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The World Book of Happiness

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The buffer mechanisms

Living and working in Beirut, Dr. Huda Ayyash-Abdo discovers the positive mechanisms of people in a tumultuous country such as Lebanon: “Internal traits are more important than external conditions”. She is teaching the first course in Positive Psychology in Lebanon and perhaps in the Arab region.

How to switch negative impact

Subjective well-being (or life satisfaction) has become an area of research to an increasing number of psychologists and social scientists in the last two decades. Our research in this domain in a developing country such as Lebanon taught us that people do not need ideal conditions to be happy. Rather, they need livable and acceptable conditions to experience satisfaction with life. Socio-economic status seems to play a salient role in levels of subjective well-being. That said, personality traits seem to correlate significantly with levels of subjective well-being. Among those are adaptability, sociability, resilience, self-esteem, optimism, adherence to values, regulation of realistic expectations, and tolerance. Indeed, our research indicates that these internal traits are more important than external conditions.

Lebanon has compromising external conditions; the most significant of which is its chronic political instability that sometimes results in violence. Our research points out that people possess a remarkable level of hardiness that helps them mediate the influence of instability. People use a variety of mechanisms to help them ameliorate the negative impact of political violence and uncertainty. These mechanisms include habituation, denial, sublimation, social connectedness, and engagement in constructive activities that help them create a different and more positive reality than that of the negative existing one—that of political violence.

The aforementioned personality traits are internal mitigating factors between the individual and the environment. There are also external elements that serve as important buffers between the individual and potentially adverse conditions. One such mediating factor is the presence of family cohesion and stable social support. Another external factor is having a goal and working towards it. This gives a person a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

What do we learn? The presence of negative emotions is not to be avoided or repressed. Indeed, negative affect is natural in certain circumstances. For example, the loss of a loved one merits grief and mourning for a certain period of time. However, the ratio of positive affect to negative affect (i.e. for a person to experience more positive affect than negative affect overall) is more of a significant determinant of subjective well-being. In addition, the perception of an event, how it is interpreted, and the importance it is given is equally important in life satisfaction. Not only does a person need to filter through what occurrences trigger negative emotions, but actively engage in activities that elicit positive affect.

QUOTE: “People possess a remarkable level of hardiness that helps them mediate the influence of instability”

The keys:

- **Internal traits are more important than external conditions: from adaptability and self-esteem to tolerance and adherence to values.**
- **People use a variety of mechanisms to help them ameliorate the negative impact of violence and uncertainty: from habituation and denial to social connectedness and engagement in constructive activities.**
- **The presence of negative emotions is not to be avoided or repressed but we have to engage actively in activities that finally elicit positive affect.**

Huda Ayyash-Abdo is an Associate Professor of psychology and the chairperson of the Department of Social Sciences in the School of Arts and Sciences at the Lebanese American University in Beirut (Lebanon). Her research interests include developmental counseling, youth development, and the application of appropriate counseling approaches to Lebanon and other the Arab countries. She lived and taught in the United States for 16 years before returning to Lebanon.