

Reclaiming Happiness in the U.S.

According to Gallup's 2024 World Happiness Report, Americans under the age of 30 are so unhappy that they have, in fact, pulled the "United States out of the top 20 happiest countries in the world for the first time in the report's history" (Ansberry 1). In a nation founded on ideals of freedom and the pursuit of happiness, we as Americans seem to find ourselves paradoxically grappling with some of the lowest happiness levels in recent history. This trend is particularly striking among young adults, who report feeling less satisfied and more uncertain about the future. Despite a society abundant with opportunities and comforts, something vital seems to be missing. While Americans today, especially young adults, struggle with historically low levels of happiness despite the Constitution's promise of its pursuit, true and lasting happiness can still be cultivated through the deliberate practice of virtue, offering a path to fulfillment even in the face of adversity or challenging circumstances.

To understand why young adults are so disillusioned today, we need to consider the unique pressures and influences shaping this generation, especially social media. Social media plays a significant role in how young people view themselves and their lives. This is evident in Brook Stoney's study in *Computers in Human Behavior*, which showed that 59% of students with extended technology use experienced greater stress, as "extended uses of technology can lead to greater stress," and these "technostresses" can lower individual well-being" (Stoney 1). Also, instead of promoting meaningful connections, social platforms often foster a sense of inadequacy

and competition, where our young generation feels pressured to constantly showcase their lives as being so-called “picture perfect.” This perpetual comparison can breed anxiety and dissatisfaction, leading many to feel that they are somehow failing in the “pursuit of happiness” promised to them by American ideals.

On top of social media, the burden of economic uncertainties also weighs heavily on today’s young adults. For many, the reality of student loans looms over them, with debt obligations stretching well into their adult years, making financial independence feel like a distant goal. According to the St. Louis Fed, Gen Z holds, on average, “13 percent more student debt than millennials did at the same age,” with many feeling “trapped” by rising balances. Rising living costs, including housing, healthcare, and essential expenses, add to this strain, especially in urban areas where job opportunities may be more plentiful but come with a high cost of living. Gen Z, for instance, is reportedly paying “31 percent more on housing than millennials did at the same age, after adjusting for inflation.” Additionally, necessities like car insurance for 16-to-24-year-olds have “more than doubled over the past decade,” while health insurance has “climbed 46 percent” after adjusting for inflation. (Bhattarai and Cocco 1).

Adding on to the financial pressures, young adults also face an unpredictable job market shaped by automation, global competition, and economic shifts, creating a precarious environment where long-term job security is increasingly rare. (Bhattarai and Cocco 1). Even after completing a college education, recent graduates from this generation face higher unemployment rates than the general population, further illustrating the uncertainty in their employment prospects. All these factors combined help create a backdrop of financial instability

and limited opportunity within younger generations, making it challenging for young adults to achieve a sense of financial security or simply security in general, that previous generations might have found more attainable after college. Faced with these financial burdens, it's easy to see why many young adults feel trapped in a cycle of survival, just getting by rather than making progress or getting ahead, further deepening the sense of despondency as they struggle to fulfill the promises of prosperity and happiness inherent in the so-called American Dream.

But it's not just young Americans; many Americans today interpret the "pursuit of happiness" as the attainment of pleasure, success, or material comfort. As we can see in our day-to-day lives, people flaunt their material wealth through nice clothes or vehicles once they achieve this status, either in public or on social media, which ties back to my point about younger generations believing that these material goods are what make you happy due to being disillusioned by social media. This understanding, however, can often lead to feelings of emptiness once we achieve the goals we set for ourselves, leaving us searching for more. Studies have shown that material wealth or external achievements do not heavily affect happiness. For instance, a study by Diener, Horwitz, and Emmons examined some of the wealthiest individuals in the United States and found "their levels of happiness to be barely above that of individuals with average incomes" (Csikszentmihalyi). This is why I believe the Constitution's emphasis on the pursuit of happiness was likely intended by our founding fathers to encourage us to embark on an internal journey of self-improvement and virtue rather than solely on external satisfactions like wealth.

While some critics argue that the pursuit of virtue may seem impractical, especially for individuals facing economic or personal hardship, I would have to disagree as someone who

comes from a low-income household and instead agree with Aristotle's philosophy, which suggests otherwise. Practicing virtue does not require a perfect or easy life; instead, it calls for a commitment to personal growth and resilience, accessible to anyone willing to engage with it. In fact, cultivating virtues like resilience and gratitude offers us a stable source of fulfillment that is not dependent on material success or ideal circumstances. (Nussbaum) For instance, when facing setbacks, practicing gratitude helps us recognize the good that remains, fostering a mindset that supports happiness even in the face of adversity. Practicing virtue doesn't have to be something large; it can be something as small as what I like to do, such as picking up litter on the ground or sidewalk, even if it's not my responsibility. We might not think much of this small act, but taking a moment to clean up benefits not only the environment but also shows that we care for the community and take responsibility for the spaces we share. In this way, a simple act of service reflects virtues like respect for the environment, consideration for others, and a commitment to stewardship. This approach to happiness is empowering, as it enables young adults to actively shape their own sense of fulfillment by embodying these virtues.

