# Self-Acceptance and Happiness

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The nature of happiness and the good life have preoccupied people for millennia, and the idea that what matters is not just to live, but to *live well* has been central to both Eastern and Western thought (Kesebir & Diener, 2008). Democritus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics and Epicureans were the first Western philosophers to ponder over the nature of happiness, inaugurating a tradition that has spanned over the centuries into the twenty-first century. Philosophical treatments of this issue have been predominant for a long time (Kesebir & Diener). However, more recently, it has become the subject of intense scientific scrutiny, as behavioral and social sciences have begun to devote increased attention to this topic (Kesebir & Diener; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Interest in happiness and wellbeing is particularly prominent in psychology (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Although, during much of the last century, the focus on alleviating suffering and reducing psychopathology has overshadowed the study of happiness and wellbeing, a shift towards them can be seen in the 1960s, peaking

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with the positive psychology movement in the late 1990s (Ryan & Deci; Seligman, 2000). Indeed, positive psychology was conceptualized as having three major concerns: (a) positive subjective experiences; (b) positive individual traits; (c) institutions that foster positive subjective experiences and adaptive individual traits (Robins, 2008; Seligman, 2000).

Current approaches to the study of happiness in psychology fall into two overlapping, but separate categories, revolving around distinct philosophies: the hedonic view and the eudaimonic view (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). Before analyzing the role of self-acceptance in happiness, we briefly review these approaches and their main contributions to the field. Following the lead of prominent authors, throughout this chapter, we use the concepts of happiness and wellbeing interchangeably.

## Happiness as Enjoyment: The Hedonic Approach

The term *hedonism* derives from the Greek word *hêdonê*, pleasure (White, 2006). This perspective equates happiness with the positive affect resulting from getting the material goods one wishes to possess or from the action opportunities one wishes to experience (Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). Conceptualizing happiness as pleasure has a long history. In Plato's dialogue named after him, the Greek sophist *Gorgias* (fifth century BC) appears to indicate that happiness consists in getting whatever one wants, and that this is "the greatest good" (White, 2006). This view, not supported by Plato, was adopted by his contemporary, Aristippus of Cyrene, pupil of Socrates and founder of the Cyrenaic school of philosophy, who argued that "No considerations should restrain one in the pursuit of pleasure, for everything other than pleasure is unimportant, and virtue is least important of all" (Tatarkiewicz, 1976, p. 317). Popular versions of these ideas can later be found in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jeremy Bentham.

Psychologists who endorse the hedonic view have usually adopted a broad view of hedonism, which includes physical and psychological desires and pleasures and involves judgments about a variety of elements of life (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Research in this paradigm has mainly used *subjective wellbeing* (SWB) (Diener, 1984) as a measure of happiness (Kesebir & Diener, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001). SWB is a combination of the hedonic approach with the so-called life-satisfaction approach (Kristjánsson, 2010). It reflects a general evaluation of a person's life, and involves the following major components: *life satisfaction* (global and domain-related), *positive affect* (i.e., the prevalence of positive emotions and moods), and *negative affect* (i.e., low levels of negative emotions and moods) (Diener, Napa Scollon, & Lucas, 2003; Kesebir & Diener, 2008).

This line of study has offered important insights into age-old questions concerning the determinants and effects of happiness (Haybron, 2000). Thus, data seem to indicate that there is a genetically determined set point for happiness (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Based on twin and adoption studies, it has been

concluded that the heritability of wellbeing is as high as 50 % (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Changes in life circumstances (both positive and negative) have a limited impact on people's levels of happiness over the long run, accounting for about 10 % of an individual's happiness level (Diener, Lucas, & Napa Scollon, 2006; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). The remaining 40 % is explained by intentional activity, particularly associated with the pursuit of personal goals (Lyubomirsky et al.).

