

If One Life Breathes Easier...

First published in the January 2005 issue of *ESKOM NEWS*

As many people slowly traipse back to work after the summer break, office greetings tend to centre upon effusively wishing one another a 'Happy New Year'. While this is often done in a hail-fellow-well-met manner, do we really know what we mean when we wish our family and friends happiness or desire this state of mind for ourselves?

As far as words go, the term 'happy' seems to have gradually slid into the same realms of meaninglessness as other nondescript expressions like 'nice' or 'fine'. Yet happiness is something that human beings strive for. And it's far more than just a good feeling we experience. Happiness is the state that fills us with energy, so when we're happy we're more likely to achieve whatever it is we want. This sets up a pleasant productive cycle because the more we do the things that turn us on, the happier we become and the more energy we have.

Looking around it may be hard to believe that happiness is natural to the human condition. But it isn't something we need to be schooled in or something that takes years to learn. A child can experience it as easily as an adult. It can be spontaneous or contrived and by this I mean that we can do things that create happiness for ourselves. So if this is the case, how come there seems so little of it about?

The biggest problem most people have is that they have very little, if any, idea about what it is that will fulfil their annual wish of having a happy new year. If you don't spend much time thinking about it, take a moment now and really consider what happiness means to you. And if your return to work is not making you feel happy, what can you do to change this situation?

When in seminars I pose questions about what would make each delegate happy, the responses of some people have to do with material things - like more money or more goods - and others believe external changes - like a new house, a new husband or a new job - will be the answer. But while we may fantasise about how that new sedan is going to make us feel, realistically very few of the things that people believe will make them happy have the power to sustain this good feeling long term.

Sure it always feels great to take delivery of new things, but from past shopping experiences all of us know that the good feeling of a new pair of brogues or a new jacket is very short-lived. It's only advertising that sells the promise that an expensive watch, a stylish dress or fresh cologne will make us glow with happiness; just like the models who are paid a small fortune to manufacture those false smiles they are so cheerfully wearing.

In my previous article I briefly mentioned a new field of study called Positive Psychology, which focuses its research almost exclusively on upbeat notions like optimism and happiness. Interestingly, the founder of this movement, Martin Seligman (who confesses to have previously been a miserable old sod!) reveals some of the myths we hold about what it is that will make us happy. In his book *Authentic Happiness* he shows:

- Wealth, which brings with it more possessions, has a surprisingly low correlation with happiness levels. The rich are, on average, only slightly happier than poor people.
- Real income has risen dramatically in the prosperous nations over the last 50 years, but the level of life satisfaction has been entirely flat in the US and most other wealthy nations.
- Physical attractiveness (which like wealth, brings about any number of advantages) does not have much effect at all on happiness.
- Objective physical health, perhaps the most valuable of all resources, is barely correlated with happiness at all.
- The good things in life and high accomplishments have astonishingly little power to raise happiness more than fleetingly.
- In less than three months, life events (such as being fired or promoted) lose their impact on happiness levels – either way.

Allied to these surprising results is the finding that depression, the most chronic form of unhappiness, is ten times more prevalent in the world today than it was in the 1960's. And, if we don't change our ways, depression is predicted to be the number one most prevalent non-contagious disease by the year 2020.

Seligman shows that depression is increasing because in constantly striving to get our 'thrills', we are taking too many short cuts. This means we're depriving ourselves of the satisfaction that is brought about from overcoming real challenges in life. Instead of pushing our own boundaries and truly testing our abilities, we're trawling the mall or passively flattening our bottoms in the cinema.

Equally so there are no short cuts to attaining happiness. So if more money, improved looks, better health, good living and bigger accomplishments are not doing it for us, then perhaps we'd better restructure our life habits around what it is that makes human beings happy. But, before moving on, please don't get me wrong ... I'm not against having money or material things, for if I am going to be unhappy, I'd rather be rich in my misery than poor!

But instead of a life-long focus on 'Me! Me! Me!' true life-satisfaction, fulfilment and a deep feeling of happiness come from what we do for other people. This is not to say that their gratitude is the key that turns our happiness on (because the thanks may not happen) but moreover the satisfaction from knowing that our lives matter.

So rather than looking at what we haven't got or stressing about getting more of what we want, consider how you can increase your ability to make a difference to other people's lives. This doesn't mean having to make a contribution to masses of people - as said by the great philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson; "To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived... that is to have succeeded".

Stephanie Vermeulen of *The Effective Training Corporation* runs practical training programmes on Applied EQ in business and public forums as well as being an inspiring conference speaker and personal coach.

Her books, *Stitched-up: Who Fashions Women's Lives?* and *EQ: Emotional Intelligence for Everyone* are available from all leading bookstores and online from Amazon and Kalahari. She can be contacted on:

Phone: +27 11 486 1211
e-mail: steph@theeqsite.co.za
website: www.theeqsite.co.za