

## Integrating Sustainability Concepts into Psychology of Emotion

### Goal

The goal of this project was to get students to reevaluate the relationship between their happiness and their possessions. The hope was that students would learn that there is very little evidence to support the idea that money or material possessions are associated with happiness. In other words, I wanted to help students understand that to be happy, it's better to avoid buying products and to instead focus on particular kinds of activities and experiences.

### Intervention

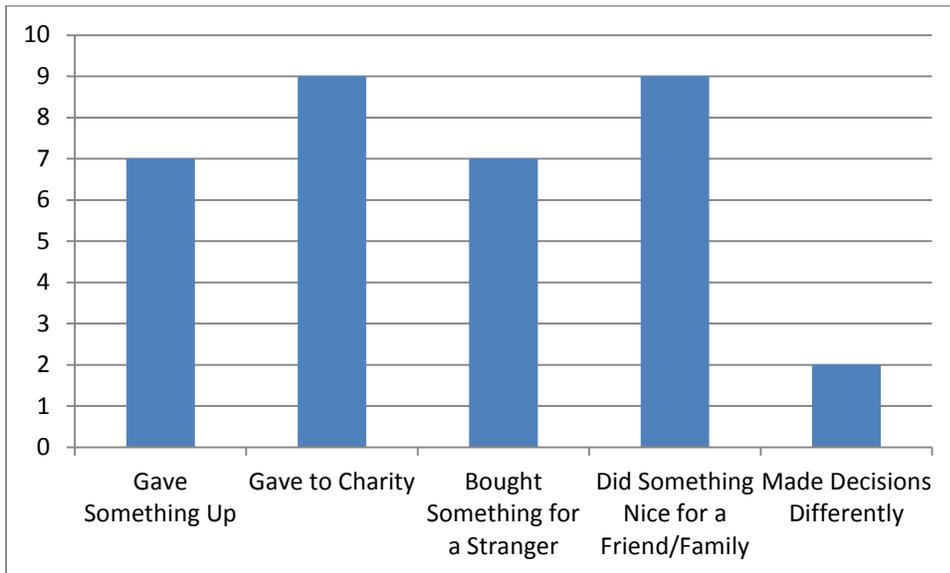
I put together a four-part lecture series with three assignments, titled "Sustainable Happiness."

- Assignment 1. Students wrote brief, in-class, essays about their possessions and their happiness. They were asked to think about both short-term happiness and long-term happiness and to be as honest as they can with themselves as to how they feel *right after* buying something new as well as weeks and months later.
- Lecture 1. Sustainable Happiness. Money: Explored the research behind how money and material goods provide a very small increase in life-satisfaction. Also explored how the best way to use money to increase happiness is not to purchase goods but to engage in activities that you enjoy.
- Lecture 2. Sustainable Happiness. Choice: Identified the ways people make decisions when faced with lots of options and identified how particular decision-making styles are associated with increased happiness.
- Lecture 3. Sustainable Happiness. Charity: Explored the research behind how giving to others is associated with an increase in happiness while buying things for yourself is not. Also explored the research behind how increased money and material goods is associated with antisocial behavior.
- Assignment 2. Students were asked to try something new, rooted in one of these lectures, for a day and write up an evaluation of what they did and how they felt about it. Examples I provided were to go without something they would normally have or buy, give to charity, or make decisions differently (see below for examples of what they did).
- Lecture 4. Sustainable Happiness. Being happy without stuff: Provided some background on what people believe will make them happy and then discussed ten empirically-supported approaches to increasing personal happiness.
  - Spend time with others
  - Seek challenges and meaning in work
  - Smile more
  - Look for ways to help others
  - Take time for yourself
  - Embrace flow
  - Spend time in nature
  - Stay in shape
  - Be Organized
  - Think positively
- Assignment 3. Students wrote essays like assignment 1 again but this time with the additional question, "Has any of this changed since the last time you did this assignment?"

### Examples from Assignment Two

Activities students tried for assignment two fell into five different categories (see below for a frequency count).

1. Gave something up: no phone, no make-up, no caffeine
2. Gave to charity: bought books for kids in need, donated to a particular cause
3. Bought something for a stranger: bought coffee for the person in line behind them, bought a stranger gas,
4. Did something nice for a friend or family member: made dinner for roommates, bought a present for a niece
5. Made decisions differently: tried not to overthink decisions and weight too many options



In general, students found that these changes led to an increase in happiness for the day(s) they did them. The only exception was the group that purely gave something up which ended up being a little more mixed. For instance, two students gave up their phones for the day. One of them reported hating it, feeling out of the loop all day, and worrying that she was missing something important. The other reported that she worried that she was missing things but that, overall, it was a really good experience. She said she was more engaged with the people around her and more mindful of what she was doing. She said she planned on bringing her phone places so she wouldn't worry about missing things but that she was going to leave it in her bag so she wouldn't be inclined to check it as often.

### Outcome Assignment

The primary purpose of assignment three was to assess how students had changed as a result of these lectures and assignments. Results were mixed. The majority of students indicated a change in how they viewed the relationship between happiness and material goods. Students indicated that they felt they were less reliant on possessions and were more interested in relationships. Others said they still felt the urge to buy things but that they did a better job of asking themselves "why" they wanted things or whether or not they "needed" things. Some said they were more thoughtful about how the happiness from a new purchase would wear off over time. Finally, some said they were more inclined to purchase experiences or to give to others than they were to purchase new things.

For those who didn't identify a change, there were two main reasons. First, some simply said that new possessions made them happy and that this hadn't changed because of this class or these activities.

Second, some said that they weren't materialistic to begin and always knew that there was little relationship between happiness and material goods so this class didn't change anything for them.