Psychology 987i: The Science of Happiness
Spring, 2002  Thursdays 1-3PM
MBB 42 Church St Room 227

Instructor: Dr. Nancy Etcoff (Harvard Medical School)
Telephone: 617-726-5574
Email: Etcoff@mediaone.net

Office Hour: Thursdays 3-4:30 pm at 42 Church St; other times by Appointment.

Office: MGH East, Room 9121
Building 149 – 13th Street
Charlestown MA 02129

Required Texts:


Supplementary Reading Packet – Individual Articles are listed below.

Course Requirements:

Each student will be required to make a 30 minute class presentation, and write a 20-30 page paper. The topic of the paper must be approved by the instructor. The paper may be in one of two formats, either a critical review of a topic within the science of happiness or a detailed proposal for original research on a specific hypothesis within the science of happiness. The latter would include a detailed background, proposed methods and statistics and a discussion of possible findings. Grading will be based on the class presentation (25%), class participation (15%), and the paper (60%).

A significant portion of the grade depends on oral participation. If a student wishes to take this course but finds oral participation difficult, he or she must come to see me after the first class to discuss an alternate arrangement for grading.
Course Description

This course focuses on the science of happiness, integrating findings from positive psychology, psychiatry, behavioral genetics, neuroscience and behavioral economics. Over the course of the semester, we will consider the genetics of happiness, including the notion of a biologically determined hedonic set point, the brain’s pleasure circuitry, and the mind’s power to frame events positively, a tool used with great success in cognitive therapies. We will question an idea that has gained prevalence since the Enlightenment: that pleasure and happiness are our purpose.

Schedule of Classes

January 31
Introduction:
Among the questions considered:
*How do we define happiness?*
*Is happiness what matters most?*
*Why study happiness; isn’t suffering more important?*
*Does greater happiness come from pleasure or from acts of kindness?*

Handouts:
Robert Nozick from *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 1974 (pp 42-43)

February 7
Compared to what? How to measure happiness
Reading: Chapter 1 Myers
     Chapters 1,3,4 Kahneman, Diener, Schwartz

February 14
Love and Happiness: In which we consider why people are so ecstatic when they fall in love, whether marriage makes men and women equally happy, and the pleasures of solitude.
Reading: Chapters 8,9 Myers
     Chapters 18,19 Kahneman, Diener, Schwartz
Supplemental Reading:

February 21
Genes and Personality Traits: Is happiness hard won or heritable?
Reading: Chapter 6 Myers
     Chapters 11, 15 Kahneman, Diener, Schwartz
Supplemental Reading:
David Lykken and Auke Tellegen: Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon
*Psychological Science*, 7, 1996, 186-189

**February 28**
The Brain’s Reward Pathways. Or why you can’t get no satisfaction
Readings: Chapters 25, 26, 27 Kahneman, Diener, Schwartz

**March 7**
Consuming Happiness I: Drugs. In which we consider why people all through recorded history
want to get high, and whether you can get “better than well” by prescription.

**GUEST SPEAKER**  Dr. David Lenson, Professor of Comparative Literature,
University of Massachusetts, Amherst, author of *On Drugs*.

Readings: Supplemental
Sadie Plant. Chapters 2,3,4  Artificial Paradises, Unconscious, White lines.
*Writing on Drugs*, 2000.

**March 14**
Contagious Happiness: Smiles and Laughter
Readings:
Supplemental
Charles Darwin, Chapter 8 (Joy, High, Spirits, Love, Tender Feelings, Devotion)

**March 21**
Happiness and Culture: In which we will ponder whether or not the East and West have alternate
notions of happiness, and why people in Iceland are so happy.

Readings: Diener and Suh, Chapters 2, 4, 5, 6, 10

**April 4**
1.Age and Gender and Happiness: Women are much more likely than men to suffer from
depression. Does that mean that men are happier? Are we generally happier when young or old?
And why are teenagers so miserable?

Readings: Myers, Chapter 4
Diener and Suh, chapter 11
Kahneman, Diener, and Schwartz, chapter 17

2. Consuming happiness II: Wealth, employment and the general issue of whether money can buy happiness
Readings: Diener and Suh Chapter 8
Myers, Chapter 2
Review Chapter 18 in Kahneman, Diener, and Schwartz
Supplemental:

April 11
Pleasures of the Body: where we consider the relation of pleasure to happiness, and why sex is fun and chocolate tastes good.

Readings: Kahneman, Diener, and Schwartz Chapter 6
Supplemental:

April 18
Pleasures of the Mind: where we consider curiosity, creativity, and contemplation.
Readings: Chapter 7, Myers
Chapters 7 Kahneman, Diener, and Myers

April 25
Pleasures of the Heart and Soul: where we consider awe, transcendence, aesthetic bliss, gratitude, and compassion.
Readings: Chapter 10, Myers
Supplemental Reading: Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt. Approaching Awe, a moral, spiritual and aesthetic emotion. In press.

May 2 FINAL CLASS
In which we re-examine the questions we raised in January.