

STOP TRYING TO BE HAPPY

Why the Pursuit of Happiness
Misunderstands Human Functioning



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David S. Morgan

Doctoral Candidate | Walden University | Practitioner-Scholar

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Happiness is widely treated as an achievable and maintainable state. This paper argues that this assumption is structurally incompatible with how human experience operates. Drawing on Adaptive Becoming Theory (ABT), happiness is reframed not as a destination but as a temporary signal within a continuous process of expectation, mismatch, response, and reorganization. The implication is direct: the pursuit of happiness as a stable state is not merely difficult. It is the wrong goal.

Keywords: Happiness; Well-being; Adaptive Becoming Theory; Human Functioning; Hedonic Adaptation; Continuous Reorganization; Mismatch-Driven Reorganization; Process Theory of Well-Being; State-Based Models; Personal Growth

You have had this experience.

Everything is working. The job is solid. The relationships are intact. By any reasonable measure, things have come together. And yet something is not quite settled. A low, quiet pressure you cannot name. A sense that the feeling you expected has not fully arrived.

So you adjust. You optimize. You tell yourself the next thing will resolve it.

It does not.

For decades, we have treated happiness as something you can achieve and, if you get it right, maintain.

Set the right goals. Make good decisions. Build a life that aligns with your values. Eventually, things come together. The effort pays off. You arrive at a version of life that feels stable and finally settled.

It is a compelling idea. It is also wrong.

What feels like a personal problem is often a structural misunderstanding.

Not because happiness does not exist. People experience it every day. But because the underlying assumption, that human experience can resolve into a stable, lasting state, is fundamentally misaligned with how life actually works.

They reach a milestone they have spent years pursuing, a promotion, a successful transition, a long-awaited change, and for a moment, everything feels right. There is clarity. A sense of alignment. The feeling that things have come together.

And then, quietly, it fades.

Not dramatically. Not all at once. But the sense of "this is it" softens. New pressures emerge. The clarity dissolves. The system continues.

We tend to interpret this as a personal failure. We assume we chose the wrong goal, or did not go far enough. So we adjust. We set a new target. We try again.

But what if the problem is not the goal, or the effort, but the model we are using to interpret the experience?

THE PATTERN WE KEEP MISREADING

Across contexts, the pattern is consistent. People pursue something they believe will make them happy. They achieve it. There is a moment where things feel aligned.

Then the feeling changes.

This is not a failure of discipline or ambition. It is a feature of the system itself.

Decades of research, from hedonic adaptation to behavioral decision-making, show the same pattern. Philip Brickman and Donald Campbell's foundational work demonstrated that people return to a well-being baseline after both positive and negative events, normalizing gains and adjusting to new conditions. Daniel Kahneman has shown that people systematically mispredict the satisfaction they will derive from future states (*Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 2011). The feeling we expect to arrive does not hold the way we imagine it will.

The problem is not the goal. It is the assumption that a stable state is available at all.

And that assumption quietly shapes every decision that follows.

A DIFFERENT WAY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS HAPPENING

Across research in behavioral science, neuroscience, and organizational adaptation, the same pattern appears. A more accurate account of human functioning understands it as a continuous process:

expectation → mismatch → response → reorganization

This cycle does not resolve. It repeats.

There is no final state. Only temporary coherence.

We move through the world with expectations about outcomes, relationships, progress, and identity. Reality diverges from those expectations. That divergence creates mismatch. Mismatch is not a problem to be eliminated. It is the signal that drives attention and action. We respond. The system reorganizes.

This framework, developed formally in Adaptive Becoming Theory, integrates converging evidence from predictive processing, flow theory, and self-determination theory into a unified process account of human

functioning. Within this process, there are moments when things come together, when expectations and current reality align closely enough that the system feels coherent. Those moments are what we tend to label as happiness.

But they are, by definition, temporary.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow offers perhaps the clearest illustration. The states of deep engagement and satisfaction he documented in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990) arise precisely when challenge is matched to skill, when the system is actively engaged with manageable mismatch. Flow is not a stable state. It is a region within an ongoing process.

As soon as conditions change, or expectations evolve, the alignment shifts. New mismatches emerge.

From this perspective, the question is not why happiness is so hard to maintain. It is why we expect it to be maintainable at all.

WHAT HAPPINESS ACTUALLY IS

If we stop treating happiness as a destination, it becomes easier to see what it actually represents.

It is not a stable condition. It is a temporary signal, an indicator that, in that moment, you are effectively engaged with what is happening around you. It reflects a moment of successful adaptation.

That is why it often accompanies progress, learning, connection, and creative work. And it is why it fades, not because something has gone wrong, but because the system continues. New conditions emerge. New expectations form. The work of adaptation resumes.

THE COST OF GETTING THE GOAL WRONG

When we treat happiness as something to be achieved and sustained, we optimize for the wrong outcome.

We ask: Will this make me happy? How do I maintain this state? Those questions assume stability is the objective.

But if human functioning is inherently dynamic, stability is not just difficult to achieve. It is the wrong goal.

The result is unnecessary friction. We chase outcomes that cannot deliver what we expect them to deliver. When the feeling fades, we interpret that as a problem to solve rather than a signal to understand. Chronic dissatisfaction follows, not from failure, but from a misread of what the system is doing.

A DIFFERENT SET OF QUESTIONS

If happiness is not a stable state to achieve, the question is not how to get there. It is how to operate within a system that never settles.

That shift changes the way you make decisions.

Instead of asking:

- **Will this make me happy?**
- **Is this the right choice for long-term satisfaction?**
- **How do I maintain this once I have it?**

You begin to ask:

- **Will this keep me meaningfully engaged?**
- **Does this expand my ability to respond to what is changing?**
- **Is this a direction I can continue to grow within, even as it evolves?**

These are not philosophical questions. They are practical ones.

They change how you evaluate opportunities, how you navigate transitions, and how you interpret the inevitable moments when clarity fades.

When the feeling you expected does not hold, the goal is no longer to fix it or replace it. It is to understand what the system is asking of you next.

That might mean leaning into challenge rather than avoiding it. It might mean revising assumptions rather than doubling down on them. It might mean staying with something long enough for new coherence to emerge.

None of these guarantee happiness. But they align with how human experience actually functions. And over time, they produce something more reliable than a stable emotional state: the ability to move with change rather than constantly trying to outrun it.

STOP TRYING TO BE HAPPY

The problem is not that happiness is fleeting. That much is widely understood.

The problem is that we continue to treat it as something that can be stabilized, as an end state rather than a moment within an ongoing process.

Once you see that clearly, the pursuit itself starts to look different.

You stop asking whether a decision will make you happy in any lasting sense. You start asking whether it will engage you, challenge you, and allow you to respond to what emerges.

Happiness still shows up.

But it is no longer something you try to hold.

It is something that appears when you are fully engaged with a life that does not.

About the Author

David S. Morgan is a Doctoral Candidate at Walden University and a practitioner-scholar working at the intersection of organizational theory, leadership, and human development. A former CEO and co-inventor of the Perkins Smart Braille, he is the originator of Adaptive Becoming Theory and the author of more than ten books on leadership, innovation, and human formation.

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