

The Happiness Industry Makes Me Sad

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I am all for being happy. Who isn't? But the happiness industry? That's another thing altogether.



[Photo Credit](#)

The happiness industrial complex promises that bliss will be found when we get our eating, exercise, sleep, journaling, weight, complexion, clothing, and all our Christmas shopping exactly right, including remembering our own reusable grocery sacks. And beyond the material routes to happiness, Amazon produces over 40,000 hits for “happiness self-help” books promising to assist us in finding fulfillment and becoming self-actualized. Our society is so obsessed with happiness there’s even a journal you can buy, for \$34, to keep track of the “best me.” With all the hype, I’m feeling like happiness is becoming another item on my to-do list; that can’t be what happiness is all about.

1. \$11 billion industry. Happiness has become the perfect consumer product. Best of all from the marketers’ perspective: you can never have too much. Is it money well spent? All indications are that paying for happiness is not working. The happiness industry – including self-help books, self-actualization retreats, and corporate expenditures promoting happiness – epitomized by Google’s [Jolly Good Fellow](#) – has exploded in the past decade. Unfortunately, the return on investment does not seem to be paying off in the US where [happiness has been falling over the same period of time](#).

2. The holy grail. The pursuit of happiness is as old as humankind, but the multi-billion dollar happiness industry is a new phenomenon that comes at a very high price. Can we really buy and consume happiness, just like champagne? And the idea that we are not well unless we are in a state of perpetual happiness is fundamentally flawed logic. [The data suggest](#) that the happiness industry is inadvertently contributing to a seedbed of dysphoria. In fact, [a recent study](#) indicated that people without any mental disorder make up a bigger percentage of those in therapy today. This is a complex data point, but at least in part, it suggests that people who are basically well are not happy.

3. Social media fans the flames. Is everyone else really happier than I am? A lot has been written about the negative effects of social media. One way that social media may be specifically contributing to unhappiness lies in the normal and healthy process of [social comparison](#) that gets skewed online. We are social animals, and we understand ourselves in social context. *What are the values and practices of my community? My family? What do my peers think and do and value? Who do I respect? What are the cultural messages about love and meaning and power?* These questions help us navigate our own paths in life. We have an extensive science on how we come to understand ourselves through this process of [social comparison](#). The problem is that online messaging is inherently narrow and biased – to the point of being dishonest – and from social media to online advertising, individuals and industry are in a happiness competition with every post.

4. Mental Health vs. Happiness. There is still an overabundance of fear and stigma associated with talking

about mental health. I see it in the many conversations I have had with private industry leaders who want to promote mental health at work. They know a healthy workforce is a good thing and that mental health problems are a leading cause of lost productivity, but they are concerned about alienating those they are trying to support if they talk about mental health too explicitly. I posit, however, that we have real, effective mental health interventions that produce real, effective returns on investment, and we will all benefit when we talk about and use them. I strongly believe that if industry leaders focus on mental health, it will be money well spent. When people are mentally healthy, they are able to engage more fully in all aspects of life, are more resilient, and are able to experience the range of human emotions, including happiness.

5. **Sadness serves.** Some of the happiness industry rhetoric sounds like a campaign driven to avoid feeling sad. Take [Subaru's campaign about "love"](#) for example. Like primary colors, we have [primary emotions](#), and sadness is one of them. Real mental health comes with the capacity to know and feel our primary emotions of happiness, fear, and anger along with sadness (remember the masterful representation of these basic human emotions in *Inside Out?*). To be mentally healthy, engaged, and caring members of society, [we need to know sadness](#) as much as we need to know happiness.

This is the season of wishes for happiness - for happy holidays and happy new years. I wish for all, myself included, much happiness. But more than that, and in the interest of mental health, my bigger wish is that we get the business of happiness in check to make room for the range of feelings that come with living life to its fullest, which will inevitably include real happiness (the kind that can't be purchased or found online).