The practice of virtue, which includes qualities like gratitude, kindness, integrity, and resilience, creates a foundation for happiness that remains consistent in our lives, regardless of our external circumstances. Cultivating kindness and compassion in one's life allows us to promote strong social connections, which can be essential sources of support during difficult times. Together, these virtues create an enduring form of happiness, offering us inner stability and satisfaction, regardless of whether life aligns perfectly. This path to happiness, grounded in virtue, becomes not only achievable but also beneficial for everyone, regardless of their life circumstances. Some countries are already ahead of the U.S. in realizing this, with examples like

Finland and Denmark, consistently ranking higher than the United States in Gallup's World Happiness Report, emphasizing virtues such as community support, trust, and a focus on well-being over material success. These nations' cultural emphasis on values like social responsibility and compassion has contributed to stronger social connections and a higher overall sense of happiness among their citizens.

One of the most important, if not the most powerful, virtues is gratitude, which can play a transformative role in enhancing our life satisfaction and mental health if we actually practice it. This is not just say; research has shown that regularly practicing gratitude can lead to increased well-being. This is because it allows us to shift our attention from what we lack to what we have, which fosters genuine contentment in our lives. For instance, a study by UCLA Health, with responses from more than 26,000 people, showed that they “found an association between higher levels of gratitude and lower levels of depression” (UCLA 1). Studies by UCLA Health also found that people who are grateful or have a grateful mindset in general “report higher satisfaction with life, stronger social relationships, and more self-esteem than those who don't practice gratitude” (UCLA 1).

We might ask ourselves why people who practice gratitude tend to have better overall well-being. I can answer this question as someone who regularly practices gratitude. It has allowed me to shift my perception, focusing on what I have rather than what I lack in life, which fosters a positive outlook. An example I can think of is that even though I don't have luxury material goods, I have an amazing, loving family and friends, which is something money cannot buy. This shift in my outlook not only enhances my personal happiness but also builds resilience, allowing me to handle any future difficulties more effectively.

Resilience is another virtue crucial for young adults to successfully face today's challenges. In an era in the United States marked by political divisiveness, economic instability, and a mental health crisis at an all-time high, the ability to adapt and overcome adversity has never been more essential for us to succeed. Resilience involves not only enduring the hardships we might face but also learning and growing from them, allowing us to turn something we might see as an obstacle into an opportunity for self-improvement in our lives. Kuranova, Ann, writing in the journal *Psychotraumatology*, describes resilience as "the ability to cope with adversities in daily life" (Kuranova), highlighting that resilience allows individuals to stay mentally healthy or recover quickly even in the face of adversity. This capacity to handle daily stressors leads to better mental health outcomes, especially for those facing heightened risks, supporting the idea that resilient individuals often report higher life satisfaction. Resilience acts as a kind of "mental immunity," providing individuals with a buffer against worsening mental health conditions amidst today's instability (Kuranova). Resilience is also dynamic and context-dependent, changing according to our circumstances yet reflecting stable individual differences that help us maintain purpose and stability, even when external circumstances are uncertain. This path to resilience enables us to adapt and persevere, ultimately fostering a sense of inner stability in the face of life's adversities.

We are inherently social creatures, and community plays a vital role in happiness. A deliberate practice of virtue often involves engaging with others in meaningful ways, showing kindness, empathy, and respect within a community. In contrast to today's highly individualistic society, partly fueled by social media, where happiness is often pursued alone, a focus on

community nurtures deeper, more meaningful relationships. As shown in the *British Columbia Medical Journal*, the relationships we share with those around us ground us in our functional well-being and are essential for mental and physical health. Loneliness, now considered a “growing health epidemic,” is associated with serious health risks like “reduced cognitive function and a higher risk of dementia, as well as stroke, heart disease, and cancer mortality” (Hoverman and Schuld 2). By contributing positively to others' lives, we create a network of support that is particularly beneficial during times of personal struggle or societal challenges. Social initiatives like “social prescribing,” where we can get connected with community activities to enhance their well-being, have shown that fostering social connections can improve both mental and physical health (Hoverman and Schuld 2). Several countries, including the UK and Japan, have even established roles like the Minister for Loneliness, recognizing the need for such social support. This acknowledgment at an international level further illustrates that focusing on the community we belong to not only brings us happiness but also strengthens our resilience and well-being. I believe this reinforces the importance of cultivating meaningful relationships so we can take one step closer to having a fulfilling life.

In a time when the majority of our fellow Americans are experiencing unprecedented levels of dissatisfaction, finding happiness through virtue offers a refreshing, lasting solution. With social media pressures, economic struggles, and the chase for material wealth fueling feelings of inadequacy and instability, real happiness doesn't come from these external pursuits of ours. Instead, it's found in how we develop inner qualities such as gratitude, resilience, and kindness.

These virtues do not only create a strong and adaptable foundation for our well-being, but it helps us thrive even when our life gets tough. Countries that emphasize community and well-being over material success show us that practicing these values consistently leads to supportive communities and personal fulfillment. By focusing less on external achievements and more on internal growth, young adults and all Americans can truly embrace the Constitution's promise of the “pursuit of happiness.” In doing so, happiness becomes more than just a passing goal; it becomes a lasting, achievable way of life, rooted in virtues that uplift both individuals and communities.

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