## Happiness Beyond Enjoyment: The Eudaimonic Approach

The eudaimonic perspective intimately links happiness to virtue (McMahon, 2004). Similar to hedonism, it can also be traced back to classical Greek philosophy, where it received its most notable treatment in Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics, written in 350 BC (McMahon). Aristotle rejects the Cyrenaic perspective. A significant part of the Nichomachean Ethics is concerned with rebutting the idea that happiness consists of satisfying one's desires. Essential to his view is the idea of striving towards excellence based on one's unique potential (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Rather than being concerned with pleasure, Aristotle was interested in *self-realization* as the highest good towards which people should be striving, expressed in the selection and pursuit of life goals based on one's true nature (*daimon*) (Norton, 1976; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Waterman et al., 2008). Similar ideas can be found much later in the writings of John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

The state of eudaimonia has also been an important issue in psychology. Human flourishing and self-realization were fundamental for both Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers (Huta, 2013; Robins, 2008). Among more recent developments of the eudaimonic perspective are the *psychological wellbeing* (*PWB*) *model* (Ryff & Singer, 1998, 2000, 2008), the *self-determination theory* (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and the positive psychology approach to happiness (Seligman, 2002, 2011).

## The Integration of the Hedonic and Eudaimonic Views: Positive Psychology

During the last decade, professionals embracing positive psychology have been among the most important advocates of the need of studying human happiness, conditions that lead to it, and ways in which it can be developed and maintained (Seligman, 2000). The hedonic and the eudaimonic approach are both present in positive psychology (Jørgensen & Nafstad, 2004). The most influential theory of happiness in the field, developed by Martin Seligman (2002, 2011), one of the founding fathers of positive psychology, draws heavily on Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia although it is, in fact, a combination of the two perspectives.

In his book, *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman (2002) describes three types of happy lives: *the pleasant life* (hedonic perspective), *the good life* (eudaimonic and hedonic perspective), *and the meaningful life* (eudaimonic perspective). The pleasant life is mainly about positive emotions and is defined as: "life that successfully pursues the positive emotions about the present, past and future" (Seligman, p. 262). Thus, in contrast to Diener's (2000) SWB model, which emphasizes both the lack of negative emotions and the presence of positive ones as necessary to happiness, Seligman's theory focuses only on positive emotions.

The good life is about positive traits, most importantly *strengths and virtues* (see Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). In Seligman's words, it is "using your signature strengths to obtain abundant gratification in the main realms of one's life" (p. 262). A good life cannot be attained as a permanent state, but is a continuous development of the individual's strengths and values (Jørgensen & Nafstad, 2004).

The most complex form of happy life is the meaningful life, which has to do with things that transcend the individual. It is defined by "using your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are" (Seligman, 2002, p. 263).

In his 2011 book, *Flourish*: *A visionary new understanding of happiness and wellbeing*, Seligman advances a new version of the theory which, in addition to *positive emotions* (i.e., pleasant life), *engagement* (i.e., good life), and *meaning* (i.e., meaningful life), presents *relationships* and *achievement* as being essential conditions to flourishing.

Seligman's theory of happiness thus represents a combination of the hedonic and eudaimonic views. Other authors have also supported the attempts of combining these two major perspectives into a comprehensive psychological image of human happiness (see Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

## Refinement of the Integrated Perspective: "Rational" and "Irrational" Happiness

Martin Seligman has called Albert Ellis, founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), an "unsung hero of positive psychology." Indeed, in addition to his preoccupation with the development, maintenance, and treatment of emotional problems, Ellis was deeply interested in what made people happy and in how happiness could be achieved (Bernard, 2011). Titles of some of his most popular books are a reflection of this interest: *A Guide to Personal Happiness* (Ellis & Becker, 1982); *How to Make Yourself Happy and Remarkably Less Disturbable* (Ellis, 1999); *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything—Yes*, *Anything* (Ellis, 1988); *A Guide to Successful Marriage* (Ellis & Harper, 1961); *How to Raise an Emotionally Healthy*, *Happy Child* (Ellis, Wolfe, & Moseley, 1966).

According to Ellis, REBT has two major goals: to help people overcome their disturbances and to help them self-actualize, become fully functioning, and happy:

> [REBT] primarily deals with disturbed human evaluations, emotions and behaviors. It is rational and scientific but uses rationality and science to enable humans to live and be happy. It is hedonistic, but it espouses long-range instead of short-term hedonism so that people may achieve the pleasure of the moment and of the future, and may arrive at maximum freedom and discipline (Ellis & Dryden, 1997, p. 5).

