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Why Your Idea Of Success Might Be Making You Miserable

We may be squeamish around talk of building “moral character.” But ethical behaviors might make us happier than productive ones.



[PHOTO: EVERETT COLLECTION VIA [SHUTTERSTOCK](#)]

BY DAVID MAYER

People desire excellence. We want to be healthier, well-liked, and successful. So we soak up articles instructing us how to [get promoted](#), [be more productive](#), and [become better liked](#). We read books like [Charles Duhigg's recent *Smarter Faster Better*](#) in order to learn what science can tell us about becoming more productive and, generally speaking, successful. But science also tells us that these common measures of success—productivity, efficiency, and professional achievement—don't reliably make us *happy*, at least not in

the long run. However, there may be ways to turn some of the habit-based practices we're so keen to brush up on into methods for improving our happiness.

WHAT ACTUALLY MAKES US HAPPY

Author Emma Seppälä examines this conundrum in her book [*The Happiness Track*](#), showing how our search for success doesn't just fail to address but often *thwarts* our happiness. Focusing on future success, she writes, is a surefire way to be discontent in the present, according to studies showing that compassion, rather than self-interest, more often leads to joy. There's intriguing brain [research](#), for instance, finding that the brain's pleasure centers are activated when we're kind to others, rather than when we focus on personal goals.

Similarly, [spending money on others](#) rather than ourselves has also been found to make us happier. This "giving is better than receiving" effect is [even found in infants](#). As the psychologist Dacher Keltner argues in [Born to Be Good](#), our prewired desire to be compassionate—doing things that show care for others—leads us to experience meaning. And while there's robust support for the role of moral behavior in generating happiness and meaning, there's virtually no evidence that material gains or improved efficiency or productivity do the same.

So what's a success-driven overachiever to do? This is hardly a novel dilemma. Everything inside us (and much without) says to do *more*. To be more efficient. To be more effective. To gain more status. People we respect at work and in life have achieved so much, and we'd like to do the same. And it's true that we gain some of our sense of self from our work successes. Yet now research is telling us there may be a downside to many of the efforts that lead to them.

ADVERTISING

REDEFINING SUCCESS

Fortunately, we can be successful and have happiness and meaning if we adjust our notion of excellence—of what it is to succeed. The term has fallen out of use, but what was once called "moral excellence"—meaning simply, being the best person one can possibly be—might be a helpful guide. As Seppälä and fellow scientists are now learning, efforts toward personal

improvement can have wonderful side effects, including joy and happiness, as long as they're geared toward the right things.

Form of the pages.

TEMPERANCE.

Eat not to dullness ; drink not to elevation.

	Sun.	M.	T.	W.	Th.	F.	S.
Tem.							
Sil.	*	*		*		*	
Ord.	*	*			*	*	*
Res.		*				*	
Fru.		*				*	
Ind.			*				
Sinc.							
Jus.							
Mod.							
Clea.							
Tran.							
Chas.							
Hum.							

That's something Benjamin Franklin understood—and tried to tackle scientifically. In 1726, at age 20, he created a system to develop his moral character, which involved highlighting [13 virtues](#) and using a simple chart (like the one above, to help him avoid alcohol) to meticulously track his adherence to them. Franklin put down a dot each time he violated a virtue. He began to notice that he needed his pen less and less often with each passing week. “Though I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it,” Franklin wrote in his autobiography, “yet I was, by the endeavor, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it.”

The beauty of books like Duhigg's and Seppälä's is that, while they focus on different ideas of success, both remind us how powerful habits and practices can be in determining what and how much we can achieve. Yet the key is to not let the allure of achievement deviate too far from an ultimate objective—

one that, as Franklin discovered, is more an ideal to strive toward than a goal to clinch.

Management researchers [Erik Dane and Scott Sonenshein](#) argue that much the way we can develop skills, we can also develop “moral excellence.” Nor does that have to mean for us the same things it meant for Franklin. However we choose to define being a good person (or becoming a better one), this psychological finding is potentially pretty revolutionary, refuting the idea that your character is more or less fixed by adulthood.

The psychologist Carol Dweck has written extensively about the power of a “growth mind-set”—the personal belief that you can continue to develop. This concept typically applies to performance and, subsequently, often appears in conversations about productivity and effectiveness, but there’s no reason it can’t apply to less conventionally “practical” behaviors, like our ethics. Those who believe that hard work and diligence can actually lead to moral growth—for instance, becoming more compassionate—are more likely to actually build the skills that enable it. And by consequence, they’re more likely to experience its greatest fruits: happiness and meaning.

FOUR SIMPLE HABITS THAT CAN MAKE YOU HAPPIER

Here are a few tips to get started:

Unlike mastering a skill, these ethical behaviors, as Franklin found out, are impossible to ever nail.

1. Think small. It may feel ridiculous, outdated, or overly ambitious to think about “moral excellence,” which might bring to mind all-consuming, monumental acts or of people like Mother Theresa. But as Franklin believed, small daily acts matter. You may not agree with him that “temperance” is a virtue, but other modest behaviors do have an impact on happiness. [Sonja Lymburosky](#) has found that small acts of generosity enhance feelings of happiness. Smile and make someone feel acknowledged. Listen well. Open a door for someone. Thinking about everyday decisions in moral terms—whatever those may be to you—can help you improve.

2. Build your moral muscles. You’ve got to be intentional about it. And unlike the types of skills we hone at work in order to achieve the usual type of success, doing “good” when nobody is watching will have no material outcome. Yet being ethical and compassionate when you don’t have to be can have a powerful identity-affirming impact that can bring joy and meaning to

your life. Drop the change the cashier handed you into the tip jar. Donate anonymously to a cause you care about. Let someone pass in front of you on the highway.

3. Avoid perfectionism. The goal of striving for moral excellence isn't about becoming a perfect person. Unlike [mastering a skill](#), these ethical behaviors, as Franklin found out, are impossible to ever nail. The goal is simply improvement. Ask yourself, am I a slightly better person today than I was yesterday? If the answer is yes, and you've defined that on terms that square with your values, then you're doing great.

4. Don't expect praise. [Research by Benoit Monin](#) shows that we're often prone to reacting defensively to others' good deeds—a phenomenon he terms the “rejection of moral rebels.” Being nice to somebody can actually make them resent you for it. If that happens, brush it off. Your focus should be on *you* and *your* core values, not how others perceive you in the short term.

Just [take it from Aristotle](#): “Moral excellence comes about as a result of habit. We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, and brave by doing brave acts.”

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