

HAPPINESS

A tale of two doctors, and other people.

I have not done any research on this subject, but a lot of my work revolves around having people be happy in their workspace.

Let me begin with the story of two doctors. Both are Paediatricians, women, and survivors. What struck me was the marked difference in their levels of happiness and energy.

Both began their lives in what would be termed as pretty regular families and had 'arranged marriages' which is quite traditional in India. They were in abusive relationships, in which they continued for many years before ending them, while continuing to pursue their careers. Today when you meet them, one is a highly successful person, who dons many hats, and is full of energy. The other one is also reasonably successful, but has an air of melancholy about her and tends to not achieve all she could. I was curious and decided to listen to them more closely.

The difference that I could discern was in the story they were telling themselves and the world about who they were. One almost revelled in her achievements and celebrated having overcome the difficulties in her life. She saw herself as a survivor, who would not be put down by circumstances, as one who makes her own destiny. The other saw herself as a victim of unfortunate circumstances, believing that fate dealt her a cruel hand and her destiny is to suffer. She was seeing herself in the image that people around her were casting for her, not being aware of who she really was.

What makes some people accept their lot, others to complain and still some remarkable ones, to thrive on what is coming their way and make the most of it? I raise these questions because I believe that also defines who are happy and who are not.

'Happiness is not the absence of pain'. It is what we do despite whatever is happening. It is being able to celebrate who we are, and what we do. It is being able to celebrate even adverse circumstances and see the opportunity in them, and then take it further by celebrating one's strength in having dealt with this. It is the story we tell ourselves.

I live in Mumbai, a crazy, congested; some may say dirty and crowded mega polis, which is throbbing with life and energy. My work is in government hospitals with health care workers, doctors, nurses, housekeeping staff, and administrative staff. The hospitals are a bit like the city, crowded and crazy, with work overload, bogged by inefficient systems and inadequate resources. In every facility I hear the same refrain: our staff is not motivated how can we change that?

To answer this, we went about interviewing those few personnel who were identified as being motivated, to help us understand what keeps people going in this

environment. These were people who had made a difference and were successful; with exactly the same circumstances that everyone else said prevented them from performing even their regular duties well. Here again, I heard the same difference. It was the story that people told themselves about who they were, what their circumstances were, and whether they saw themselves as having the power to make a difference.

Those who were successful saw themselves as being powerful, in the sense that they believed they could make things work. They refused to be 'victims' and continuously sought ways to work through the complicated red tape and bureaucracy. One doctor said to me, "When I go into an office to ask for something, I go in believing it is my right to get it." Another said, "I don't give up. I keep pursuing different ways till I get what I want". And when they hit a roadblock, or a failure, they move on.

I find this ability to focus on what is working, what is there to celebrate a remarkable tool to be happy in this world. It allows you to deal with all that is making one's life unhappy and painful, and keep feeling happy! This is what our work is all about.

Hospital staff is in a service profession. Except for doctors (and that too not all of them), most do not see themselves as contributing to the well being of society; that is the way the hierarchy works. Hence their stories about their work are not about saving lives or making people better, they are about having to work hard without recognition. And they are unhappy. When we started working with these people, we wanted to discover the stories of heroism, of contributing to the health of the patients who came into the hospital. There were plenty of these, and more and hearing them was often an emotional process. When this process happens in a large group, the change in perceptions, about self and each other is perceptible. The value that each one places on self and others increases and the story has changed.

My experience has been that the group is much happier doing their work after this intervention. There have however been two challenges. The first being, how does one measure 'happiness'? The second is sustaining the change. This cannot be a one-time intervention. Being happy can also be a learned behaviour, if we can constantly monitor and emphasise the kind of stories that are being told in organisations, in this case the hospitals. I am not advocating that we should not tell stories of what is not happening, but that these could end with examining what strengths are existing to help change.

I sometimes get a feedback that all this is too idealistic, but when one has seen change and experienced being happy for oneself and others, then it is hard to ignore. I think that it is simplicity of the idea that makes it seem outlandish. We think happiness is all very complicated, and it is some utopian place where there is no pain or difficulties. I believe happiness is available to anyone who seeks it right here, and difficulties and pain are all included in this. All we need is to do is stop searching, accept and celebrate our strengths and find the story that allows us to tap into it.

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