

3. Pick one of the thinkers we have studied in this course (it can be the same thinker as you used in question 2 or a different thinker). Lay out one thing in this article that the thinker would disagree with and explain why their views commitments would lead them to disagree with Brooks, using a specific example.

4. Do you agree with Brooks that following these three equations will lead to happiness? Why or why not? Explain which aspects of the views on happiness we have studied in this course you find most convincing and why. Lay out your own perspective, using specific examples.

Opinion

On Coronavirus Lockdown? Look for Meaning, Not Happiness

Why cultivating “tragic optimism” will help us weather this crisis — and even grow from it.

By Emily Esfahani Smith

Ms. Esfahani Smith is the author of “The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed With Happiness.”

- April 7, 2020



Credit...Justin Paget/DigitalVision, via Getty Images

The coronavirus pandemic has not just threatened the physical health of millions but also wreaked havoc on the emotional and mental well-being of people around the world. Feelings of anxiety, helplessness and grief are rising as people face an increasingly uncertain future — and nearly everyone has been touched by loss. A nationally representative poll conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation finds that [nearly half of](#)

[all Americans](#) — 45 percent — feel that the coronavirus has negatively affected their mental health.

Which raises a question: Is there anything people can do to cope with the emotional fallout of this confusing and challenging time?

How people respond to adversity is a topic I've investigated for years as a journalist. Over the past decade, I've interviewed dozens of people about their experiences of extreme stress and have scoured the academic research in psychology on resilience to understand why some people are broken by crises while others emerge from stressful experiences even stronger than before.

What I've learned sheds light on how people can protect their mental health during the pandemic — and it upends some common ideas our culture carries about trauma and well-being. When researchers and clinicians look at who copes well in crisis and even grows through it, it's not those who focus on pursuing happiness to feel better; it's those who cultivate an attitude of tragic optimism.

The term was coined by Viktor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist from Vienna. Tragic optimism is the ability to maintain hope and find meaning in life despite its inescapable pain, loss and suffering.

To understand how tragic optimism might serve us during the pandemic, it might help to recall how America responded to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. People reported increased feelings of fear, anxiety and hopelessness. These emotions were more debilitating for some than for others. To learn why, a group of researchers, led by Barbara Fredrickson, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, studied the well-being of young adults in the weeks after the attacks. None of the students had lost loved ones on Sept. 11, but like the population at large, they reported feeling distressed. And yet, some of them were less likely to become depressed than others. What set those resilient students apart was their ability to find the good. Unlike the less resilient students, the resilient [reported experiencing](#) more positive emotions, like love and gratitude.

But that didn't mean they were Pollyannas. They did not deny the tragedy of what happened. In fact, they reported the same levels of sadness and stress as less resilient people. This finding comes up frequently in psychology research: In general, resilient people have intensely negative reactions to trauma. They experience despair and stress, and acknowledge the horror of what's happening. But even in the darkest of places, they see glimmers of light, and this ultimately sustains them.

But even more than helping them cope, adopting the spirit of tragic optimism enables people to actually grow through adversity.

For a long time, many psychologists embraced a victim narrative about trauma, believing that severe stress causes long-lasting and perhaps irreparable damage to one's psyche and health. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association [added post-traumatic](#)

[stress disorder](#) to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, and since then, PTSD has received a lot of attention in the media and among ordinary individuals trying to understand what happens to people in the wake of tragic life events.

Yet psychologists now know that only a [small percentage of people](#) develop the full-blown disorder while, on average, anywhere from one half to two-thirds of trauma survivors exhibit what's known as post-traumatic growth. After a crisis, most people acquire a newfound sense of purpose, develop deeper relationships, have a greater appreciation of life and report other benefits.

It's not the adversity itself that leads to growth. It's how people respond to it. According to the psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, who coined the term "post-traumatic growth" in the 1990s, the people who grow after a crisis spend a lot of time trying to make sense of what happened and understanding how it changed them. In other words, they search for and find positive meaning.

