

# *Passing the Threshold to Achieve Happiness*

By Laura Kato

## Abstract

How much of your happiness do you think lies within your control? Some philosophers believe that our happiness lies solely within our internal control despite negative external events happening to us. These believers think that even if something bad happens, such as a major car accident, we can still live out a happy life because of the ability of our minds to focus on happiness and to stay optimistic and hopeful during dark times. On the other hand, some philosophers believe in uncontrollable external factors, such as luck, influencing our happiness in addition to our internal controls. Through thorough research and analysis, I believe that there is a threshold of positive external factors one must pass in order to be able to fully use their internal controls to maximize one's happiness.

## Introduction

2020 sure has been a heck of a year. With a pandemic growing in America by the minute and possibly one of the most controversial elections to exist, it is no wonder why happiness seems so sparse these days. However, some philosophers, such as the Stoics, would surely be disappointed that we cannot maintain our happiness despite external events. Although some may believe that long-term happiness stems from within us, uncontrollable external factors, to an extent, do play a role in our happiness whether we like it or not. 2020 provides us with the perfect scenario of how externalities have the ability to steal one's happiness away despite how hard one tries to hold onto it by staying optimistic and hopeful. I plan to perform research on to what extent external factors beyond our control, such as global events or luck, play a role into our happiness. How much power do we, ourselves, actually have on our own happiness?

## Background

Let's begin by explaining the two types of happiness. As described by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, there is happiness as "a state of mind", such as being happy to get a good grade on an exam, and happiness as "a life that goes well for the person leading it".<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we will be focusing on the latter: happiness as a state of being in life. There has been a lot of disagreement, however, when it comes to whether happiness stems more from within us or can be affected by externalities, such as one's luck or life events. For example, Aristotle, a highly respected and well-known philosopher, believed that, while virtue is the main component of happiness, he states that "the ugly, the lonely, and the lowly are unlikely to lead happy lives".<sup>2</sup> The article, "The Ugly, The Lonely, and The Lowly: Aristotle on Happiness

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Haybron, "Happiness" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Cashen, "The Ugly, The Lonely, and The Lowly: Aristotle on Happiness and the External Goods", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (University of Illinois Press, January, 2012), JSTOR

and the External Goods”, by Matthew Cashen, explains how although Aristotle’s statement may seem harsh, that he does have a valid point.<sup>3</sup> Cashen states that if someone lacks good physical characteristics, a loving family, thoughtful friends, and wealth, it will be more difficult to lead a happy life than for people who do have these external goods.<sup>4</sup> Physical characteristics cannot necessarily and naturally be chosen, so the author believes that luck does play a large role in one’s overall happiness.

The opposing side of this happiness dilemma argues that happiness stems solely from within. Jessica Love, cognitive psychologist and author of the article, “Happiness Comes from Intention, Not Luck”, believes that solely our minds and thoughts can influence whether we are happy overall or not.<sup>5</sup> She performs an experiment where she sends out a daily message such as, “did you do your best to be happy today?”, and results showed that when people reflected on their happiness for the day, their overall happiness steadily increased.<sup>6</sup> Jessica Love believes that by simply focusing on what makes one happy, one will be happier in life.

The Stoics also believed in something similar to Jessica Love’s beliefs. The Stoics believed that the key to happiness is having an “excellent mental state, which the Stoics identified with virtue and being rational”.<sup>7</sup> Epictetus, a Greek Stoic philosopher, believes that although we do not have much control on what happens to us externally, our happiness is within our control because being able to use our internal controls in order to make those external events create happiness is essential.<sup>8</sup> All of the aforementioned arguments on how much control we have over our own happiness provide us with good reasoning and evidence; however, I will be

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Love, “Happiness Comes from Intention, Not Luck”, (Quartz, June 6, 2013)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> John Sellar, “3 Secrets to Happiness, According to Roman Stoics”, (World Economic Forum, October 1, 2018)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

completing research to prove how one can, in fact, mainly use just internal controls to maintain one's happiness, but only after first passing a threshold of positive external factors.

### Methods

In order to come to my conclusion, I must perform extensive research on whether psychologists and philosophers believe happiness is solely attainable using internal factors or if it can be affected by external factors. In order to do so, I will need to compile a list of books, articles, and surveys, and proceed to thoroughly analyze them. Some books that I will read to assist me in my research is *The Art of Happiness* by the Dalai Lama<sup>9</sup> and *The Science of Positivity* by Loretta Graziano Breuning<sup>10</sup>, both being about maintaining happiness during difficult times in life. The book by the Dalai Lama will be especially helpful in figuring out how one maintains happiness after strong and long-lasting negative external events seem to be constantly pushing against someone.

