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ACTIVITY 6.4

Synthetic Happiness

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CONCEPT

This activity has students engage with Dr. Daniel Gilbert's research on synthetic happiness or our psychological immune system. Humans can become anxious about our future in a way that no other animal can. With this ability, we often believe that if things don't go our way, that we will become unhappy. Dr. Gilbert explains that we truly are happy when things don't go as planned.

MATERIALS

- *TED Talk- Daniel Gilbert on Happiness* Student Worksheet
- Access to technology or the ability to show Dan Gilbert's TED talk, The surprising science of happiness (Gilbert, 2004)

INSTRUCTIONS

- This activity will take 30 minutes to complete. The video is 21 minutes long plus time necessary for discussion.
- Have students complete the TED worksheet while watching the video.
- It might be helpful to pause as you go to discuss the questions rather than waiting until the end.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How are stress and anxiety alike?

How are they different?

Can you experience anxiety without a stressor?

Can you experience stress without anxiety?

TED TALK- DANIEL GILBERT ON HAPPINESS STUDENT WORKSHEET

Name

What does the frontal lobe do?

What can our brain do that other animal brains cannot do?

Who is more happy- lottery winners or paraplegics?

What is the impact bias?

What does Daniel Gilbert mean by "synthesized happiness" or a "psychological immune system?"

What is the difference between natural and synthetic happiness?

What argument does Daniel Gilbert make about synthetic happiness?

What conclusions can you draw from the painting study with the patients with anterograde amnesia?

When does the "psychological immune system" work best? Explain this.

What conclusions can be drawn from the Harvard photography study in regards to synthetic happiness?

"The great source of both the misery and disorders of human life, seems to arise from over-rating the difference between one permanent situation and another. Avarice over-rates the difference between poverty and riches: ambition, that between a private and a public station: vain-glory, that between obscurity and extensive reputation. The person under the influence of any of those extravagant passions, is not only miserable in his actual situation, but is often disposed to disturb the peace of society, in order to arrive at that which he so foolishly admires. The slightest observation, however, might satisfy him, that, in all the ordinary situations of human life, a well-disposed mind may be equally calm, equally cheerful, and equally contented. Some of those situations may, no doubt, deserve to be preferred to others: but none of them can deserve to be pursued with that passionate ardour which drives us to violate the rules either of prudence or of justice; or to corrupt the future tranquillity of our minds, either by shame from the remembrance of our own folly, or by remorse from the horror of our own injustice."
—Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, 1759 (p. 210)

What did Adam Smith mean by the passage above?

What is the main point of Daniel Gilbert's Ted Talk?

How could Daniel Gilbert's Ted Talk help with the emergence and maintenance of stress?

ANSWER KEY

What does the frontal lobe do?

The prefrontal cortex of the frontal lobe acts as an "experience simulator." We can have experiences in our heads before we try it out in real life.

What can our brain do that other animal brains cannot do?

Think about the future in a capacity that our ancestors and other animals cannot; the example given from the TED talk is that we can think about liver and onion ice cream, and without trying it, make the decision that it would be a bad idea.

Who is more happy- lottery winners or paraplegics?

A year after a lottery winner wins the lottery and a year after a paraplegic loses the ability to use their legs, they are equally happy.

What is the impact bias?

Impact bias is the tendency to overestimate the hedonic impact of future events; the tendency for the simulator to work poorly; the simulator makes us believe that different outcomes from we want will have a larger effect, impact, and intensity than it actually will.

What does Daniel Gilbert mean by "synthesized happiness" or a "psychological immune system?"

Daniel Gilbert means a system of cognitive processes which helps us change our views of the world, so we feel better about the world we live in when things don't go our way.

What is the difference between natural and synthetic happiness?

The difference between natural and synthetic happiness is that natural happiness- we get what we wanted; synthetic happiness- what we make from not getting what we want.

What argument does Daniel Gilbert make about synthetic happiness?

It is real; it is just as real and enduring as getting what you wanted.

What conclusions can you draw from the painting study with the patients with anterograde amnesia?

They synthesized happiness; the patients didn't realize that they owned the painting, which they originally didn't like as much, and yet after owning it (unknowingly), liked it better.

When does the "psychological immune system" work best? Explain this.

When we do not have options; when we feel stuck.

What conclusions can be drawn from the Harvard photography study in regards to synthetic happiness?

When we can't change our minds (when students had to select a picture immediately), we tend to be happier with the picture we were stuck with, yet when we think we can change our photograph, we tend to not be as happy with our decision.

Yet, 68% of students want a course where they would have the ability to change their minds, without realizing that they will ultimately be less happy with the results.

What did Adam Smith mean by the passage above?

It's natural to recognize that we as humans do have preferences and want to have goals for a specific future, but when the desire to acquire the desired outcome does not happen (losing an election, not getting a job, etc.), it can put us morally at risk. It can lead us to lie, cheat, steal, hurt others, and act recklessly and cowardly. Our ambition when we do not recognize that the outcome will be alright or when we do not get what we want can expose a dangerous and dark side of humanity.

What is the main point of Daniel Gilbert's Ted Talk?

Humans have a self-protectant psychological immune system that allows us to make the best of situations that don't go our way, and be truly and genuinely happy with the new outcome.

How could Daniel Gilbert's TedTalk help with the emergence and maintenance of stress?

Answers will vary.

Example: our appraisal of an upcoming test, such as the ACT, might be appraised differently. For instance, if we believe that we need a score of 24 or higher for college or else we will not be successful because we won't get into the college of our choice, our stress response will reflect this appraisal. If a student recognizes that studying for the ACT is important, but they will be able to make the best of whatever score they receive, studying for the ACT might not be considered stressful.

Reference

Gilbert, D. (2004). *The surprising science of happiness* [Video]. TED Conferences. https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_the_surprising_science_of_happiness

Smith, A. (1759/1976). *Theory of moral sentiments.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.