In modern psychology research, this is known, a bit unfortunately, as "benefit finding." Mr. Frankl called it "the human capacity to creatively turn life's negative aspects into something positive or constructive." Of course, some people are naturally more hopeful than others. But the success of psychological interventions like [meaning-centered psychotherapy](#) — developed by Dr. William Breitbart at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and his colleagues to help terminal patients cope with death — reveals that even the most despairing individuals have the capacity to find meaning in a crisis.

It may seem inappropriate to call on people to seek the good in a crisis of this magnitude, but in study after study of tragedy and disaster, that's what resilient people do. In [a study](#) of over a 1,000 people, 58 percent of respondents reported finding positive meaning in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, such as a greater appreciation of life and a deeper sense of spirituality. Other research shows that benefit finders grow not only psychologically but also physically. [Heart attack survivors](#), for example, who found meaning in the weeks after their crisis were, eight years later, more likely to be alive and in better health than those who didn't.

This doesn't mean that people should endure adversities with a smiling face. In fact, Mr. Frankl specifically said that tragic optimism is not the same thing as happiness. "To the European," he wrote, "it is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to 'be happy.' But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to 'be happy.'"

He was right: In American culture, when people are feeling depressed or anxious, they are often advised to do what makes them happy. Much of the pandemic-related mental-health advice channels that message, encouraging people to distract themselves from bad news and difficult feelings, to limit their time on social media and to exercise.

I'm not suggesting those aren't worthy activities. But if the goal is coping, they do not penetrate into the psyche as deeply as meaning does. When [people do things](#) that make

them happy, like playing games or sleeping in, they feel better — but those feelings fade fast, according to research by Veronika Huta of the University of Ottawa and Richard Ryan of the University of Rochester.

When people search for meaning, though, they often do not feel happy. The things that make our lives meaningful, like volunteering or working, are stressful and require effort. But months later, the meaning seekers not only reported fewer negative moods but also felt more “enriched,” “inspired” and “part of something greater than myself.”

Though it has been only a few weeks since the pandemic started affecting life in the United States, I see people embracing meaning during this crisis. On my community listservs, people are organizing “help groups” to run errands for immuno-compromised people. They are rallying around struggling small businesses with “virtual tip jars.” Many companies and businesses, nationally and locally, are offering their services free. I’ve noticed people also say they are experiencing deeper connections to others — and feel more grateful to the caregivers, teachers, service workers and health care professionals among us. This certainly won’t be remembered as a happy period in the history of the world, but it may be remembered as a time of redemptive meaning and hope.

Does any of this mean the pandemic is a good thing? Of course not. It would be far better had the pandemic never occurred. But that’s not the world we live in. Life is, as Buddhists say, 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows. As much as we might wish, none of us can avoid suffering. That’s why it’s important to learn to suffer well.

Emily Esfahani Smith is the author of [“The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed With Happiness.”](#)

The Times is committed to publishing [a diversity of letters](#) to the editor. We’d like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some [tips](#). And here’s our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) ([@NYTopinion](#)) and [Instagram](#).

Correction: April 7, 2020

An earlier version of this article misidentified the organization that added PTSD to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It was the American Psychiatric Association, not the American Psychological Association.