Ellis thus distinguishes two types of happiness—both of which people are encouraged to pursue—*short-term satisfaction* and *long-term fulfillment* (see also Ellis & Harper, 1975; Bernard, 2011). Short-term happiness is defined in terms of feelings of pleasure, which can be achieved through active involvement in a wide range of activities (Bernard; Ellis & Becker, 1982). Long-term happiness is also conceptualized as positive emotions, resulting from the fulfillment of individual potential, striving towards excellence and self-actualization (Bernard, 2011; Ellis, 1973, 1988). It involves a choice, an active quest, and it is intimately related to goals: "according to REBT theory, humans are happiest when they establish important life goals and purposes, and actively strive to attain these" (Ellis & Dryden, 1997, p. 4). In this context, Ellis differentiates between having the *will* and having the *willpower* to pursue happiness (Bernard, 2011; Ellis, 1999). While having the will refers to making the choice, expressing the decision of working towards being happy, having the willpower is harder, and it involves persisting in trying to reach a goal, taking the appropriate actions doing them again and again, until the goal is reached (Ellis).

As there is no universal road to wellbeing, each person must establish his or her goals in accordance with his or her preferences and talents. However, in Ellis' view, long-term happiness is very likely to be related to the pursuit and achievement of goals that reduce emotional pain and maximize comfort and pleasure, and that lead to profound and satisfying relationships and excellence at work and other activities (Bernard, 2011).

In relation to happiness, even more important than the content of our goals is whether they are formulated in *rational or irrational* terms. The emphasis on the importance of *how* we wish for something, in addition to *what* we wish for is a major, often neglected, contribution of REBT to the understanding of happiness. This is a key distinction that does not appear in other approaches, and allows for a differentiation between what could be called *rational and irrational happiness*.

According to REBT, cognitions, emotions, and behaviors are highly interconnected, with cognitions, more specifically evaluative cognitions, playing a major role in the generation of our feelings and actions (Ellis, 1988; Ellis & Dryden, 1997). A distinction is made between two types of evaluative cognitions: rational and irrational. Ellis maintains that both these thinking patterns, the self-enhancing (i.e., rationality) and self-defeating (i.e., irrationality), are biologically based, not just the result of interacting with a particular environment (Ellis, 1988; Ellis & Dryden, 1997; Bernard, 2011). Thus, in addition to the self-actualizing tendency that Rogers and Maslow talk about, human beings are also characterized by a natural self-defeating tendency, one that they can, however, learn to control. This assumption of a biologically based predisposition for rationality/irrationality is interesting to look at in light of the findings regarding the genetic basis of happiness.

The core of rationality is the preferential (non-absolutistic) formulation of our goals and desires. Associated with preferential thinking are three other rational beliefs: frustration tolerance, non-awfulizing, and unconditional acceptance. Unconditional acceptance involves acceptance of self (i.e., unconditional self-acceptance (USA)), of others (i.e., unconditional other-acceptance), and of life (i.e., unconditional life-acceptance) (Dryden, Neenan, & Yankura, 1999). A person thinking in rational terms will experience feelings of pleasure and satisfaction when his or her goals and desires are met, and feelings of dissatisfaction when they are not met. These negative feelings (i.e., functional negative feelings) will be healthy, normal responses to negative events, will not prevent the person from attaining his or her goals, and will not prevent the experiencing of positive emotions associated with other goals (Ellis & Dryden, 1997).

The core of irrationality is the absolutistic (dogmatic) formulation of one's goals and desires. Resulting from it are three other irrational thinking tendencies: low frustration tolerance, awfulizing, and global evaluation. In this case, when a person's goals and desires are not met, he or she will have unhealthy (i.e., dysfunctional) negative feelings that interfere with goal attainment and with experiencing positive emotions associated with other goals (Ellis & Dryden, 1997).

Rational thinking is central to the REBT theory of happiness, while irrational thinking is central to the theory of unhappiness and psychopathology. REBT thus advances the idea of rational/irrational happiness, advocating that the way our goals and desires are formulated is equally important as their content and their attainment. The flexible, non-absolutistic formulation of goals promotes wellbeing even if and when they cannot be reached.

This perspective leads to a view of negative emotions consistent with the eudaimonic approach which maintains that, under certain conditions, having negative emotions is more reflective of healthy functioning than not having them or avoiding them (Ryan & Deci). REBT goes one step further, distinguishing between *functional negative emotions*, resulting from rational beliefs, and considered adaptive reactions to negative events, and *dysfunctional negative emotions*, generated by irrational thinking, which have a significant deleterious impact on adaptation and wellbeing. Moreover, from this perspective, positive emotions can also be problematic. When activating events confirm our irrationally formulated desires, we experience *dysfunctional positive emotions*. They are dysfunctional because they reinforce their underlying irrational beliefs. For example, the belief "I must absolutely only get good grades" will generate a (dysfunctional) positive emotion if the person does get a good grade, but the same belief will lead to a (dysfunctional) negative emotion if he or she does not get the grade he or she demands he or she should get.

