

Greater Good - The Science of a Meaningful Life

Go Deep

By [Hanna Roen](#) | June 10, 2010 | [0 comments](#)

Does your happiness depend on the types of conversations you have?

Think back to the last time you sat next to a stranger on a plane and started up a conversation. What did you talk about? Was it minor chitchat—small talk about the weather or the in-flight movie? Or did you dig deeper, into problems you were having with your fiancé’s family or a sticky situation at work? Which type of conversation do you think would be linked to your happiness?



Megha Patil

A recent study published in *Psychological Science* examined the correlation between the types of conversations people have and their levels of happiness.

Researchers from the University of Arizona and Washington University in St. Louis recorded the conversations of 79 undergraduates over four days using a special electronic device: Every 12.5 minutes, it captured a 30-second clip of sounds in the student’s environment. Each clip was then studied to determine if the student was alone or in a conversation, and if that conversation was small talk (e.g., “What do you have there? Popcorn? Yummy!”) or deeper, more meaningful conversation (e.g., “She fell in love with your dad? So, did they get divorced soon after?”). In addition, students filled out questionnaires measuring their happiness and well-being, and their friends also rated the participants’ happiness levels.

Consistent with previous research, more social contact was related to greater happiness: Participants who spent more time with others, and in conversation with them, were the happiest. However, the type of conversation mattered a lot. Unhappier participants were alone more and, when in conversation, engaged in mostly small talk. By contrast, the participants who were rated as happiest had twice as many substantive conversations and more social interaction in general than the unhappiest participants.

The authors note that their results cannot clearly determine whether the types of conversations we have affect our happiness, or the other way around. It’s possible that the happiest people are the most social and just have more close friends with whom to have meaningful conversations. But it’s also possible that substantive conversations positively impact happiness.

The researchers hope to clarify this relationship through future research. But so far their results do suggest “that the happy life is social rather than solitary,” they write, “and conversationally deep rather than superficial.”

About The Author

Hanna Roen is a *Greater Good* editorial assistant.

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