After performing this research and analyzing my compiled books and articles, I will create a survey to pass out to at least one hundred people. First, I will need to get exempt IRB submission approval because I am gathering data from people through surveys. This survey will have questions on it such as, "What is the definition of happiness to you?", "What makes you most happy?" and "What do you think will increase your daily happiness?". Essentially, this survey will gather people's opinions, feelings, and reflections on their own happiness or lack thereof. I will also be asking whether they believe, in their own life, if their experienced external factors beyond their control affect their happiness more than their internal factors. I will, however, keep in mind that people may have different definitions of happiness, as some people

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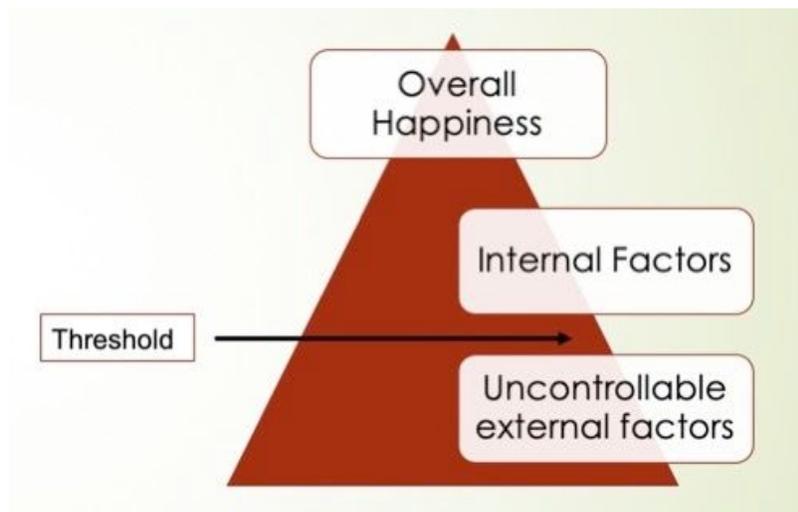
<sup>9</sup> Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness*. (Riverhead Books, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Loretta Graziano Breuning, *The Science of Positivity*. (New York: Adams Media, 2016).

may think that their happiness stems most from money, while others look to love when hearing about happiness. This is why I will use my survey responses in order to enlighten myself and gain more insight on other's views on happiness instead of jumping to a conclusion solely from people's opinions. After completing my research and compiling and analyzing the results from my surveys, I will compare and contrast them with each other. From there, I will come up with the most well-rounded conclusion based upon my comparing, contrasting, and analyzation of my research.

### Expected Results

After performing all of my necessary research, I expect to come to the conclusion that in order to live out a happy life, one must have a certain number of uncontrollable external factors going right in their life. After passing that threshold, one must then use their mind and internal strengths in order to completely fulfill their happiness.



Without any or too little positive external factors, it will be too difficult for one to remain optimistic and maintain their happiness throughout life. However, once someone passes that threshold and has enough long-term external factors going

right in their life, such as a stable income and a supportive family or friend group, they will be able to remain happy using internal strengths despite more obstacles that may come their way.

There will always be more troubles in life or more things one must overcome, but with the combination of the right amount of positive external factors and internal strength and optimism, one will be able to stay in that happiness state of being for a very long time.

### Conclusion

Hence, while some philosophers believe in internal factors solely affecting one's happiness and others believe in external factors contributing a lot to happiness, I believe that through my proposed aforementioned research, I will come to the conclusion that one must pass a threshold of positive external factors before one can mainly use their internal controls to maintain happiness. Happiness can be such a fragile thing, especially during these dark times of 2020, but with the right positive external factors, such as having a safe and steady income and maintaining good health, in addition to having the right internal strength, we can all push to live out a happier life.

## Works Cited

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Budget Timeline

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Gathering research articles/studies + IRB approval work: 20 hours	Reading/analyzing research/studies: 15 hours	Reading/analyzing research/studies: 15 hours	Creating survey and reaching out to participants: 15 hours	Compiling survey data and analyzing it: 20 hours	Writing research paper: 20 hours
20 hours x \$15.00 per hour	15 hours x \$15.00 per hour	15 hours x \$15.00 per hour	15 hours x \$15.00 per hour	20 hours x \$15.00 per hour	20 hours x \$15.00 per hour
\$300	\$225	\$225	\$225	\$300	\$300

Total: \$1,575 stipend over the span of 6 weeks + \$50 for a participant incentive + \$650 for the IRB exempt approval= \$2,275