All of the above things considered, we believe REBT theory offers some valuable insights to be considered by the positive psychology perspective on happiness. Regarding *pleasant life*, an important thing is that not all behaviors associated with positive emotions are adaptive. Pleasant feelings may arise from behaviors that are dysfunctional on the short or long run. Also, positive emotions themselves can be dysfunctional, if they are the result and contribute to the maintenance of irrational beliefs (Ellis, 1994).

When we talk about the *good life*, a key issue, besides goals that allow the expression of individual strengths, is how these goals are formulated. An irrational formulation of our desires, in terms of demands, will result in dysfunctional negative feelings when desires are not met, and in dysfunctional positive feelings, when they are met (Ellis, 1994). We must thus strive towards a rational formulation of our goals.

Finally, a rational perspective on the *meaningful life* draws attention to the fact that values people choose to adhere to should also be endorsed in a non-absolutistic, nondogmatic way, in order to be able to accept self and others, and be free of dysfunctional negative feelings (Ellis, 1994).

The so-called *Decalogue of Rationality* below summarizes REBT insights into wellbeing in a format that can be easily used with clients (see David, 2006). It comprises rational ways of thinking about the self, others, and life that lead to functional emotional and behavioral consequences.

**The Decalogue of Rationality (David, 2006)**

1. IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE to succeed at everything you do, and do everything humanly possible to succeed, BUT IF YOU DON'T, it does not mean that you are a worthless human being; it only means that you've had a less efficient behavior, which can probably be improved in the future. As a human being, you are valuable by the mere fact that you exist. Therefore, it's good to unconditionally accept yourself, which does not imply that you also have to unconditionally accept your failures without at least trying to correct them, as much as humanly possible

2. IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE to succeed at everything you do, and do everything humanly possible to succeed, BUT IF YOU DON'T, remember that it's just (very) bad, not catastrophic (the worse thing that could happen to you), and that you can find joy in other activities, even if it's not easy in the beginning. No matter how bad is the thing that's happened to you, it's not the worse thing that could happen!

3. IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE to succeed at everything you do, and do everything humanly possible to succeed, BUT IF YOU DON'T, you can take/tolerate this, and you can go on, finding joy in other activities, even if it's not easy in the beginning.

4. IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE that the others be fair and/or nice to you, BUT IF THEY ARE NOT, it doesn't mean that you or they are worthless human beings; it only means that they've had an inadequate behavior, which, in principle, can be changed in the future. The others are valuable as human beings by the mere fact they exist. Therefore, it's good to unconditionally accept them, which does not imply that you also have to unconditionally accept their inadequate behaviors without trying, as much as humanly possible, to help them correct these behaviors.

(continued)

5. IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE that the others be fair and/or nice to you, BUT IF THEY ARE NOT, remember that it's just (very) bad, not catastrophic (the worse thing that could happen), and that you can find joy in other activities, even if it's not easy in the beginning.

6. IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE that the others be fair and/or nice to you, BUT IF THEY ARE NOT, you can take/tolerate this, and you can go on, finding joy in other activities, even if it's not easy in the beginning.

7. IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE that life be generally fair (to you and/or the others) and pleasant/easy, BUT IF IT'S NOT, it does not mean that life is unfair and that you are a worthless human being. Life is a mixture of good and bad, and we should try to maximize (if possible) and/or see the good parts, and reduce (if possible) and/or learn from the bad ones.

8. IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE that life be generally fair (to you and/or the others) and pleasant/easy, BUT IF IT'S NOT, remember that it's just (very) bad, not catastrophic (the worse thing that could happen), and that you can find joy in specific activities, even if it's not easy in the beginning.

9. IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE that life be generally fair (to you and/or the others) and pleasant/easy, BUT IF IT'S NOT, you can take/tolerate this, and you can go on, finding joy in specific activities, even if it's not easy in the beginning.