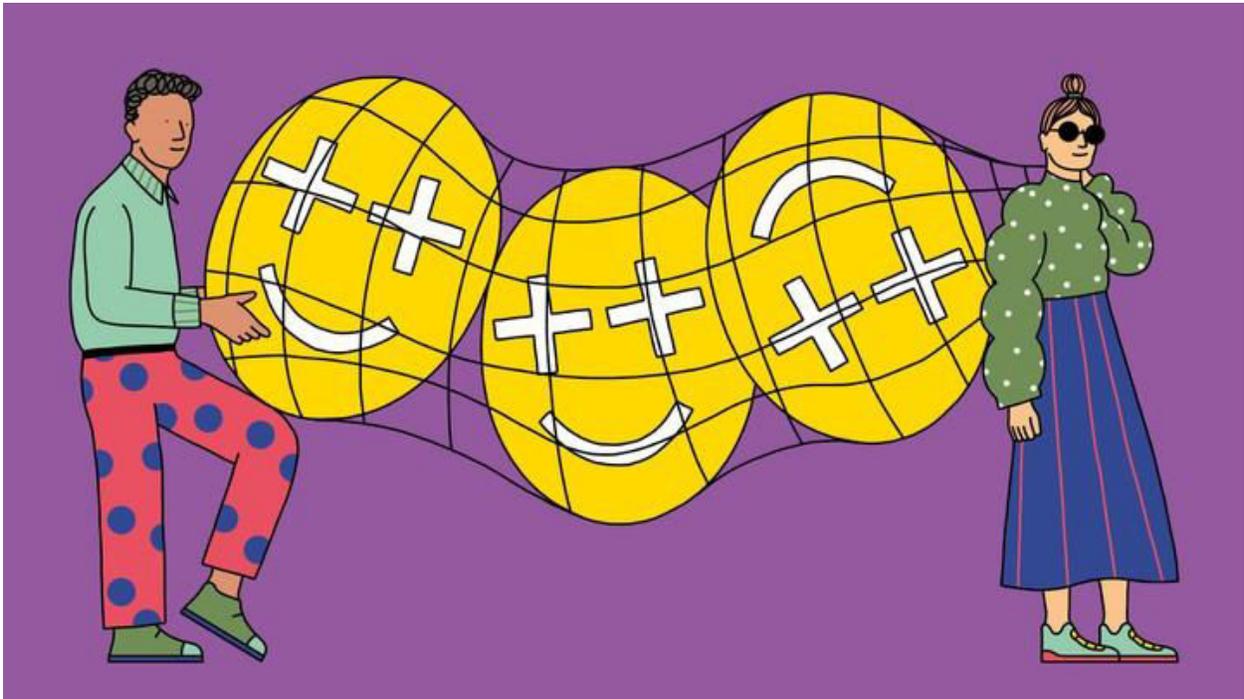
HOW TO BUILD A LIFE

The Three Equations for a Happy Life, Even During a Pandemic

“How to Build a Life” is a new column that aims to give you the tools you need to construct a life that feels whole and meaningful.

ARTHUR C. BROOKS

APRIL 9, 2020



IT SEEMS STRANGE TO launch a column on *happiness* during a pandemic. The timing is, well, awkward, isn't it?

Maybe not. We're stuck at home; our lives on COVID time have slowed to a near halt. This creates all sorts of obvious inconveniences, of course. But in the involuntary quiet, many of us also sense an opportunity to think a little more

deeply about life. In our go-go-go world, we rarely get the chance to stop and consider the big drivers of our happiness and our sense of purpose.

On second thought, maybe this is the perfect time to launch a column on happiness.

I teach a class at the Harvard Business School on happiness. It surprises some people when I tell them this—that a subject like happiness is taught alongside accounting, finance, and other, more traditional MBA fare. Nathaniel Hawthorne once famously said, “Happiness is a butterfly, which, when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you.” This is not exactly the stuff of business administration.

But if you imagine my students sitting outside in a circle (or in a virtual circle on videochat, these days) hoping to have a butterfly land on us, you’re wrong. Here are a few of our topics: “Affect and the Limbic System,” “The Neurobiology of Body Language,” “Homeostasis and the Persistence of Subjective Well-Being,” “Oxytocin and Love,” “Acquisition Centrality and Negative Affect,” and “The Hedonic Treadmill.”

MORE STORIES

•

1. [Your Professional Decline Is Coming \(Much\) Sooner Than You Think](#)

ARTHUR C. BROOKS

•

2. [Fear Can Make You a Better Person](#)

ARTHUR C. BROOKS

•

3. Two Errors Our Minds Make When Trying to Grasp the Pandemic

ARTHUR C. BROOKS

The scientific study of happiness has exploded over the past three decades. The Nobel Prize winners Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton (both at Princeton University) publish extensively on the subject. The University of Pennsylvania has a whole graduate-degree program in positive psychology, led by Martin Seligman, one of the most distinguished social psychologists in the world. A peer-reviewed academic journal called the *Journal of Happiness Studies* has been in operation since the year 2000 and enjoys high prestige in scholarly circles.

