

Work, Happiness, and Unhappiness

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There has been a growing recognition of the importance of mental health in the workplace. Most of our adult life is spent at work and, thus, work has become one of the key determinants to our health and happiness. Happiness in the workplace is beneficial not only to the employees but also to the employers, organizations, our community and our society.

Stress, unhappiness and psychological distress in the workplace have been associated with lost productivity, decreased work performance, increased risk of accidents, relationship conflicts at work, increased absenteeism, increased presenteeism, sick leave, short term or long term disability, burnout, increased job turnover rates, various health conditions, and increased disability and health care costs.

The book "*Work, Happiness, and Unhappiness*" by Peter Warr (2007) has arrived at a perfect time!

Peter Warr, Psychologist, Emeritus Professor, Institute of Work Psychology at the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom, has received the Spearman Medal of the British Psychological Society for distinguished research as well as the Presidents' Award of the British Psychological Society for outstanding contributions to psychological knowledge. This high-quality book is illustrative evidence of the talented and outstanding work by this award-winning Psychologist.

Warr (2007) has done an exceptional job in his book *Work, Happiness, and Unhappiness* in discussing the nature and measurement of happiness, including appreciating and recognizing the various aspects of happiness; identifying the primary aspects of an environment that influence people, "environment-centered" approach, and the "person-centered" approach to the study of happiness, including consideration for "person-environment fit"; and the importance of understanding the consequences of happiness and unhappiness at work.

Warr has elegantly shown the demographic and personality variables and cultural differences throughout the book. Extensive literature reviews are provided throughout the chapters, showing the author's commitment to research, science and to evidence-based approach.

By discussing the interrelationships among work, happiness and unhappiness, in addition to outlining the key mediating and moderating factors, the author helps the reader to comprehend and appreciate the complex nature of this topic.

This book is elegantly written and very well structured. Chapter 1 describes work and its implications; the psychologists' views of the nature of happiness and measurement of the two principal aspects of happiness, well-being and self-validation. The primary question of the book is "*Why are some people at work happier or unhappier than others?*" A comprehensive answer such as "*people at work are happier if their jobs contain features that are generally desirable and if their own characteristics and mental processes encourage the presence of happiness*" is developed in the book.

Chapter 2 details the nature and measurement of happiness as well-being and self-validation. Three levels of scope of subjective well-being are described: "context-free" well-being, which involves an evaluation of life as a whole without restriction to a particular setting;

“domain-specific” well-being, which relates to experiences to one part of life space such as job, family, or health, with job-related well-being being the primary focus of the book; and “facet-specific” well-being, which focuses on one particular aspect of a domain such as income received from employment. Concepts related to happiness as well-being are described such as emotion, mood, attitude, quality of life, stress and mental health. Psychologists’ description and measurement of happiness as self-validation is also viewed, highlighting that happiness cannot only be defined in terms of pleasure but also the involvement of activities that we perceive as being worthwhile or meet certain standards.

Chapter 3 moves on to describe the impact of unemployment and retirement on happiness and unhappiness by looking at the interaction between environment and the person. Various moderator variables are highlighted, including employment commitment, age, financial pressures, duration of unemployment/retirement, state of health, local unemployment/retirement rate, and social relationships.

Chapter 4 outlines the principal environmental characteristics associated with happiness, including opportunity for personal control, opportunity for skill use, externally generated goals, variety, environmental clarity, contact with others, availability of money, physical security, and valued social position. Warr posits that environmental features and happiness are not related in a linear fashion and provides a very creative and helpful analogy to describe the nature of the relationship between environment and happiness, the *Vitamin Analogy*. “*Vitamins are important for physical health up to but not beyond a certain level, after which there is no benefit from additional quantities. Furthermore, certain vitamins become harmful in very large quantities, so that in those cases the association between increased vitamin intake and physical health becomes negative after a broad range of moderate amounts*” (pages 15-16).

Using the vitamin analogy, Chapter 5 examines the relation of happiness with six of the key features in job settings that are expected to have “constant effect” across high levels, including availability of money, physical security, valued social position, supportive supervision, career outlook, and equity. Chapters 6 and 7 examine the relation of happiness with the other six environmental features that are believed to have a psychological harmful effect at very high levels, including opportunity for personal control, opportunity for skill use, externally generated goals, variety, environmental clarity, and contact with others.

Chapter 8 discusses the combination of job features and their combined influence on happiness. Measurement and causal patterns are explored drawing on longitudinal studies. Very interestingly, the chapter also describes profiles of psychologically bad work and psychologically good work drawing on the vitamin framework.

Chapters 9 to 13 illustrate the person-centered approach to the study of happiness. Chapter 9 examines the social and judgmental influences on happiness. Ten types of mental process or judgments are viewed, including mental comparisons with other people, with other situations, and with other times, and assessment of personal salience, self-efficacy and novelty or familiarity.

Chapter 10 describes the differences between sets of people, specifically, cultural differences, demographic differences, and occupational differences on happiness. The demographic features look at gender and age differences. The occupational differences examine full-time and part-time employees and permanent and temporary employees.

Chapter 11 examines research on personality influences on happiness, the inheritance of happiness, and at the combined effect of personality traits and job features. The chapter studies

the interesting question of “are certain kinds of people more exposed than others to particular features in the environment?”

Chapter 12 investigates the moderating effect of personal salience in the association of environmental features with happiness. Chapter 13 examines the moderating effect of occupational values in the association of job characteristics and happiness. The occupational values include: desire for autonomy and influence; desire for skill use; desire for goals and challenge; desire for variety; need for clarity; concern for social relationships; desire for money; concern for physical comfort and security; desire for a significant role; desire for supervisory support; concern about career outlook; and concern for fairness.

Chapter 14 explores the consequences of happiness or unhappiness on behavior. Some consequences that are studied include job performance; associated thoughts and behaviors; absence from work; and staff turnover.

This is an excellent and a comprehensive book and a must read book for those in the area of Industrial/Organizational/Occupational/Clinical Psychology, Management, and Human Resources. I would also strongly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in the area of mental health in the workplace.

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