

Compartmentalization And Happiness, Part 1

James Albright August 22, 2022



Compartmentalizing what you do in flight allows you to focus on what keeps you safe

In previous articles, we've looked at the importance of placing your life as a professional aviator into a "compartment" to allow you to focus on flight while minimizing outside distractions. Along the way we've learned that giving outside portions of your life their own compartments will further strengthen your compartment devoted to flight. We know intuitively that problems within any compartment can turn you from your normal joyous self into a psychological mess. Your misery within any compartment is likely to infect the other compartments and the misery will spread. Your happiness, believe it or not, becomes a safety of flight issue.

Unhappy Aviator = Unsafe Aviator

your normal level of happiness or are you destined to remain at that level forever? Is happiness an emotional or a rational choice? What is the key to being a happy aviator? Do your flight, social, family and work compartments support your overall happiness?

Many of us “ice water in our veins” pilots refuse to believe that our emotions have any impact on our performance at all. If you are naturally happy, maybe that is true. But what if you aren't?

Happiness or Misery: 'Normal' or Learned?

Until recently, many psychologists believed that your personality is shaped primarily by your childhood environment. You are what you are because of the way you were brought up at an early age. Now psychologists realize there is more to it than just environment; it turns out your personality owes much more to your DNA than previously thought.

Consider the identical twin sisters Daphne and Barbara, studied extensively by the University of Minnesota's Center for Twin and Adoption Research, founded by Thomas J. Bouchard, Ph.D. It is the largest ongoing study of separated twins in the world, with nearly 100 pairs registered.

Many of the sisters' similarities were to be expected: They had the same medical maladies (heart murmurs, thyroid problems and allergies) and their IQs were just a point apart. Raised outside London, the sisters left school at the age of 14 and went to work in local government. They met their future husbands at the age of 16, suffered miscarriages at the same time, and then each gave birth to two boys and a girl. They feared many of the same things (blood and heights) and exhibited unusual habits (each drank her coffee cold; each developed the habit of pushing up her nose with the palm of the hand, a gesture they both called “squidging”). None of this may surprise you until you learn that separate families had adopted Daphne and Barbara as infants; neither even knew of the other's existence until they were reunited at the age of 40. When they finally did meet, they were wearing almost identical clothing.

These kinds of coincidences are common among identical twins who were separated at birth but not among fraternal twins who were also separated.

Daphne and Barbara have sunny personalities and tend to burst into laughter in mid-sentence. Their brains seemed to be programmed to look on the bright side. Some other pairs of twins, however, are not so lucky.

Psychology Professor Jonathan Haidt has written extensively about this, notably in his book *The Happiness Hypothesis*. He finds that happiness is one of the most highly heritable aspects of personality. “On just about every trait that has been studied, identical twins (who share all their genes and spend the same nine months in the same womb) are more similar than same-sex fraternal twins (who share only half their genes and spend the same nine months in the same womb). This finding means that genes make at least some contribution to nearly every trait. Whether the trait is intelligence, extroversion, fearfulness, religiosity, political leaning, liking for jazz or dislike of spicy foods, identical twins are more similar than fraternal twins, and they are usually almost as similar if they were separated at birth. Twin studies generally show that from 50% to 80% of all the variance among people in their average levels of happiness can be explained by differences in their genes rather than in their life experiences.”