Religion, philosophy, and the arts have long considered happiness a subject suitable for study. The sciences have only recently caught up. This column, which we're calling "How to Build a Life," will draw on all these sources of wisdom in the hope of helping you identify the building blocks of happiness—family, career, friendships, faith, and so on—and giving you the tools to use them to construct a life that is balanced and full of meaning, and that serves your values.

This column has been in the works for some time, but my hope is that launching it during the pandemic will help you leverage a contemplative mindset while you have the time to think about what matters most to you. I hope this column will enrich your life, and equip you to enrich the lives of the people you love and lead.

TO START US OFF, I want to give you three equations for well-being—equations that, in my opinion, you need to know to start managing your own happiness more proactively.

EQUATION 1: SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING = GENES + CIRCUMSTANCES + HABITS

Subjective well-being is a term of art usually used by social scientists. Why not *happiness*? Many scientists consider *happiness* as a term to be too vague and too subjective, and to contain too many competing ideas. In everyday language, *happiness* is used to denote everything from a passing good mood to a deeper sense of meaning in life. The term *subjective well-being*, on the other hand, refers to an answer to this kind of question: "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy,

or not too happy?” (That is the actual wording from one of the most prominent surveys that address the subject, the General Social Survey.)

Read: *The Yale happiness class, distilled*

Equation 1 summarizes a vast amount of literature on subjective well-being, starting with the question of the heritability of happiness. Personally, I dislike the idea that happiness is genetic; I dislike the idea that *anything* about my character or personality is genetic, because I want to be fully in charge of building my life. But the research is clear that there is a huge genetic component in determining your “set point” for subjective well-being, the baseline you always seem to return to after events sway your mood. In an article in the journal *Psychological Science* reporting on an analysis of twins—including identical twins reared apart and then tested for subjective well-being as adults—the psychologists David Lykken and Auke Tellegen estimate that the genetic component of a person’s well-being is between 44 percent and 52 percent, that is, about half.

The other two components are your circumstances and your habits. Research is all over the map on what percentage each part represents. Circumstances—the good and the bad that enter all of our lives—could make up as little as 10 percent or as much as 40 percent of your subjective well-being. Even if circumstances play a big role, however, most scholars think it doesn’t matter very much, because the effects of circumstance never last very long.

We may think that getting a big promotion will make us permanently happier or that a bad breakup will leave us permanently brokenhearted, but it isn’t true, as a casual look back on your own life would surely attest. Indeed, one of the survival traits of human beings is psychological homeostasis, or the tendency to get used to circumstances quickly, both good and bad. This is the main reason money doesn’t buy happiness: We get used to what it buys very rapidly and then go back to our happiness set point. And for those of us lucky enough to avoid illness, even the unhappiness from the COVID-19 crisis will be in the rearview mirror before very long.

GENES AND circumstances aren’t a productive focus in your quest for happiness. But don’t worry, there’s one variable left that affects long-term well-being and is under our control: habits. To understand habits, we need Equation 2.

EQUATION 2: HABITS = FAITH + FAMILY + FRIENDS + WORK

This is my summary of thousands of academic studies, and to be fair, many scholars would dispute it as too crude. But I am convinced that it is accurate. Enduring happiness comes from human relationships, productive work, and the transcendental elements of life.

A little bit of clarification is in order here. First, *faith* doesn't mean any faith in particular. I practice the Catholic faith and am happy to recommend it to anyone, but the research is clear that many different faiths and secular life philosophies can provide this happiness edge. The key is to find a structure through which you can ponder life's deeper questions and transcend a focus on your narrow self-interests to serve others.

