



LESSON PLAN

The Nature of Happiness



RELATED FILM

Mr. Happy Man

BY MATT MORRIS



The Nature of Happiness

Key Idea

The pursuit of happiness can seem arduous, requiring effort and time to reach one's goals. Yet, sometimes, happiness can be simple, experienced through moments of love and attention.

Background

Most people put a great deal of effort and attention into achieving happiness. The U.S. Constitution recognizes “the pursuit of happiness” as an inalienable right. Yet, According to *The Washington Post*, studies show that while Americans are getting richer, we are not getting happier. In fact, our level of happiness has gone down since 2005.* In support of a global shift in how we think, work toward, and spread happiness, the United Nations has adopted a resolution that identifies “happiness” as an indicator of social progress. Member countries are invited to assess the happiness of their citizens through the Global Happiness Index, which uses six measures to explore who is happy and why. Rankings from 2015 show Switzerland, followed by Iceland, Denmark, and Norway as the happiest countries in the world, with the United States ranked at number 15.

The short film, *Mr. Happy Man* by Matt Morris, documents the life of 88-year-old Bermudian, Johnny Barnes, who devotes six hours of his day greeting passers-by at a traffic circle in the capital city of Hamilton, with the hope of spreading positivity and joy as well as being of service to others.

*Brigid Schulte, “[Why the U.S. rating on the World Happiness Report is lower than it should be – and how to change it.](#)” *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2015.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.11-12.1.c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.



Film: 10 minutes

Class: 60 minutes

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- English Language Arts
- Philosophy
- Sociology

COLLEGE

- English
- Philosophy
- Sociology

THEMES

- Positive role models
- Social and emotional learning
- Encouragement

MATERIALS

- Online access to the film
- Equipment for showing film

PREPARATION

- None



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Common Core English Language Arts. SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 [or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Psy.2.9-12. Investigate human behavior from biological, cognitive, and sociocultural perspectives.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Share with students that the United Nations now recognizes the importance of happiness as a measure of global well-being. Since 2011, the U.N. has invited member countries to track the happiness of its citizens. The World Happiness Index measures happiness through six variables:

1. Money (spending power)
2. Health and life expectancy
3. Social support (having someone to count on)
4. Freedom to make life choices
5. Freedom from corruption
6. How generous one acts and feels

Ask students what they think about this list. Is there anything missing from this list that they feel should be recognized as an indicator of happiness? Ask students: What are some things that make them happy? Do students think happiness can be inspired and shared? If so, how?

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Introduce the film by telling students they will be watching a film about Johnny Barnes, an 88-year-old native Bermudian man. Since 1986, Barnes has performed a daily ritual of standing on a street corner in Bermuda's capital city of Hamilton. He shares positive affirmations to passers-bys.

Direct students to watch the film and ask them to take note of Barnes' personality traits. Ask students to make a list of the comments that he says and the responses he gets from the people with whom he interacts.



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Delving Deeper

After viewing the film, lead a discussion with such questions as:

- Make a list of the ideas and beliefs of Johnny Barnes that support his efforts to make others happy. (Some answers include: living a life of service, enjoying the beauty of nature, loving each other, and joy comes from helping others.)
- In the film, a radio host said, “a lot of people couldn’t understand why he would do what he’s doing.” In your own words, describe the motivation behind Johnny Barnes’ actions.
- What are three synonyms and three antonyms of the word “happiness”?
- One woman interviewed in the film explains that she did not want to look at Johnny Barnes when she was driving to work one morning because she wanted to “hold on to my unhappy moments.” Why might someone want to hold on to unhappy moments?
- If you could summarize what Johnny Barnes represents in one sentence, what would be your description?
- The Greater Good Science Center has collected research showing that people who are kind and generous toward others tend to be happy, and that happiness contributes to being kind and generous. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- Do you think happiness is something one can work toward? If so, how?

Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. Is happiness a choice? This question is explored on [Debate.org](https://www.debate.org), a free online debate forum. Visit the website and read two arguments for “yes” and two arguments for “no”. In a paragraph, describe why you agree or disagree with one of the arguments. Use the film and your own experiences to support your point of view. (CCSS.ELA.SL.11-12.1.c)



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2. As portrayed in the film, a statue of Johnny Barnes was commissioned and erected at the Hamilton traffic circle in his honor. Imagine that you are chosen to write a plaque for the base of the statue. Create a one-sentence inscription honoring Johnny Barnes. In a paragraph, describe the reasoning behind your inscription. (C3.D2.Psy.2.9-12)
3. Jane Goodall, educator and primatologist, says, “ I have many kinds of happiness. I’m completely happy when I’m alone in nature... I’m really happy when I sit around with friends in the evening, particularly around a campfire where we can tell stories... I’m totally happy when I’m walking with a dog. Dogs make me really, really, happy because you can just be yourself with a dog.”* Write a paragraph, similar to Goodall’s description. What are some things in your life that make you feel content and happy? Why? (CCSS.ELA.SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1)

* Jane Goodall interviewed for the movie, [“Human.”](#)

Resources

Peter N. Stearns, [“The History of Happiness.”](#) Harvard Business Review, January –February 2012 issue.

Darrin M. McMahon, Ph.D., [“A History of Happiness.”](#) YES! Magazine, October 1, 2010

Matthieu Ricard, [“The Dalai Lama: Happiness from Within.”](#) International Journal of Well Being, 2011.

Brigid Schulte, [“Why the U.S. rating on the World Happiness Report is lower than it should be – and how to change it.”](#) *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2015.