

Study Proves Stinkin' Thinking Makes You Unhappy

People who look at the past through rose-tinted glasses are happier than those who focus on negative past experiences and regrets, according to a new study published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

The study helps explain why personality has such a strong influence on a person's happiness. The findings suggest that persons with certain personality traits are happier than others because of the way they think about their past, present and future.

The study examined how peoples' ratings on the "Big Five" personality traits relates to their approach to time and life satisfaction. The "Big Five" model assesses how extraverted, neurotic, open, conscientious and agreeable a person is, and rates individuals as high or low on each personality trait rather than assigning them a personality type.

"We found that highly extraverted people are happier with their lives because they tend to hold a positive, nostalgic view of the past and are less likely to have negative thoughts and regrets. People high on the neurotic scale essentially have the exact opposite view of the past and are less happy as a result," says Ryan Howell, assistant professor of psychology at San Francisco State University, who authored the study with SF State graduating senior Jia Wei Zhang.

"This is good news because although it may be difficult to change your personality, you may be able to alter your view of time and boost your happiness," Howell said. The authors suggest that savoring happy memories or reframing painful past experiences in a positive light could be effective ways for individuals to increase their life satisfaction.

Numerous studies over the last 30 years have suggested that personality is a powerful predictor of a person's life satisfaction. These latest findings help explain the reason behind this relationship. "Personality traits influence how people look at the past, present and future and it is these different perspectives on time which drive a person's happiness," Howell says.

More than 750 participants completed surveys about their personality, life satisfaction and "time perspective" – a concept coined by Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo to describe whether an individual is past, present or future orientated. To assess time perspective, participants were asked such questions as whether they enjoy reminiscing about the "good old days" or whether they believe their future is determined by themselves or by fate.

People's view of the past had the greatest effect on life satisfaction. Extraverts, who are energetic and talkative, were much more likely to remember the past positively and be happier as a result. People high on the neurotic scale, which can mean being moody, emotionally unstable and fretful, were more likely to have an anguished remembrance of the past and to be less happy.