HAPPINESS

The Years We Miss While We Are Living Them

Jim Petersen, PhD · June 18, 2026

The happiness illusion

When people reach their seventies and look back on their lives, which years do they remember as the happiest?

Most of us would probably guess the years of greatest success. The years when careers peaked. The years when incomes reached their highest levels. The years when major goals were accomplished and long-awaited dreams became reality.

Surprisingly, that is often not the answer.

Over a six-year project, Cornell gerontologist Karl Pillemer interviewed more than a thousand older Americans, most of them in their seventies, eighties, and beyond, and asked them what mattered most across a long life. Their answers were rarely centered on milestones or accomplishments. Again, they pointed instead to the ordinary texture of daily life: a morning cup of coffee, a familiar face at the table, an unexpected note from a friend. Pillemer found that savoring these small, everyday moments was one of the clearest lessons his elders wanted to pass on.

In other words, when the people who have lived the longest look back, the years they treasure are often not the ones their younger selves would have predicted. They are frequently the ordinary middle years; the years filled with family dinners, youth sports practices, school events, friendships, community activities, and the routines of everyday life.

At the time, many of those same people felt overwhelmed.

They were balancing careers and family responsibilities. They were worrying about finances, aging parents, children's futures, and endless obligations. Like many of us, they assumed happiness was waiting somewhere ahead.

There is research that helps explain why those years can feel so heavy while we are living them. Economists David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald, drawing on data from roughly half a million people across the United States and Europe, found that life satisfaction tends to follow a U-shaped pattern across the lifespan. Well-being is relatively high in youth, declines through the middle decades, and reaches its low point in midlife before rising again. The very years that later look golden are, statistically, the years when many people feel most strained.

Later research points in a hopeful direction. A 2023 study led by psychologist Susan Charles, following about a thousand adults aged twenty-two to ninety-five, found that emotional well-

being generally improves across young adulthood and into midlife, and that later life tends to be a season of relatively high and stable contentment. One explanation the researchers offer is perspective. With age, people focus more on the present and less on what comes next, and they begin to recognize that many of the moments they once overlooked were among the most meaningful.

That observation aligns closely with one of the central themes in my book, The Sun Will Come Up Tomorrow.

Throughout our lives, many of us fall victim to what I call the Happiness Illusion.

We convince ourselves that happiness exists somewhere in the future.

“I’ll be happy when I get promoted.”

“I’ll be happy when I retire.”

“I’ll be happy when the mortgage is paid off.”

“I’ll be happy when the kids are grown.”

“I’ll be happy when life slows down.”

Psychologists have a name for the mechanism behind this. They call it affective forecasting; our effort to predict how future events will make us feel. The research of Timothy Wilson and Daniel Gilbert shows that we are surprisingly poor at it. We routinely overestimate how much a promotion, a purchase, or a milestone will lift us, and how long that lift will last. The achievement arrives, the glow fades faster than we expected, and we set our sights on the next thing.

So, the finish line never stays still. We spend years climbing mountains only to discover another mountain waiting at the top.

Meanwhile, life is happening.

Children are growing up.

Friendships are deepening.

Memories are being created.

And too often, we are so focused on what comes next that we fail to appreciate what is happening right now.

The good old days are usually today

One of the great ironies of life is that people often recognize their happiest years only after those years have passed.

We call them “the good old days.”

But what if the good old days are happening right now?

What if the years we are rushing through today will someday become the years we most wish we could revisit?

That possibility should cause all of us to pause.

The meeting you are hurrying to leave.

The family dinner you almost skipped.

The conversation with a friend.

The soccer game.

The neighborhood gathering.

The evening walk.

The ordinary moments that seem insignificant today may eventually become the moments you treasure most.

A personal reflection

As I approach my seventy-second birthday, I find myself reflecting on this research in a very personal way.

The years I once viewed as the busiest and most demanding are increasingly the years I treasure most.

Those were the years of raising children with my wife Louise. They were years of service in the Navy, years of building a career, years of helping clients, coaching leaders, mentoring professionals, teaching students, and pursuing goals that seemed important at the time.

Like many people, I often focused on the next assignment, the next promotion, the next accomplishment, or the next challenge.

Looking back, I realize those years were not obstacles standing between me and happiness.

They were happiness.

Not because they were easy.

They were not.

Not because they were stress-free.

They certainly were not.

They were happiness because they were filled with purpose, relationships, growth, service, and love.

The very things that matter most.

Success is not the enemy

This is not an argument against ambition.

Achievement matters.

Goals matter.

Growth matters.

As someone who has spent decades helping leaders, business owners, financial professionals, and military veterans pursue excellence, I strongly believe in setting ambitious goals.

The problem is not success.

The problem is postponing happiness until success arrives.

When we tie our well-being exclusively to future accomplishments, we miss opportunities for joy that already surround us.

The healthiest perspective is not choosing between achievement and contentment.

It is learning to pursue both simultaneously.

Work hard.

Dream big.

Set ambitious goals.

But do not sacrifice today’s joy for tomorrow’s possibilities.

What really matters

When Pillemer asked his elders what they would tell a younger generation, almost none of them spoke about quarterly earnings, the size of an office, the car they drove, or the title on a business card.

Instead, they talked about relationships.

They talked about family.

They talked about friendships.

They talked about shared experiences.

They talked about faith.

They talked about moments.

In other words, they talked about life.

The very things that often seem ordinary in the moment become the things that matter most in memory.

The sun will come up tomorrow

Years ago, the wife of someone who worked for me had a habit of focusing on everything that was wrong. No matter what was happening, she seemed able to find the cloud surrounding every silver lining. If the situation improved, she would worry about what might happen next. If something went well, she would quickly shift her attention to something that had not.

Rather than argue with her concerns or try to convince her to see things differently, I often responded with a simple statement:

“The sun will come up tomorrow.”

At first, it was simply a way of reminding her that today’s frustrations were not the whole story. Most problems eventually pass. Most disappointments eventually fade. Most setbacks are temporary, even when they do not feel that way in the moment.

Over the years, however, I began to realize that the phrase carried a much deeper lesson.

Life will never be perfect.

There will always be challenges, disappointments, setbacks, and uncertainties.

Yet there will also be opportunities for gratitude, connection, purpose, and joy.

The challenge is not finding a perfect life.

The challenge is recognizing the value of the life we already have.

Perhaps the greatest lesson from those who have looked back over seven, eight, and nine decades is this:

Do not wait for happiness to begin.

One day, you may discover that the years you were trying to get through were actually the years you will miss the most.

And when that realization comes, you may find that the life you were waiting for was the life you were already living.

The sun will come up tomorrow.

The question is whether we will appreciate today before it becomes yesterday.

References

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