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HASS465: The Good Life

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### A Synthesis of Perspectives on The Good Life: The Importance of Presence

The soft glow of blue LEDs dimly light the young college student's room until 2 AM. His dopamine receptors are unnaturally stimulated, so completely loses his sense of time. An adolescent girl knows she should be working on her final report due in a few days for her history class, but her bottomless TikTok "For You" page teleports her out of the urgency of the deadline. A 78-year-old retiree feels overwhelmed by how quickly the little graphics on his phone screen change month-by-month, but he feels powerless in the fact that his evening routine consists of his unrelenting Facebook feed. An overworked single mother wishes she could connect with her son and daughter in a more intimate fashion, but her feelings overwhelm lead to her handing them both iPads while she retreats into her own device. All of these individuals share the common contradictions of feeling lonely and connected, tired and wired, bored and overstimulated, and fulfilled and guilty.

It is not uncommon for the average adult to spend almost seven hours per day on electronic devices partaking in non-work related activities. In higher ranges, individuals spend ten to fourteen daily on such devices, which can be twice the commitment of a full time job. An essential aspect of living a good life is deliberately distancing oneself from the unrelenting stream of noise and distraction from the modern world. The world of 2024 is vastly different

from the one where homo sapiens evolved. Technologies have been meticulously designed to relentlessly emotionally exacerbate users for as long as possible, and the practices of Flow and Deep Work described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Cal Newport respectively are becoming increasingly harder to reach. Csikszentmihalyi, who is a world-renowned positive psychologist, defines flow as “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.”. (Csikszentmihalyi, Oppland, Madeson) Newport, who is both a well-known Computer Science professor at Georgetown University and a non-fiction author, defines deep work as, “Deep work is also an activity that generates a sense of meaning and fulfillment in your professional life. Few come home energized after an afternoon of frenetic e-mail replies, but the same time spent tackling a hard problem in a quiet location can be immensely satisfying.”. (Newport) Both of these concepts will be later discussed in the context of living well in the twenty-first century. **A sense of presence is essential to feel physically, mentally, and spiritually fulfilled, and individuals must overcome the modern world’s increasingly potent multi-directional pull to be increasingly distracted in all avenues of life.**

First, the rise of mental health issues emphasizing depression will be analyzed through the perspective of societal trends in a wide array of modern and developing societies. Next, the concept of presence will be discussed from both points of view ranging from ancient philosophy to modern psychology, and the reasons for why this topic is essential for living a good life will be outlined. Finally, a conclusion will be made on how to best approach the necessity of presence in living a good life.

Reported rates of mental and physical health issues have rapidly increased in the past few decades for a variety of reasons: diminishing social connections, an increase in technology use,

the rapid rise in addictive products, and more. According to Brandon H Hidaka, M.D., Ph.D., in an article he wrote in the National Library of Medicine,

Mental and physical well-being are intimately related. The growing burden of chronic diseases, which arise from an evolutionary mismatch between past human environments and modern-day living, may be central to rising rates of depression. Declining social capital and greater inequality and loneliness are candidate mediators of a depressiogenic social milieu. Modern populations are increasingly overfed, malnourished, sedentary, sunlight-deficient, sleep-deprived, and socially-isolated. These changes in lifestyle each contribute to poor physical health and affect the incidence and treatment of depression.

These claims of declining health statistics in both physical and mental health by Dr. Hidaka are backed from various sources. According to a Pew Research article by research advisor Giancarlo Pasquini and survey advisor Scott Keeter, 41% of the United States adult population have experienced high levels of psychological distress between the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic in March 2020 and the publication date of the article in December 2022. The group that experienced the highest rate of distress was the young adult age range 18-29. As evidenced by another Pew Research article by associate director John Gramlich, 76% of United States parents expressed levels of concern for their children's anxiety or depression, and 53% of the distraught parents specified concern in the "Extremely/Very" category. A Gallup meta-survey representing 77% of the world's population in the article "Almost a Quarter of the World Feels Lonely" by senior research consultant Ellyn Maese describes the worldwide pandemic of loneliness. The stereotype of the loneliest population group being the eldest is broken with the highest rates of loneliness reported by the youngest cohorts at 55% and 57% for the age groups 15-18 and 19-29 respectively. The lowest rates of loneliness correspond to the oldest age group, still high at 42%. This article also articulates profound negative physical and mental health impacts that are induced by loneliness.