10. THE ONLY MUST—even though it's conditional, non-absolutistic: only if you wish to be healthy and happy—IS THAT NOTHING MUST. The fact that you really wish for something, and that you do everything humanly possible to attain it, does not mean that it must absolutely happen. In other words, it's good to understand and accept that it is not written anywhere that our desires, be them intense and justified by the effort invested in them, must come true, just because we wish and fight for this. Only God's requirements/desires can mandatorily acquire ontological reality; our desires sometimes come true, while sometimes they do not, no matter how justified they are, because life and/or others block them (or don't care about them at all). Therefore, it is good to desire things, to fight for them, but, at the same time, to be ready to accept that, despite our efforts, what we desire might not happen. It would be good to understand and accept this!

## The Self

The notion of self has been central to psychology. However, similar to other fundamental concepts in the field, the self is not easy to define in a noncircular way (Gillihan & Farah, 2005), and there is no widespread scientific consensus about what it means "to be a self" (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 197).

In *Principles of Psychology*, William James (1890/1950) defines it as everything we are "tempted to call by the name of *me*" (p. 183), and distinguishes among several selves: *the material self*, *the social self*, *and the spiritual self*. Since James, numerous definitions of the construct have been offered, and concepts related to the self have been given particular attention in the writings of personality theorists, social psychologists and clinical psychologists, and psychotherapists.

Baumaister and Bushman (2011) describe the self as having three main components. The first is *self-knowledge* (or *self-concept*), and it is related to such aspects as self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-deception. The second is the *social self* (*or public self*), which involves elements related to social presentation, group membership, relationships to others, and social roles. Finally, the *agent-self* (or *executive function*) refers to decision-making, self-control, and so on.

Regardless of how it is defined, the self is closely related to evaluative or rating processes, as terms such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence show. In this sense, one of the most commonly and consensually endorsed assumptions in research on the self is that people need to see themselves in a positive light (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Indeed, evaluations and attitudes towards the self seem to be highly relevant for mental health and wellbeing. In this context, *self-acceptance* has been conceptualized as particularly important.

## Self-Acceptance and Happiness: Theoretical Approaches

Although the importance of self-acceptance was stressed by theorists such as Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, and Harry Stack Sullivan (Berger, 1952; Williams & Lynn, 2010), it has been mainly identified within the humanistic movement and some forms of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), particularly with REBT and third-wave CBTs.

According to Maslow, who endorsed an eudaimonic perspective of the good life, self-acceptance (along with the acceptance of others and of nature) is one of the most important characteristics of self-actualized people (Maslow, 1954): "Our healthy individuals find it possible to accept themselves and their own nature without chagrin or complaint or, for that matter, even without thinking about the matter very much" (p. 155). Maslow's writings foreshadow the non-evaluative acceptance of human nature espoused by Albert Ellis in his view of mental health and happiness (Bernard, 2011):

> What we must rather say is that they [self-actualized individuals] can take the frailties, the sins, weaknesses, and evils of human nature in the same unquestioning spirit with which one accepts the characteristics of nature. One does not complain about water because it is wet or about rocks because they are hard, or about trees because they are green. As the child looks out upon the world with wide, uncritical, undemanding, innocent eyes, simply noting and observing what is the case, without either arguing the matter or demanding that it be otherwise, so does the self-actualizing person tend to look upon human nature in himself and in others. (Maslow, 1954, pp. 155–156).

Rogers held a similar view of the importance of self-acceptance, both as an element of the therapeutic process, and as an ingredient of wellbeing. He viewed complete acceptance as one of the key ingredients of contentment and individual freedom from negative emotions:

> It would appear that when all of the ways in which the individual perceives himself—all perceptions of the qualities, abilities, impulses, and attitudes of the person, and all perceptions of himself in relation to others—are accepted into the organized conscious concept of the self, then this achievement is accompanied by feelings of comfort and freedom from tension (Rogers, 1947, p. 364).

Studies conducted beginning with the late 1940s, mostly under the influence of the humanistic perspective on acceptance, have confirmed that high levels of self-acceptance are related to positive emotions, satisfying social relationships, achievement, and adjustment to negative life events (see Williams & Lynn, 2010 for a review).

Already a pivotal concept in REBT (Ellis, 1962), developed in the 1950s, acceptance is also an integral part of most third-wave cognitive behavioral psychotherapies, developed beginning with the 1980s. Promoting acceptance is fundamental to acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993), mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBSR and MBCT; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). According to Hayes, Strosahl, Bunting, Twohig, and Wilson (2004) "acceptance involves taking a stance of non-judgmental awareness and actively embracing the experience of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations as they occur" (p. 7). Acceptance becomes a main goal particularly in aversive situations that cannot be avoided, escaped, or eliminated without considerable costs for the individual.