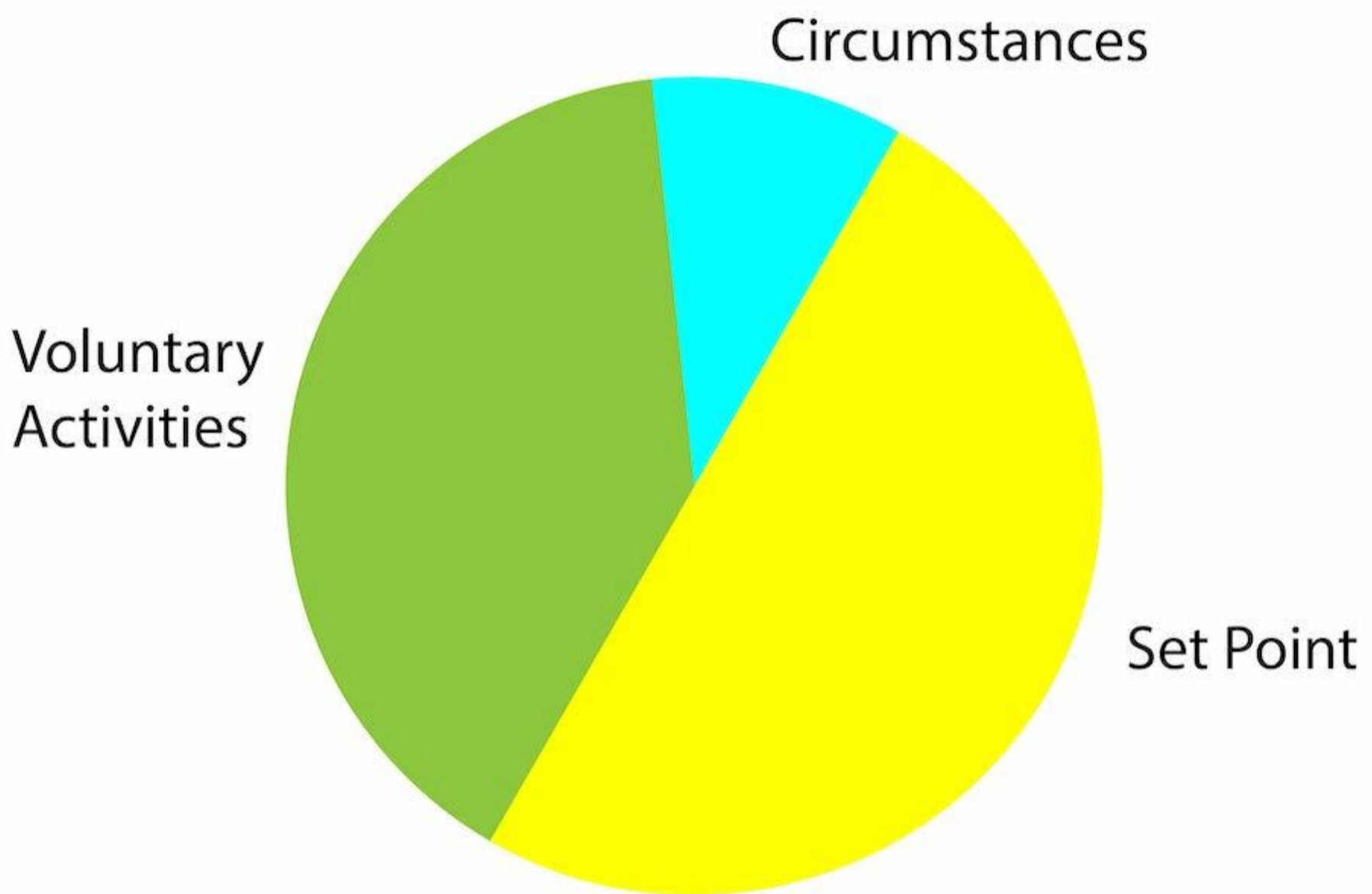
It appears that being naturally happy or miserable is due in large part to our genes. This is obviously good news for those who are naturally happy, bad news for those who are not, and maybe just confirmation of the situation for everyone between the two extremes. For those with a predisposition to being unhappy, the big question is what to do about it? Are you stuck with what you have, or can you do something about it? Wouldn't it be neat if there was a formula for happiness?

In Part 2, we'll discuss how you can control your happiness level.

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Compartmentalization And Happiness, Part 2

James Albright August 23, 2022



Credit: Author graphic

In Part 1, we discussed how being naturally happy or miserable is due in large part to our genes.

Can you control your happiness level?

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Starting in the 1990s, several studies have shown the heritability of well-being may be as high as 80%, although the more widely accepted figure is 50%. Psychology Professor Jonathan Haidt likens this to a thermostat, which is set forever. This “set point” could be dialed into 58 for depressives, for example, and 75 for happier people. So, does this mean we are doomed to be only as happy as our biological set point?

