

Have a happy life and a healthy one

The meaning of happiness is something that has taxed the intelligence of philosophers since the time of Aristotle in the fourth century BC. Asking people if they are happy raises more questions than it answers. Is happiness a single emotion or is it a personality trait? Is it merely the absence from the consciousness of unhappiness?

Happiness certainly has some connection with another emotion, that of contentment. Those who feel reasonably content with their possessions in general are for the most part happy. Those who are always reaching for more in goods or esteem are never happy unless they are intoxicated by them.

Writers through the ages have expressed aspects of the phenomenon. James Hogg, the Scottish poet, called the skylark the "emblem of happiness". Alexander Pope talked of "our benign end and aim".

Some commentators have been more bound to earth. Horace, in the first century AD, offers a curiously modern version of one attitude, when he remarks that "We seek happiness in boats and carriage rides", something we see everywhere in our modern world.

Thomas Jefferson made history when he pronounced that among the rights of man is the "pursuit of happiness". Shaw claimed: "We have no right to consume happiness without producing it more than to consume wealth without producing it". Samuel Johnson had a point when he remarked: "Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes some virtues impracticable and others remarkably difficult."

A feature in the 23 November issue of *Nature* discusses the meaning of happiness



and whether there is a link between happiness and health. Research indicates that life circumstances have little effect on long-term happiness. Different kinds of happiness change over time — older people find a decline in both positive and negative moods.

Happiness is increased after marriage, but only temporarily. The observation that married people revert to previous levels of contentment within a few years of the wedding suggests that marriage may bring about other sources of daily happiness such as family contacts while removing some contacts with friends.

Our psychological well-being, or otherwise, is presumably affected by hormone levels of cortisol and adrenaline. More research into the psychological relation between well-being and distress is indicated. People with positive emotions catch fewer colds than depressed ones.

The fact is that the more we think about it the less precise our chosen definition of happiness becomes. Yet it seems clear that poverty is one social factor the elimination of which would make most of us much happier.

Role for babies in ancient society

Our ancestors some 27,000 years ago regarded their newborn recruits as full members of their tribal society, according to a report from Vienna published in the 16 November issue of *Nature*. Plenty of graves of adults dating from the Upper Palaeolithic are known, but graves of young children are rare and may serve to give us some notion of how these new arrivals were regarded by their parents and grandparents.

During the past decade eastern Austria's Upper Palaeolithic sites have been investigated and settlement patterns between the rivers Danube and Krems have proved to be of particular interest. A well-preserved living floor, with a radiocarbon date of about 27,000 years ago, containing stone artefacts and ornaments together with charcoal, ochre and fired clay bearing human fingerprints was revealed.

Of particular interest were two burials about one metre apart found in 2005 and 2006. One featured two infants, thought to be twins, aged between nine and 10 months.

The skeletons were embedded in red ochre and one was decorated with more than 30 ivory beads. The second burial was the skeleton of an infant aged less than three months, also with red ochre.

In the double burial, the skulls were orientated to the north, faces to the east. In the other, the skeleton was lying on its right side, facing south.

Nothing comparable has been reported before and there appears to be no ruling regarding orientation. The skeletons and their ages will add to the debate over Gravettian rituals of long ago.

Singing helps recover lost speech

Aphasia is a distressing affliction and one that may become a serious embarrassment for anyone who is obliged to move in society, however humble his or her role.

Neurologists are aware that sufferers from this ailment have brain damage that disrupts the ability to produce and comprehend language communications. Curiously enough, however, they can sing words that they are otherwise unable to pronounce. Although the reason for this is not understood, it could be that singing slows the rate of speech and permits more retrieval by limiting the number of syllables per beat of the rhythm. Attempts to improve speech through singing exercises have produced no striking results.

However, research into aphasia carried out at the University of Montreal has compared the results of solo singing with choral singing and offered some hope that a therapeutic approach may be possible. When aphasic people were given familiar and unfamiliar songs to perform on their own and with others in a choir, it was found that speech was not improved by solo singing, whereas choral singing produced a dramatic improvement in the recall and pronunciation of spoken words.

It is believed that it is not the singing alone that stimulates memory for language but the experience of mood shared between singers in company. If this is true, the cultivation of choral singing might have potent beneficial effects on sufferers from aphasia.