Over the past 20 years, research in this paradigm has produced, an impressive amount of evidence related to the importance of acceptance for mental health and wellbeing. The detrimental effects of psychological phenomena opposite to acceptance, such as suppression and avoidance have also been extensively documented (see Williams & Lynn, 2010 for a review).

## *Self-Acceptance in REBT*

We now turn to self-acceptance as advocated by Albert Ellis and REBT. Although acceptance appeared in the writings of Albert Ellis before some of the perspectives discussed above, we have chosen to discuss it at the end, due to its unique features and far reaching implications for the idea of happiness. While third-wave cognitive behavioral therapies mainly stress the importance of accepting internal events, the object of acceptance in REBT is much broader, directed towards life conditions, others, and self (Dryden & David, 2008).

According to REBT, self-rating is detrimental and can lead to dysfunctional emotional and behavioral consequences. Ellis' solution to this problem is USA, meaning that "the individual fully and unconditionally accepts himself whether or

not he behaves intelligently, correctly or competently, and whether or not other people approve, respect or love him" (Ellis, 1977, p. 101).

The core of the REBT idea of USA is thus the affirmation of human worth above and beyond human behavior. In this view, a person cannot be given a single global rating that defines them and their worth. Personal value is not to be defined by conditions that change (Dryden & Neenan, 2004). USA involves acknowledging that we are complex beings, subject to constant change, that defy rating by ourselves or others, while at the same time accepting that we are essentially fallible (Ellis & Dryden, 1997). However, this does not mean that our individual behaviors cannot be subject to evaluation. USA allows people to rate their actions and traits, and encourages such ratings as a means of personal change and improvement, but not their self, their essence (Bernard, 2011).

Acceptance in this form is considered "crucial to solid emotional and behavioral health" (Ellis & Robb, 1994, p. 91). By eliminating self-rating and strengthening self-acceptance, people become liberated of anxiety, feelings of inadequacy and fear of criticism and rejection, and are free to explore and pursue the things that really make them happy (Bernard, 2011). Being happy and enjoying life is, in Ellis' view, far more important than proving oneself (Bernard). Self-rating and other-rating, although not responsible for all human emotional problems, "very possibly create most of it" (Ellis, 2005, p. 157).

A distinctive feature of REBT is its view of self-esteem, which is not only conceptualized as different from USA, but is seen as a dysfunctional global rating process (Ellis, 1962, 1988). Indeed, self-esteem is defined as how much value people place on themselves, and is constituted by judgments and comparisons (Baumaister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Neff, 2003). While high self-esteem refers to a favorable global evaluation, low self-esteem reflects an unfavorable definition of the self (Baumaister et al., 2003). Therefore, REBT sees both high and low self-esteem as unhealthy; regardless of the level, they reflect an overall evaluation of one's worth, eventually leading to dysfunctional emotions (Chamberlain & Haaga, 2001a; Ellis, 1962, 1988).

## Self-Acceptance and Happiness: Research Findings

We have so far discussed the way self-acceptance has been conceptualized in relation to wellbeing in some of the major theories concerned with happiness and the good life. Below, we present data linking self-acceptance to the most important elements of happiness, as described in the hedonic and eudaimonic view: positive emotions, positive relationships, goals and achievement, and meaning.

Studies relating self-acceptance to negative outcomes outnumber those looking at the link between self-acceptance and positive emotions. Existing data indicate a significant association between self-acceptance and positive emotions. A study conducted by Chamberlain and Haaga (2001b) on a nonclinical sample has indicated a positive association between USA on the one hand, and happiness and satisfaction

with life on the other hand. These results have been confirmed by Macinnes (2006), who has reported a positive correlation between USA and PWB. At the same time, USA is negatively related to anxiety, depression, and it mediates the relationship between some forms of perfectionism and depression (Chamberlain & Haaga, 2001b; Flett et al., 2003; Macinnes, 2006; Scott, 2007). Moreover, USA is significantly negatively related with neuroticism, one of the most important personality predictors of SWB (Davies, 2006).