A 2005 study published in the Review of General Psychology offers us hope that we are not doomed to the set point when it comes to our happiness. Researchers Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon Sheldon and David Schkade hypothesize that this set point accounts for half of our potential happiness. Our circumstances, such as our marital status, income or where we live contribute another 10%. Voluntary activities, such as exercising regularly, striving for personal goals, learning new skills or simply learning to look at life through a different lens, account for the remaining 40%.

Haidt notes that since 50% of our happiness is determined by our set point, there is an argument to be made that in some cases medication, meditation or other cognitive therapies might be required to lift our spirits. But in many (perhaps most) cases, happiness can be found in the other components of what Haidt calls the happiness formula: $H = S + C + V$, where “H” is happiness, “S” is the set conditions, “C” is one’s circumstances, and “V” is one’s voluntary activities.

The set conditions, “S,” are the biggest determinant of your happiness; you may indeed be naturally happy or unhappy. But you are not doomed to the fate of your genetic makeup. Changes to the “C” and the “V” can impact your happiness for the better.

Your circumstances include factors you can't change, such as your race, sex and age. But they also include things you have some control over, such as your marital status, your income and where you live. Granted, for the most part, these things are difficult to change.

Voluntary activities are those things you choose to do and thus have a great deal of control over. You can choose to exercise or learn a new skill, for example. As trite as it may sound, you can simply decide to focus on the positive. I find it helpful to straighten out sections of my life and categorize what must happen next to promote overall well-being. “I am doing a good job in the husband compartment; next I need to work on the dad compartment.”

Is Happiness An Emotional Or a Rational Choice?




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One of my earliest rules of life is “happiness takes effort.” But I realize that oversimplifies what is a very complicated subject. There are people with such a strong “S” in their happiness equation that therapy is called for. Even short of that, you cannot simply decide to be happy.

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BECOME A MEMBER

I've heard this best described as the rider on the elephant. Our emotional side is the elephant, and our rational side is the rider. Perched atop the elephant, the rider holds the reins and seems to be in control. But the rider's control is precarious because the rider is so small compared to the elephant. If the 6-ton elephant and the 200-lb. rider ever disagree on which way to go, the rider is going to lose. The key to effectively changing the balance is for the elephant and rider to move together.

Haidt uses this metaphor as well. "We were shaped by individual selection to be selfish creatures who struggle for resources, pleasure and prestige, and we were shaped by group selection to be hive creatures who long to lose ourselves in something larger. We are social creatures who need love and attachments, and we are industrious creatures with needs for effectance, able to enter a state of vital engagement with our work. We are the rider and we are the elephant, and our mental health depends on the two working together, each drawing on the others' strengths."

Effectance is defined as "having a causal effect." In terms of our happiness, we need to know that what we are doing matters. As aviators, we need to believe we are doing good for more than just our checking account balance and the "total" number in our flight logs. Without effectance, you will have a difficult time motivating yourself to put in the necessary hours and effort to be a better aviator.

In Part 3, we'll discuss what is the key to being a happy aviator.

Compartmentalization And Happiness, Part 1: <https://aviationweek.com/business-aviation/safety-ops-regulation/compar...>

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Compartmentalization and Happiness, Part 3

James Albright August 24, 2022



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In Part 2, we discussed how you can control your happiness level.

What is the key to being a happy aviator?

Have you ever noticed that you could have two people doing the same job with completely different outlooks on that job? Consider two captains with the same flight credentials, earning the same salaries, flying the same trips. Why can one be highly motivated and eager for every trip, and the other be dreading every moment? A great deal depends on how we view the job.

Is what you do a “job” and nothing more? If your only reason for working is for the pay and all your passion and effort is devoted elsewhere, then perhaps it is just a job. I’ve known a few aviators who have jobs and would give it all up if they knew they could earn more money with less effort or guarantee the paycheck without the trouble of regular medical exams and check rides. Fortunately, these aviators are in the minority.

As an aviator, there is probably more than a paycheck motivating you. If you have larger goals, such as earning that next type rating, getting that next qualification or some other step in the process of becoming a more valued aviator, you have a career. But even with a career, you can find yourself as a small cog in a big wheel, wondering if you are just striving for advancement because that is what is expected of you. Even a career can end up in dead ends and prove unsatisfying. In short, even careerists can be unhappy. There must be more! There is.

