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## Head's Message: American Women: Unhappy

by Susanna A. Jones



I imagine that many of you have seen or heard press coverage of the annual United States General Social Survey which indicated this year that on the whole, women are less happy than men. A paper by professors at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, titled "[The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness](#)," which analyzes the results of the General Social Survey and numerous other similar surveys from around the world, has prompted this flurry of media attention. While women's happiness has been trending downward since 1972 (while men's happiness, by contrast, has been trending up), this was the first year that women tracked as less happy than men. With the exception of African-American women (who are happier than African-American men), this finding applies to women across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic lines as well as for other characteristics such as marital, maternal, and employment status. This finding has surprised many people, especially since women have made such tremendous strides in the intervening 37 years, while others are not surprised in the least. We all can speculate about why women's happiness may be declining both absolutely and relative to men's; what is important, though, is what we can take from this research for our own purposes.

The first point is related to one I made last week. As women, we need to recognize that if we're unhappy (and not all women are by any means), our unhappiness may result from long term social trends. Research also shows that to a degree (about 50%), whether we are generally happy or sad is genetically determined. That means that we need to be careful about blaming particular institutions for our malaise or despair, or wherever we sit on that continuum of unhappiness.

As someone who definitely sits squarely in the optimistic cohort, I always look for ways to make a situation better. Being unhappy is not a good thing, even for those who seem to revel in their misery. As numerous studies show, being unhappy produces a host of detrimental effects including affecting our health and longevity. While it is certainly worthwhile to pursue public policy and social options that could improve women's lives, we should also look for ways that we can improve our own personal well-being and help our daughters and students construct lives that are inclined towards happiness rather than sadness.

For some of these answers, I will turn first to Marcus Buckingham, the author of a book titled, *Find Your Strongest Life: What the Happiest and Most Successful Women Do Differently*, which offers some insights into women who buck the unhappiness trends. Buckingham offers four prescriptions from his research:

- 1. Focus on moments, more than goals, plans or dreams.**

He suggests that we focus on what he calls “strong moments,” times that when we think back on them “will be a vivid, detailed moment,” a moment that even causes a physical response. As he describes it, we might “sit up a little straighter; our shoulders might go back; our breathing might slow slightly; we might even smile as we cast our memories back. This kind of “moment, and the emotions [we] feel as [we] relive it in [our] minds, is [us], in truth.” And that is the critical point: it is in these moments that we can find our true selves, what we really care about, what energizes us, what genuinely makes us happy. Those moments are obviously going to be different for different people – they might come from deep intellectual engagement, from solving a particularly challenging problem, from helping someone, from the thrill of winning an athletic contest or listening to the audience clap for a performance we’re part of, from enjoying a place of particular natural beauty, or from snuggling with a child while reading to him/her. When we are mindful of these moments, we can identify our true selves. As parents and teachers, we can help our girls find their strong moments. Then, hopefully, we and they can direct our/their lives accordingly.

## **2. Accept what we find**

What Buckingham means by “accept what we find” is to acknowledge and accept what those strong moments tell us about ourselves and don’t try to be something we’re not. Those of us who are mothers can, I think, easily relate to this. If we simply don’t have time to make home-baked cookies for whatever occasion seems to demand them, don’t try and don’t feel bad about it. (I will confess that I’m not very good at this, but I’m getting better). We all know those parents who have a natural gift for playing with small children, who seem to be able naturally to relate to them (my husband has this gift) while these kinds of interactions don’t come as easily to others. Just because we don’t play naturally doesn’t make us a poor parent. Moreover, we shouldn’t force ourselves into roles that are uncomfortable (for one thing we know that children sense our discomfort). Instead, we need to find ways that we do find fulfilling to interact with our children. We can apply this same precept to other aspects of our lives. We all know people who, for whatever reason, have pursued careers that seem like round pegs in square holes. Those people aren’t happy and fulfilled. When we pay attention to those strong moments, and not what society may tell us (or we think is telling us) we should be doing, they give us a compass that will lead to more satisfying and fulfilling life courses. As parents and teachers, we need to pay attention to what our girls’ strong moments tell us and help them and us accept what we find. It’s so important that young people follow *their* hearts and passions, not what *we* might like for them or even what we might have planned for them if those plans are not right for them.

## **3. Strive for Imbalance and**

## **4. Learn to say "Yes."**

These two are closely related and, in many ways the most interesting prescriptions. But I’m going to discuss these next week, so stay tuned.

Read Marcus Buckingham's [blog](#).