenge the mindset of people who believe that their is a limitation attached with disability has evidently made him a torch bearer for many young people today. From pursuing a top notch competitive MBA with his determined efforts to conquering the depths, the heights and the breadths of terrains which only a strong hearted person can do, he has done it all. His adventures include his journey in harshest terrain of Antarctica, to deepest seas of Indian Ocean, to sky diving, all of it without much external financial support.

Case III: Vicky Roy, selected for a project to photograph the development of New York Twin Tower: A young poor boy who boarded a train from West Bengal to Delhi, without any shelter or means to avail one. He lived until 18 in an orphanage. He could study till 10th grade. He found interest in photography and after immense struggle and pursuit, a struggle which could break his dreams/faith any time, he got an

opportunity to showcase his work, and was accepted in British High Commission. After this, he got selected for a project to photograph the development of New York Twin towers. This success, after 11 years of leaving home is definitely a culmination of efforts and perception.

Case IV: Sapna Pooniya, Rajasthan, race walking Olympics entry from India: As a young girl she participated in racing and race walks at state level and later at national level. But after completing her education, she got married. Meanwhile she got selected in Police service. She had to leave her dream there as responsibilities grew and she had given birth to a son. But her heart still went out for race walk. She participated in a race walk competition held by police circle. Although she could not win, as she was out of practise, but her ability was recognised. Later she started her training, which was very rigorous and required her to practise away from her family. But her hard work and determination rewarded her. She won gold in 35th National games, became the first women from state to get gold in 5 km race walking in World Police Games held in USA, got fourth position in Asian Walking Championship organised in Nomi city of Japan and got qualified for Olympics in 2016.

Following are the examples of people who in-spite of very favourable situations could not perceive the situations positively or who in difficult phase could not communicate there feelings to there friend's or parents, and who eventually created disturbance in the lives of people around them and also in their own. Such people remain unhappy mostly and do not indulge in positive intentional activities or give up on life.

"Almost all painful feelings have their source in an incorrect way of looking at reality. When you uproot erroneous views, suffering ceases."—The Buddha, as written by Thich Nhat Hanh

Case I: Pratibha, Consultant with an IT company: She has grown up in a middle class family, but had very supportive parents and sister. She has a habit of comparing her parents status with those who are better of, neglecting the support she gets from them. Later when she got selected in a job, she complained about the manager and her team members, and alleged that all others were given unreasonable benefits. It was known that she would create fuss on small things and create a disturbing environment around her. She has got complains and negative notions from her parents to her colleagues, to the people she shares flat with and even her company. She as such has no friends, and mostly remains on her own, as people generally prefer to avoid her.

Case II: Saira Sirohi, 16 year old state level swimmer from Ghaziabad committed suicide**:** A student of humanities committed suicide a month before appearing for class XI exams. Her friends and teachers spoke of her highly and were shocked to hear the unfortunate news. Saira had won three gold medals at the CBSE National Championship and 110 national medals across different age categories. She had set a new record in the 50m breaststroke event. Although the reason behind her action is disputable but it is evident that she was under pressure from academic side. This case gives a peek into many such actions committed by youngsters who don't share there feelings, or consult elders, or themselves navigate out of difficult emotional situations.

While in our sampling of multiple cases where people reacted negatively or perceived negatively a situation or people in their life, we found certain common traits among such people such as: sensitivity to performance feedback, lack of interactions, lack of gratitude, rumination over uncontrollable situations and past decisions.

Accumulating evidence from above case studies, we can support the notion that happy and unhappy individuals differ in particular cognitive, judgemental and motivational strategies they use.

Finding Meaningfulness with Balance

A holistic view of life is critical to an ongoing level of happiness and meaning. One way to think about life holistically is to think in terms of the overlapping domains: lx

- Work/Career/School
- Home/Family
- Community/Society
- Self (Mind/Body/Spirit)

CONCLUSION

Through the cases mentioned above, of both positive and negative people, of happy and unhappy people, and of there actions, it is evident that situations can be moulded as per perception of an individual. A positive cognitive approach can create an environment of possibilities, contrary to a negative approach that can blind an individual's potential and create a disturbance in the environment around.

The cases considered here experienced scarcity of either resources, physical strength, or opportunities, despite which some individuals could steer past the obstacles, by focussing there belief system on a single distant source of hope and empowerment.

Intentional activity is dependent on cognitive process and motivational level. Consider a scenario where a person has to swim hard in rough waters to save himself, his perception can play a pivotal role in deciding his actions, which can either drive his emotions to put forward determined effort to reach the shore or can distress him, ultimately disabling him from reaching the shore. The observation reaffirms the message behind perception in the famous quote- *Some people see the glass half full, others see the glass half empty.*

"The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."
— *John Milton, Paradise Lost*

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