In 2023, 19th and 21st US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy wrote an advisory called “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation”, and he meticulously describes the causes, effects, and proposed solutions for the United States loneliness epidemic. Page 14 of the advisory outlines substantial consistent downward trends from 2003 to 2020 in the context of household family and friend social engagement, both in and out of the household. Dr. Murthy explains how a lack of social connection could have negative health effects equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes daily and with almost 100% confidence worse for health than air pollution, obesity, physical inactivity, and having 6 alcohol drinks daily. This advisory cites an array of factors to cause this loneliness epidemic: those suffering from mental illnesses, dealing with financial hardship, are a part of younger demographics, and are a part of gender and ethnic minorities or identify as LGBTQ+ are more likely to be lonely. (Murthy 19) The U.S. Surgeon General then delves into the connection between social disconnection and the increasing prevalence of technology use. Social media use has grown drastically for the over 18 population, from 5% in 2005 to 80% in 2019, and rates are even higher for teen users in 2022 at 95%. In many contexts, technology and social media use increase the number of connections, but vastly diminish their quality and replace in-person socializing. This demographic trend is also known to harm the depth of intimacy of face-to-face conversations when they do happen due to what Murthy describes as, “...increased distraction, reduced conversation quality, and lowered self-reported enjoyment of time spent together...”. (Murthy 20)

These perspectives from Dr. Hidaka, the Pew Research surveys, the Gallup meta-survey, and Dr. Murthy share the common theme of relating to feelings of disconnection and a lack of presence. Next, ancient and modern perspectives of presence will be discussed, and an

overarching conclusion will be made integrating these philosophies to combat the aforementioned crises of burnout, distraction, depression, and loneliness.

The importance of presence in order to live a good life has been outlined by both ancient and modern points of view. Starting with Eastern Philosophy, Confucius was one of the most well-known Chinese philosophers of all time and was known for being the first teacher to rally for widespread education. He emphasized the value of being present in one's immediate community and relationships. For him, presence meant engaging deeply with the roles and responsibilities dictated by familial and social hierarchies, thus ensuring harmony and moral rectitude in society. "The Master said, "At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. "At thirty, I stood firm. "At forty, I had no doubts. "At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. "At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. "At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right."". (Confucius) This analect emphasizes the importance of individuals achieving their designated role in society, and there is an implication that a state of presence is essential in doing so: one is only able to succeed in their prescribed identity through full immersion in the task at hand.

Lao Tzu is a well-regarded Chinese Philosopher and author of the foundational Daoist text, the Tao Te Ching. As opposed to putting as much emphasis on one's societal role, he proposed a form of presence that embraced simplicity and spontaneity, encouraging individuals to align with the natural flow of the Tao, or the way of the universe, thereby finding peace in non-contention and effortless action. "Who can wait quietly until the mud settles? Who can remain still until the moment of action?". (Lao Tzu) This perspective implies the importance of attentiveness and tranquility in one's life, which is the antithesis of the hyper-stimulating nature of aspects of modern society.

Contrasting Lao Tzu's thoughts on spontaneity and serenity, Buddha introduced a more introspective aspect of presence through mindfulness, emphasizing awareness of the moment-to-moment experiences to transcend suffering. This involves a thorough observation of one's thoughts, emotions, and sensations to recognize the impermanent nature of all phenomena. "Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment." (Buddha) Buddhists emphasize the importance of only worrying about the present, which is a key step in reaching the ideal Buddhist state of Nirvana, the cessation of rebirth.