Similarly, there is no magic formula for what shape your family and friendships should take. The key is to cultivate and maintain loving, faithful relationships with other people. One extraordinary 75-year study followed Harvard graduates from 1939 to 1944, into their 90s, looking at all aspects of their health and well-being. The principal investigator, the psychologist George Vaillant, summarized the findings as follows: "Happiness is love. Full stop." People who have loving relationships with family and friends thrive; those who don't, don't.

Finally, there's work. Maybe it shocks you that work is part of this equation; it shouldn't. One of the most robust findings in the happiness literature is the centrality of productive human endeavor in creating a sense of purpose in life. Of course, there are better jobs and worse jobs, but most researchers don't think unemployment brings anything but misery.

Read: Meaning is healthier than happiness

What kind of work? White collar or blue collar? Stay-at-home parenting? Work requiring college? A super-high-paying job? My own research as a social scientist has focused on this subject, and I can tell you that these are the wrong questions. What makes work meaningful is not the kind of work it is, but the sense it gives you that you are *earning your success* and *servicing others*.

Equation 2 is especially worth considering during our pandemic isolation. Ask yourself: Is my happiness portfolio balanced across these four accounts? Do I need to move some things around? Are there habits I can change during this pause?

I ASSERTED ABOVE the old claim “Money doesn’t buy happiness.” It’s not quite that simple, of course. I should say, “Money doesn’t buy *satisfaction*.” Homeostasis sees to that, in the form of what psychologists call the *hedonic treadmill*: People never feel they have enough money, because they get used to their circumstances very quickly and need more money to make them happy again. Don’t believe it? Think back to your last significant pay increase. When did you get the greatest satisfaction—on the day your boss told you that you were getting a raise? The day it starting hitting your bank account? And how much satisfaction was it giving you six months later?

You might be tempted to conclude that satisfaction is out of reach. But that’s not quite right. Equation 3 provides a better way of thinking about satisfaction.

EQUATION 3: SATISFACTION = WHAT YOU HAVE ÷ WHAT YOU WANT

Many great spiritual leaders have made this point, of course. In his book *The Art of Happiness* (written with the psychiatrist Howard Cutler), the Dalai Lama stated, “We need to learn how to want what we have not to have what we want in order to get steady and stable Happiness.” The Spanish Catholic saint Josemaría Escrivá made the same point in a slightly different way: “Don’t forget it: he has most who needs least. Don’t create needs for yourself.”

This is not just a gauzy spiritual nostrum, however—it is an intensely practical formula for living. Many of us go about our lives desperately trying to increase the numerator of Equation 3; we try to achieve higher levels of satisfaction by increasing what we have—by working, spending, working, spending, and on and on. But the hedonic treadmill makes this pure futility. Satisfaction will always escape our grasp.

Read: How happiness changes with age

The secret to satisfaction is to focus on the denominator of Equation 3. Don’t obsess about your haves; manage your wants, instead. Don’t count your possessions (or your money, power, prestige, romantic partners, or fame) and try to figure out how to increase them; make an inventory of your worldly desires and try to decrease them. Make a bucket list—but not of exotic vacations and expensive stuff. Make a list of the attachments in your life you need to discard. Then, make a plan to do just that. The fewer wants there are screaming inside your brain and dividing your attention, the more peace and satisfaction will be left for what you already have.

Perhaps decreasing the denominator of Equation 3 is a little easier for you than normal during your isolation, because your expectations have diminished along with your physical ability to meet them. Can you find a way to continue this after the material world begins to beckon again in a few weeks or months?

Think of these three equations as the first class in the mechanics of building a life. But there is much, much more where all that comes from. Hence, this new column. In the coming months, I will pull back the curtain on the art and science of happiness to show how the brightest ideas can illuminate new solutions to our ordinary challenges.

Stay tuned. In the meantime, while you are still stuck at home, go study your equations.

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

ARTHUR C. BROOKS *is a contributing writer at The Atlantic, a professor of the practice of public leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, and a senior fellow at the Harvard Business School.*