It has long been proposed that the self is an anchoring point influencing our perceptions and attitudes towards others (Suinn, 1961). Adler (1926), Horney (1939) Maslow (1954), Rogers (1951), and Ellis (1999) have all emphasized the fact that self-attitudes are essential to healthy relationships. In fact, some of the first studies on self-acceptance were focused on exploring this issue (Williams & Lynn, 2010). This early research has confirmed the connection between self-acceptance and other acceptance on populations ranging from healthy students and adults to patients and prison inmates (Berger, 1952; Omwake, 1954; Phillips, 1951; Sheerer, 1949; Suinn, 1961).

Recent research in REBT has consistently documented the detrimental effects of global self-rating (i.e., self-downing) on relationships. For example, self-downing has been related to both unhealthy anger suppression and violent anger expression (DiGiuseppe & Tafrate, 2007; Martin & Dahlen, 2004). Jones and Trower (2004) found that the activation of self-downing beliefs was central in the experience of anger in a sample of clinically angry individuals. Similarly, self-downing is associated with couple/marital problems (Addis & Bernard, 2002; Möller, Rabe, & Nortje, 2001; Möller & De Beer, 1998). In a study on marital conflict, Möller and De Beer presented couples with several marital scenes with conflict present or absent, and found self-downing to be one of the core beliefs associated with conflict.

Where goals and achievement are concerned, Ellis maintains that USA has a fundamental role in selecting and pursuing the goals that are really important for short- and long-term happiness, as it liberates the individual of fear of failure and of being judged by others (Ellis, 1999; Bernard, 2011). It has been shown that irrational beliefs in general have a detrimental effect on goal selection and pursuit (Wicker, Brown, Hagen, Boring, & Wiehe, 1990) and on motor and intellectual performance (Kombos, Fournet, & Estes, 1989; Prola, 1985; Shahmohamadi, Khaledian, & Ahmadi, 2011). However, the relationship between USA and goals and USA and achievement has not been sufficiently explored in the literature. So far we know that USA is negatively correlated with maladaptive perfectionism, and that it mediates the association between socially prescribed perfectionism and depression (Flett, Besser, Davis, & Hewitt, 2003). Thus, perfectionists, who evaluate themselves in terms of global worth, are more vulnerable to negative emotional reactions that can affect their goals, when confronted with events that do not affirm their worth (Flett et al. 2003). In a study on the relation between USA and reaction to negative feedback Chamberlain and Haaga (2001a) have shown that individuals scoring higher on USA were more objective in their evaluation of their performances and less prone to denigrate people who had criticized them.

As predicted by REBT theory, self-acceptance also seems to correlate with performance, as illustrated by a study by Denmark (1973) showing that leaders with high levels of self-acceptance are rated as being most effective by their superiors.

To our knowledge, no data are available on the association between USA, as defined by REBT, and meaning in life, but research in the PWB model (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 2008) has shown self-acceptance and purpose in life to be positively related (Keyes et al., 2002).

According to Ellis, one of the key features of REBT is its philosophical nature and the emphasis on "profound and fundamental philosophical change" (Ellis, 2005, p. 156). This change, known as the *elegant solution* to human disturbance is mainly achieved by teaching people to formulate their goals and desires in a flexible, preferential manner, and through promoting unconditional self, other, and life acceptance. Giving up global evaluation of self and others eliminates one of the most important sources of unhappiness in people's lives and offers them a new outlook on themselves and the world (Ellis).

## Conclusions

This chapter offers an overview of the major perspectives on happiness in psychology and discusses the role of self-acceptance in wellbeing. A review of the REBT theory in light of these perspectives outlines valuable insights that REBT has to offer on the topic of happiness. Specifically, similar to the mainstream perspective in positive psychology, REBT views happiness as a combination of hedonic and eudaimonic elements, but further refines the concept, distinguishing between what we have called "rational" and "irrational" happiness.

"Rational" happiness is the expression of adaptive behaviors, functional positive and negative emotions, and preferentially, non-dogmatically formulated goals and values. USA is at the core of this view of happiness. "Irrational" happiness, on the other hand, is characterized by maladaptive behaviors, dysfunctional positive and negative emotions, and rigidly, dogmatically formulated goals and values. Self-downing is viewed as a major source of distress and suffering.

Considering the significant empirical support for these ideas (see David, Szentagotai, Kallay, & Macavei, 2005), we believe that REBT theory can substantially contribute not only to our understanding of what happiness is but also of how it can be gained and maintained.

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