While Buddha advocated for mindfulness meditations, Epicurus focused on the sensory experiences of the present, and he promoted a life that seeks pleasure and avoids pain through moderation. He deemed simple living and the cultivation of friendships essential for happiness. In The Principal Doctrines of Epicurus, Doctrine 18 states, "Pleasure in the body admits no increase when once the pain of want has been removed; after that it only admits of variation. The limit of pleasure in the mind, however, is reached when we reflect on the things themselves and their congeners which cause the mind the greatest alarms." (Epicurus, Hicks) The philosopher in this excerpt states the importance of living simply and not accumulating unnecessary desires. This concept connects to presence since living mindfully can be interpreted as focusing on one's present needs versus worrying about extraneous ambitions.

Epicurus was known for views regarding hedonism, but Nietzsche and Sartre, both existential philosophers, stressed the importance of individual presence in creating one's essence and meaning in life. Nietzsche's notion of 'Amor Fati', the love of one's fate, encourages embracing every moment of life, regardless of its nature, as essential to one's existence. Sartre, advocating for existential freedom, argued that individuals are wholly responsible for their

actions and must live authentically in the present, facing their existential choices without the deception of predetermined essences or values.

Modern psychological perspectives on presence add a new lens on ancient wisdom, but also include major conceptual intersections. Jonathan Haidt, who is a well-known social psychologist and author, introduces a psychological dimension to presence. In his 2006 book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Haidt makes separate arguments on the importance of presence and draws direct connections to the previously mentioned ancient points of view. Haidt uses the analogy of the elephant and the rider to discuss the complex interplay between one's emotional and rational world respectively. Haidt discusses the importance of awareness of one's emotional states in order to be fully present, since one's logical and feeling minds are inseparable. Next, Haidt discusses the concept of presence through Vital Engagement, which are actions that strike a balance between fulfillment and challenge. Haidt later suggests that happiness stems from between individuals rather than within an individual. This perspective aligns with a broader sense of presence in social communities and meaningful interpersonal connections. Finally, Haidt concludes in this book with various concepts that directly connect to Aristotalean views, Buddhism, Daoism, and Stoic Philosophy when discussing living virtuously, meditation, and cognitive behavioral therapy.

Cal Newport proposes a more focused approach through his concept of 'Deep Work', which is about cultivating a deep, uninterrupted presence in one's professional activities to derive fulfillment and productivity. Additionally, the professor offers unique perspectives on productivity that can be argued to increase presence in the workplace and beyond: context switching and seasonal working. First, Newport posits that context switching, the act of rapidly shifting between different tasks or thought processes, undermines productivity by preventing

individuals from fully immersing themselves in deep, meaningful work. It causes cognitive overload, leading to increased mental fatigue and a diminished ability to focus, which can exacerbate stress and contribute to burnout. This constant switching also disrupts one's sense of presence, as it fragments attention and detracts from the quality of engagement in any given task, exacerbating the sense of loneliness and addiction tied to modern technology, where distractions fragment attention spans and erode the quality of personal connections. In addition to fighting context switching, Cal Newport discusses a unique work schedule. In the New York Times article, written by Newport, titled "To Cure Burnout, Embrace Seasonality", the professor argues that human productivity has historically been structured around the four seasons, and hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists would inevitably have extended periods of downtime and a cyclic nature of tasks to be completed. Newport states that modern knowledge workers, who do experience seasonal productivity in some contexts, largely face an unrelenting pace of assignments and deliverables. The author compares modern work to the flawed systems commonplace in the Industrial Revolution: "And yet, as more of us shifted into the comparable comfort of office buildings, we carried over the same flawed model forged on the factory floor." (Newport) To expand upon the Computer Science professor's arguments, these breaks must not only distance oneself from the frenetic nature of modern knowledge work, but individuals must make proactive efforts to take care of themselves to avoid physical, mental, or emotional depletion. On a podcast with Stanford Professor of Neurologist and Ophthalmologist Andrew Huberman, Newport specifies his views on his beliefs of Csikszentmihalyi's definition of Flow: Newport: Csikszentmihalyi disagreed in the sense that the Computer Science professor believes a flow state is associated with performance, but the deep work required to perform highly is too taxing to be classified as flow. To summarize, professor's views on Deep Work, combatting

context switching, and seasonal working schedules are all strategies to improve one's sense of presence and well-being. These arguments are often made in the context of the workplace, but Newport does specify the importance of applying these principles in all aspects of life in order to be more present.

