

## HAPPINESS CASE STUDIES

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Here are four examples of people who might claim to have happy lives. Read each example with a partner and rate each one of their lives from 1-5 (1=awful, 5=wonderful, 3=typical human life). Decide which life you'd most like to have and which you'd least like to have.

- (1) **Anil** was a hard working businessman. He worked long hours and his life was very stressful. However, he didn't feel too bad about all the hours he put in the office – he was providing for his loving wife and children, after all. Unfortunately, Anil was being tricked: while it was true that he was providing for his family, in fact, they didn't like him much at all – his wife found him deathly boring and had multiple affairs, and even went so far as to tell cruel lies about him to his children, meaning that they didn't much like him either. Anil died of a stress-induced heart attack aged 58, and his last thoughts were happy reflections on how much his family would miss him. In fact, his wife and her lover skipped the funeral to go drinking to celebrate the fact that he was finally gone and they could get their hands on his money.
- (2) **Boris** was a normal and successful sports coach until he suffered a severe head injury in a car accident aged 29. He immediately fell into a coma. His family were debating whether to keep him alive but doctors reported that there was some residual brain activity. Specifically, scans suggested that while higher function had been knocked out by the head injury, some of Boris's pleasure centers were still highly active – more active than ever before. The doctors believed he was consciously enjoying this pleasure, even though he was now incapable of higher thought or language. Though they couldn't know exactly what it was like for Boris to experience this pleasure, the doctors suggested that it was akin to lying in a warm Jacuzzi drinking sweet tea. Boris was kept alive for a long time on the life support machine, incapable of talking but stuck in this continual state of pleasure, until he finally died aged 103.
- (3) **Cynthia** was born in the year 2350 to a poor family. Rather than become an industrial laborer like her parents, however, Cynthia decided to 'plug in' to The Experience Machine when she was 16. This is a complete virtual reality system indistinguishable from real life, and people in The Experience Machine don't realize they're in it. Before entering The Experience Machine, Cynthia arranged a set of experiences that would guarantee her an experience of a happy life, involving professional success, a wide range of hobbies, and a diverse collection of friends. Once in The Experience Machine, Cynthia's life went just as she'd hoped, and she had an almost perfect set of experiences, involving pleasures most people can only dream of, before she died of physical atrophy aged 60.
- (4) **Deena** was a profoundly religious woman who believed that the most important thing was to give herself to God. From an early age, she prayed many times each day, and devoted herself to good works. She was often tempted by the pleasures of alcohol, companionship, and romance, but believed that these would distract her from doing what was best, namely accomplishing the will of God. When was 16, she joined her local nunnery, where she lived and worked her whole life, mainly focused on prayers and ceremonies, but also doing good works for the poor. Her life was hard and often exhausting, and very repetitive, but brought her some satisfaction. When she was on her deathbed, age 72, she felt sad that she never married or got to experience the world; but she was also firmly convinced that had done the best possible thing with her life.

- (5) **Eren** was a tremendously gifted young scholar and a very hard worker. He was funny, charming, and sociable. Having obtained his first degree aged just 18, his professors all assumed he was destined for great things – a Nobel prize in chemistry or biology, or at the very least a senior research position at a top university. However, Eren chose to dedicate his life to his favorite hobby, stamp collecting. He spent every day alone in his bedroom, carefully tracking down stamps at auctions and hunting for rare versions of important stamps. He briefly considered having a family or cultivating proper friendships, but decided against it since it wouldn't leave him enough time to focus on his stamps. He also considered getting a real job, but decided against it: he made a basic income from selling unwanted stamps, and again, it would distract him from his true focus. Eren didn't get many thrills from stamps, but they brought him tremendous satisfaction (as well as some stress), and he was generally content with his life. He died aged 72, being crushed to death in an unusual stamp related accident.
- (6) **Fernando** was a self-confessed hedonist. Drugs, sex, food, wine, and friendship – he loved it all. Having inherited enough money as a teenager to support him for his whole life, he decided, despite his intelligence, not to go to college. He had sometimes thought about becoming a doctor, but these plans were also shelved: he wanted to embrace pleasure. And he was good at it. Fernando managed to spend all his life in various thrilling and glamorous situations, usually at least a little drunk or otherwise intoxicated. However, he avoided serious addiction or mental illness, and even (somehow) managed to avoid bad hangovers. He had many good friends, although their activities mostly consisted of partying. His intelligence, affability, and charm meant that he never 'went off the deep end', and when he finally died of drug-related organ failure aged 48, he said he "had no regrets, all things considered".
- (7) **Gerry** was a truly gifted artist. His paintings were spectacularly original and breathtakingly beautiful. His dearest wish and greatest ambition was to produce great art, and he produced thousands of paintings. But he barely managed to pay his rent, taking on numerous part-time jobs just to get by. He struggled to sell any of his work, and most people he knew thought his paintings were weird and messy-looking. Gerry believed in himself, deep down, but also went through crippling periods of self-doubt. Sunk deep in poverty, he distracted himself with alcohol and brief sexual encounters, and had frequent bouts of depression. Gerry died age 37, still in poverty. Shortly after his death, his work was recognized as truly inspired and the product of a genius. His paintings became some of the most valuable art objects in the entire world, and his name is synonymous with artistic greatness, a greatness Gerry recognized in himself but which was never acknowledged by the broader world.
- (8) **Hana** inherited her mother's multibillion-dollar business when was still only a teenager. After she finished university, she took over stewardship over the company, and watched it grow slowly over the course of her life. She had a circle of trusted advisors who helped her manage the business, leaving her time to enjoy hobbies and socialize with her circle of friends, as well as being able to travel widely. Nonetheless, Hana saw herself constantly in her mother's shadow; her attempts to diversify the business failed, and she believed that she was incapable of matching her mother's achievements. Although she enjoyed her free time, she always felt deeply disappointed with herself, and when she died age 70, she was convinced that she had failed to live up to her promise and potential.