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Human Needs & Satisfying Events

What Is Satisfying About Satisfying Events? Testing 10 Candidate Psychological Needs



Principle

Satisfying events satisfy basic human needs of autonomy, relatedness, competence, and self-esteem..

Quote

“When people are asked to bring to mind deeply satisfying experiences, they think of experiences in which they felt strongly autonomous, competent, or related to others.”

So What - Application

If basic human needs are autonomy, relatedness, competence, and self-esteem, then it would be useful to ask questions about these when we pursue goals or talk with others about their own goals.

As parents, we can honor autonomy by giving children appropriate choice. We can honor relatedness by building rapport and doing things that build relationships. We can honor competence by teach basic skills to our children, or giving them the opportunity to learn skills in other forums.

Building self-esteem is also on the list, but I would caution that we unpack what that means. The self-esteem movement of the 80’s and 90’s was disastrous for children overall. Here building building self-esteem happens in conjunction with the other three. It’s not about everyone gets a trophy to feel good. It’s about building self-respect with competence and autonomy.

The Research Story

Four researchers from the University of Missouri, University of Rochester, and Knox College did 3 studies to identify basic human psychological needs by asking people questions about their most satisfying events. They started with ten potential human needs including autonomy, competence, relatedness, self-actualization/meaning, physical thriving, pleasure/stimulation, money/luxury, security, self-esteem, and popularity/influence.

In study 1 they asked 322 students to think of their single most personally satisfying event they experienced in the last month. Then they asked 30 questions about the 10 needs so students could rank them. They also asked 20 questions about their emotions during the event. They found that self-esteem, relatedness, autonomy, and competence ranked highest.

In study 2 they asked 152 American and 200 South Korean students to think of their most satisfying event in the last week. Then they answered the same 30 questions about needs and 20 questions about emotions. The same four came out on top in both groups - autonomy, relatedness, competence, and self-esteem. One notable difference was that relatedness ranked higher with the Korean students, reflecting their more collectivist culture. The same set of needs appeared on top, but they were in a different order.

In study 3 they asked 233 American students to think of the most satisfying event in the last semester. They asked all the same questions about needs and emotions. Then they added a second part to the questionnaire, asking students to name the most unsatisfying event they experienced during the semester and then rate what was missing from the experience.

I think the language of the questions helps us better understand basic human needs. During this event I felt:

- Self-esteem: that I had many positive qualities, quite satisfied with who I am, and a strong sense of self-respect.
- Autonomy: that my choices were based on my true interests and values, free to do things my own way, and that my choices expressed my “true self”
- Competence: that I was successfully completing difficult tasks and projects, that I was taking on and mastering hard challenges, and very capable in what I did
- Relatedness: a sense of contact with people who care for me and whom I care for, close and connected with other people who are important to me, and a strong sense of intimacy with the people I spent time with.

Sheldon, K. M., Elliot, A. J., Kim, Y., & Kasser, T. (2001). What is satisfying about satisfying events? Testing 10 candidate psychological needs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(2), 325–339.