The modern world clearly brings sophisticated challenges that may seem insurmountable. Lack of presence in one's work, relationships, broader community, and purpose can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of instant gratification and addictive behavior in the context of physical drugs, but also technology addiction. In addition, and as previously outlined, modern societies have become increasingly secular, and there have been dwindling rates of community involvement due to factors like suburban sprawl, which is related to the additional negative effects of physical inactivity, rates of obesity, and respiratory issues caused by pollution.

Causes of despair, distraction, and disconnection deriving from a lack of presence are a societal, systemic issue, and individuals aiming to improve their sense of presence in their lives must respond with an integration of ancient and modern perspectives: taking care of one's intertwined physical and mental health, self-compassion, and instilling an internal locus of control.

Clinical Psychologist Christopher Germer defines the concept of self-compassion as "when we suffer, treating ourselves with the same kindness and understanding that we would treat a dear friend". Germer describes how Educational Psychology professor Kristin Neff initially brought this concept to the peer-reviewed academic world, and this idea became further developed with the backing of mindfulness. Germer describes how practices involving self-compassion to combat feelings of shame were the sole factor in successfully combating twenty

years of public speaking anxiety. As described by Dr. Neff, mindfulness is a key pillar in her model of self-compassion, and she describes the opposite of this concept as self-absorption and rumination. Lao Tzu, Buddha, Sartre, and Epicurus' views would align with this notion, since this unideal state goes against their respective views on tranquility, not dwelling on the past or future, authenticity, and avoiding extraneous desires. Another pillar from Neff's model of self-compassion, common humanity, is an essential aspect of being present in one's life: relying on low-quality social media based interactions are the antithesis of a fully engaging face-to-face interaction. Haidt, Newport, and Csikszentmihalyi would all agree regarding the importance of quality in-person, undistracted interactions: doing so fits their ideas of friendship, combatting context switching, and flow respectively. Germer adds to Neff's framework by arguing that rumination, loneliness, and self-doubt are all components of shame, which is the opposite of self-compassion.

Shame can be a common and overpowering emotion that can make one feel a lack of control in one's life. As outlined earlier, systemic factors out of the control of an individual have caused considerable issues regarding mental health and social connection. An individual's all-consuming sense of shame while facing these complicated issues can lead to a downward spiral of inaction and further shame. In his advisory, Dr. Murthy describes reinforcing cycles of loneliness in other contexts: "Being in poorer health can become a barrier to engaging socially, reducing social opportunities and support, and reinforcing a vicious cycle of poorer health and less connection.<sup>117-119</sup> A similar kind of pattern could occur among those struggling financially.". (Murthy 21) These examples of poor health and finances can often carry heavy associations with feelings of shame, which further exacerbate such issues in a bi-directional fashion. In order to break out of these spirals, individuals must live by an internal locus of

control. It is essential for individuals to take meaningful action to work towards solving their problems versus ruminating.

In the longest ever study on happiness from Harvard University, men and some of their family members were tracked for nearly 80 years, and members of the study were tracked on various parameters including socioeconomic status, health, and more. While many involved in the study believed financial security to be the most important factor in fulfillment, the almost century long analysis concludes that quality relationships are most essential. The director of the study, Robert Waldinger, MD, describes how relationships lower stress, delay mental and physical decline, and are the number one factor in determining an individual's happy life in the long term. Being present in the ways defined by ancient and modern perspectives is necessary to have meaningful relationships: the most fulfilling connections with others involve mutual depth of care and genuine interest. They require slow, authentic, tranquil attention that contradicts the default state of fragmented attention in 2024. Individuals need to make deliberate efforts to dim the habitual faint blue light at 2 AM. With compassion and empathy, it is entirely possible to escape the widely shared contradictory emotions so many people feel. Hope exists in the quiet breeze of the sunrise over a mountaintop. Hope exists in the shared laughter of a family dinner. Hope exists in a quiet, mundane conversation between two friends who run into each other at the grocery store.

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