If you find what you are doing is intrinsically satisfying, if you think of yourself as doing something that is greater than yourself, then you have what can be called a calling. You might even be doing it without the benefit of being paid. The job itself, the career itself, the activity improves your sense of well-being. It makes you happy.

We typically think that blue-collar workers have jobs, managers have careers, and the more respected professionals have callings. But that isn’t universally true.

Amy Wrzesniewski, a psychologist at New York University, finds all three orientations represented in almost every occupation she has examined. In a study of hospital workers, for example, she found that the janitors who cleaned bed pans and mopped up vomit—perhaps the lowest-ranking job in a hospital—sometimes saw themselves as part of a team whose goal was to heal people. They went beyond the minimum requirements of their job description, for example, by trying to brighten up the rooms of very sick patients or anticipating the needs of the doctors and nurses rather than waiting for orders. In so doing, they increased their own occupational self-direction and created for themselves jobs that satisfied their effectance needs. Those janitors who worked this way saw their work as a calling and enjoyed it far more than those who saw it as a job.

If any job can be viewed as just a job, a career or a calling, then the battle for occupational happiness would seem to depend on how you view your job. An early step in that process is to find a job that you can do well and then do well at it. But if you want to do well at it, you need to motivate yourself to put in the effort. If you view what you do as a calling, the motivation step becomes almost automatic.

You can make a good living as a pilot and be miserable at it. (Some of the most unhappy pilots I know are also some of the best paid.) If you want to be a happy aviator, you need to find something about what you are doing that makes it a calling.

I must admit that there have been times when I thought of flying airplanes as just another job. In this mode, it was hard to motivate myself to work at keeping sharp. I realized after a while that what really energized me to this profession was flight instructing. And that became my calling. This may or may not be your passion but finding out what it takes to get you to approach aviation as a calling will do wonders for your motivation and happiness.

Do Your Various Compartments Support Your Overall Happiness?



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Much of our happiness is determined by factors beyond our control, but it is also influenced by factors we do control. As aviators, we can motivate ourselves to work harder if we view what we do as a calling. A happy flight compartment not only makes us better aviators, but it also improves the other compartments. And if we improve the other compartments, they will support our flight compartment in return. It is a symbiotic relationship.

Your social compartment includes your ego and your inner drive to be and do more. Your legacy could be to have a very long and accident-free career. Knowing that could turn that career into your calling. This compartment also includes the people you fly with. We are all a product of the relationships we've had, the people we've influenced, and those that we have been influenced by. It could be that the actual flying is not the nexus of your calling, but a part of it. It could be that having a positive impact on how others fly is your calling.

Your family compartment can be a great support for your calling, or it could be the reason you see it only as a job. I believe your family will support you as an aviator if it is obvious to them that you support them as a family. If you show your family the love you have for them and the reason what you do for a living is more than just a job, they should support you. Be honest about the risks and how hard you must work to keep up. Include them in the joys of aviation so they can share that joy. Let them know why the flight compartment must have a special part of your life to keep you safe, just as they must have a special compartment in your heart to keep you grounded.

Your work compartment is a natural place to look for something larger than yourself. You might be tempted to minimize your impact on the human condition but remember all you need is to leave the world a better place than it was before to have a positive impact. My first civilian job was flying for Compaq Computer, the company that took IBM's monopoly away and played a key role in bringing computing to the masses. I could say that I was simply a bus driver shuttling our executives from city to city, and in a sense that was true. But I was also making it possible for them to do their jobs, having a profound impact on the world's ability to join the computer revolution. And that was also true. If you can learn the reason your job exists and understand that as an aviator you enable your employers to do their jobs more effectively and profitably, you will have a reason for what you do that is bigger than yourself.

All of this leads to the reasons you need to compartmentalize everything. Compartmentalizing what you do in flight allows you to focus on what keeps you safe. Paying the necessary attention to the social, family and work aspects of your life increases the value of each compartment. This should put your mind at ease, allow you to focus on what is important, and make it easier for you to be happy in every compartment. And that is the calculus that makes this equation work:

Happy aviator = Safe aviator

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Compartmentalization And Happiness, Part 2: <https://aviationweek.com/business-aviation/safety-ops-regulation/compar...>

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