

Predicting Happiness (Is Like Trying to Predict the Weather) Ben Dean, Ph.D.

If you ask a coach to describe how coaching works, the answer is often that the work is client-driven. Perhaps, "I help clients reach their most important goals." A fundamental assumption of coaching is that our healthy, resourceful coaching clients come to us with the ability to choose good coaching goals. We assume that our clients are able to predict what will enrich the quality of their lives. However, interesting research in the area of "affective forecasting" by Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman, Harvard Psychologist Daniel Gilbert, and others suggests that most of us are surprisingly inaccurate when it comes to predicting how we will experience future events.

Affective Forecasting

Affective forecasting refers to our ability to predict (or forecast) the emotional impact of a future event. How devastating will it be if we fail to get tenure? How rewarding will it be if we do? How bad would we feel if our partner ended our romance? If we take the plunge and work part-time, how much will we enjoy our extra free time? How great will it feel when we finally lose those 20 pounds? And how long will those feelings last?

Affective forecasting is an extraordinarily important component of professional and personal decision making. Almost every major decision you have ever made was based, in part, on how you thought it would make you feel in the future. Often on whether it would lastingly increase your happiness and wellbeing.

Given that we routinely factor in the future emotional consequences of events when making decisions, it is reasonable to expect that frequent practice would improve our forecasting abilities. As it turns out, this is not the case. People consistently make systematic errors in affective forecasting. Consider some striking examples of what poor affective forecasters we are:

Career Advancement

We can't always predict what achievements are necessary for job satisfaction. For example, academics pursuing tenure believe that life will be much, much better if they achieve this goal. They will have the freedom to study the things that most interest them, and they will have job security in an insecure world. However, Daniel Gilbert and colleagues (1998) found that contrary to their predictions, former assistant professors who were passed over for tenure were ultimately no less happy than their tenured colleagues.

Location

Have you ever returned from a glorious vacation in a tropical climate only to question your sanity? Why endure winter after winter when you could be living in Fiji? (Or at least California?) As it turns out, where we live is not as important as most real estate agents would have us believe! Californians are no happier than Midwesterners (Schkade & Kahneman 1998). We even tend to overestimate even the impact of more trivial decisions about location. For example, Elizabeth Dunn and colleagues (2003) demonstrated that college students vastly overestimated the impact that their dorm assignment would have on their quality of life. Students predicted that being assigned to a more conveniently located, physically attractive dorm would make them happier, when, in fact, it made no difference at all.

What did make a difference, however, were the friendships they made. Indeed, nurturing and fostering social relationships may be one of the most powerful things we can do to boost our own happiness levels. For research that supports the relationship between social relationships and happiness, see Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001; Myers, 1999; Diener & Seligman, 2002; and Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001.

Money

When are we going to learn that money doesn't buy happiness? Even the effects of winning the ultimate unlikely jackpot--the lottery--are fleeting (Brickman, Coaes, & Janoff-Bulmna, 1978). The first \$40,000, of course, does buy happiness. Moving from zero--a street person with no resources--to \$25,000, for example has a huge impact on life satisfaction. But after a certain point, there is virtually no effect. Perhaps the most convincing evidence that money doesn't buy happiness comes not from a psychologist but from the economist Richard Easterlin. His large-scale surveys of nations and individuals indicate that as people grow richer they do NOT grow happier (provided that they did not start off below the poverty line). You can download some of Easterlin's articles yourself on his website: <http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~easterl/>

Why Are We Poor Affective Forecasters?

The research of Daniel Gilbert and others suggests that we humans tend to make a systematic error in judgment which he calls impact bias. Impact bias is our tendency to predict that future events will have a more intense and longer lasting impact on our emotions than they actually do. In other words, we are biased when it comes to predicting the hedonic impact of future events. Gilbert identifies two primary reasons why we show impact bias in our judgments:

We rationalize.

Most people have what Gilbert calls a psychological immune system that protects us from protracted misery. After something unpleasant happens, such as being bypassed for a desired promotion, we begin to consider the silver linings in the cloud. Perhaps that promotion would have meant more late evenings at work and less time with the family.

The fact that we are able to engage our psychological immune system is adaptive. For those readers who are former Authentic Happiness Coaching students, remember the power of the "One Door Closes, Another Door Opens" exercise. Not only are these rationalizations (for lack of a better word) adaptive, they may very well be accurate. The downsides to that promotion were there all along, but we did not attend to them until after the disappointment.

We show impact bias in our judgments because we fail to take into account our active psychological immune system. When asked how we will feel in the face of a future, unpleasant event, we fail to take into account our own resiliency.

We have tunnel vision.

When we try to forecast our emotional reaction to an event, we tend to zero in on the event itself and forget about all the background noise in our lives. For example, when considering what it would be like to win a million dollars, we zero in on the glorious day that we receive the check. What we do not take into account are the myriad life events that fill up our time and dampen the impact of the event. No matter what happens—good or bad—we will continue to eat meals, run errands, attend doctor's appointments, etc. Life goes on, but we systematically fail to recognize this when considering the impact of a future event.

Coaching Tips

From the work of Gilbert and others, we can extract some tips for working with our coaching clients:

Educate clients about impact bias and affective forecasting. Many professionals and many clients, at least implicitly, believe that if they can just increase their wealth or take their careers to the next level, then they will be happy. Though we can still support clients in achieving such goals, we can also inform them that if happiness is the ultimate goal, then more money and more promotions are not the ticket. (Social relationships, on the other hand, are powerful predictors of happiness.)

Encourage clients to obtain more objective sources of information about the impact of their goals. When clients are generating their goals and contemplating “What do I want?” we can remind them of impact bias. Rather than attempting to project themselves into the future to imagine how they might feel, they are better served to interview another person who has “been there.” In an interesting series of studies, Gilbert found that even a randomly selected stranger who has actually experienced the event in question is more reliable than objective information or our own imagination.

Thus, one of our jobs as coaches can be to encourage clients to collect slices of reality in the form of interviews when they are in the goal-setting stage of coaching. If your client wants to make a career change and become, say, a coach, then a good homework assignment would be to interview five coaches about the pros and cons of the job. If your client’s goal is to re-craft her job so that she can work from home, whom could she interview with experience on making this switch? Do they really get to spend more time with their kids? What are the pros and cons?

Final Thoughts

We have all heard the saying that true insanity comes from doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Might I suggest a corollary for the coaching world? True discontent comes from holding onto the same goals that never made us happy in the first place. In other words, true discontent may come from the expectation that MORE money, a bigger house, or more recognition at work will make us happy in the future when our current lives are rich with evidence to the contrary.

Resources and References

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