

Constructive Dissatisfaction

It's possible I'm becoming a huge sap over the past few years now that I have children.

So during the holidays I find myself pondering things like the ideal balance between my family and everything else in my life while considering how happiness and time management fit into this equation.

A few weeks ago I wrote about the benefits of [being in control of your own time](#) on the job. One of my astute readers passed along some academic research to back me up on this claim.

Two researchers from the University of Rochester concluded that there are three determinants of well-being based on our innate psychological needs:

1. Competency (skill or ability for a given task)
2. Autonomy (control over your situation or environment)
3. Relatedness (how connected you are to other people and the relationships you build)

Their research showed these three psychological needs play an integral role in our daily well-being.

Obviously, very few are blessed with a perfect situation that satisfies all three of these needs simultaneously. If you're not dealt a perfect hand and in your ideal situation I find the best way to stay happy is to be content and grateful for what you have. This mentality is easier said than done but I've found it can help control things like lifestyle creep and the keeping-up-with-the-Joneses syndrome.

There is, however, a fine line between being satisfied with what you have and a lack of motivation to improve your standing.

I like the idea of constructive dissatisfaction that was presented by MIT professor Claude Shannon from a speech he gave in the 1950s on creative thinking:

Then there's the idea of dissatisfaction. By this I don't mean a pessimistic dissatisfaction of the world - we don't like the way things are - I mean a constructive dissatisfaction. The idea could be expressed in the words, this is OK, but I think things could be done better. I think there is a neater way to do this. I think things could be improved a little. In other words, there is continually a slight irritation when things don't look quite right; and I think that dissatisfaction in present days is a key driving force in good scientists.

Shannon was a mathematician and engineer but his thoughts on dissatisfaction being a key driving force for good sounds like a universal message when applied correctly.

Life is never perfect for anyone as there will always be *something* out of whack in the competency, autonomy, relatedness structure. Lifehack gurus spend a lot of time preaching about time management but what they're really talking about is happiness management.

I don't think there's an exact equilibrium as every individual is different but I approach these deep philosophical questions through the lens of balance (as much as I can).

You try to balance family with your career.

You try to balance wanting more with being content with what you have.

You try to balance wants with needs.

You try to balance work with play.

You try to balance being optimistic with being realistic.

You try to balance learning with entertainment.

There's no formula to aid you in striking the right balance with these endeavors but I suppose that's what constructive dissatisfaction is all about -- the journey is more important than the destination and all that.

I enjoy reading the academic research on happiness because it can help put things into perspective. But it's also a good reminder that no one has it all figured out.

Source:

[Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being](#)

Further Reading:

[Being in Control of Your Own Time](#)

[How to Be More Productive](#)