

Cake and Punctuation: A Definition of Happiness

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At one point in the British television show *An Idiot Abroad*, the cranky presenter Karl said, “I say happiness is like having a cake. If you have a cake every day, you get sick of that cake. If you’re happy all the time, you get sick of being happy” (Pilkington, 2012). Happiness is certainly an elusive cultural concept. People use words like “happy” and “happiness” frequently—in statements like, “I just want to be happy”—but the meaning is ambiguous.

Exploration into the idea reveals the complexities and contradictions of happiness.

According to the *Oxford Dictionaries*, happiness is “the state of [feeling or showing pleasure or contentment]” (Happiness). If asked, many would likely give similar synonyms. However, the way the population uses the word happiness distinguishes it from other states of being, such as contentment. For example, Karl’s assertion that an individual can get sick of being happy suggests happiness is manic and circumstantial, an unsustainably heightened condition. The statement “I just want to be happy” similarly suggests happiness is an elusive feeling of pleasure associated with a set of desirable circumstances. Happiness requires smiles, laughter, and a carefree spirit, whereas contentment suggests appreciation and peace despite imperfect conditions. Surely, few could tire of feeling peace and desire internal agitation instead.

In this context, Karl has a point. Happiness functions best as a punctuation mark rather than a full essay. Happiness is the euphoria of a new relationship or the elation of a good grade; it stems from a day without responsibilities or a beautiful family moment. Part of happiness’s charm is its novelty. Humans appear to enjoy chasing moments of sheer pleasure, and without anticipation and contrast, happiness, as with any heightened sense, becomes tiring.

Happiness is not contentment. It does not supersede pain or undesirable circumstances in the way contentment can, and it is not balanced or consistent. The antonym of happiness is sadness, which suggests the two feelings lay on opposing ends of a spectrum. A subject can experience happiness in varying degrees and in relation to different circumstances, but he or she cannot experience happiness and sadness about one stimulus in the exact same moment. Some may say, "I am both happy and sad," but this statement reflects happiness at one element of a situation and sadness at a different element of the same situation. For example, a parent might make such a statement when his or her child graduates from high school. The parent might be pleased at the child's accomplishment and simultaneously sorrowful that the child will be moving away for college. The parent is not happy and sad, both heightened states, about one element.

Happiness is just one variety of pleasure. Sometimes individuals acknowledge this detail, as Karl does when he compares happiness to cake. Other times, entities obscure the nuances, making happiness synonymous with other kinds of pleasure. The *Oxford Dictionaries* equate happiness with contentment, but contentment has different cultural connotations: happiness is the exclamation point to contentment's essay.

References

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