

How Come I'm Not as Happy as I Am Rich?

by George Pransky, PhD

If I bust my hump for 10 years I can accumulate a huge net worth and then I can have a wonderful life. I will have financial security, peace of mind, time to get close to the family, freedom to do whatever makes me happy -- all the things that make for a good quality of life.

Now it's 25 years later. To your credit you have gained that net worth. Yet, all the expected accoutrements of wealth have been elusive. You're wealthy but you don't feel financially secure. In fact you feel stressed and under the gun financially. Theoretically you have more time for family but you feel less close to your family today than you did when you spent all that time away. You deserve to have peace of mind but you still have so many things on your mind that take away your inner peace. What is the deal? Why is there such a gap between your standard of living and your internal quality of life?

I gave a talk at a Young Presidents Organization (YPO) conference and pointed out this gap between standard of living and internal quality of life. I asked people how to close the gap. One participant's suggestion was, "Get rid of your material possessions!" I asked the young presidents how to improve their standard of living and that was easy for them to answer. They sited working harder, investing well, setting goals, and seeking out a mentor. When it came to improving their internal quality of life, they were stumped.

When one of the participants suggested that a person could get a nice, quiet place on the water, another participant pointed out that was a standard of living issue. "That wouldn't give me any peace of mind", he said, "it would just add to my headaches". "Besides sitting looking at the water is not my cup of tea." Another participant said, "Okay, if that's not your cup of tea then just accumulate what is your cup of tea!"

A third participant put all three statements in proper perspective. "This room is filled with successful business people who are surrounded by what they thought would make them happy. Yet, speaking just for myself, this gap between standard of living and internal quality of life exists in my life and it might even be a bigger gap than when I was a struggling entrepreneur."

To close this gap you must understand internal quality of life at least as well as you understand how to be successful in the external world. You must understand that your internal quality of life is generated within your own mind. Internal quality of life is produced by the mind and not received through external circumstances. Your internal quality of life will go up as you understand how the mind works and as you understand where well-being truly comes from.

What do I mean by internal quality of life? I'm referring to all these things as if they were one thing: internal feeling state, happiness level, satisfaction level, internal well-being. Our internal life, our level of well-being, is in fact totally independent of our external circumstances. There are very wealthy people who are miserable and there are very poor people who are blissfully happy. It is easy to see this in others. How many people do you know who seem to have it made and yet they have not found happiness? Still others don't seem like they should be happy given their difficult external circumstances. If you get nothing else from this article you should see that external circumstances and internal well-being function independently and have their own set of operating principles.

I am not suggesting that you have to choose between standard living and internal quality of life. You definitely do not or you can have both. In fact, a high internal quality of life will ultimately help your attainments in the world by eliminating the stress factor. As your internal quality of life goes up, you will work more gracefully and with more inspiration. In other words, you will tend to work smarter rather than harder.

There is precious little education about improving internal quality of life. I don't remember any courses in high school or college. You might expect courses about the internal quality of life in my psychology graduate education but that was not the case. My psychology graduate education was all about understanding mental illnesses -- symptoms, causes, and treatment. There was absolutely no focus on attaining satisfaction in life.

Why isn't an understanding of improving internal quality of life proliferated within our culture? The answer is very simple: the mental health field and society in general have very little understanding on the subject. That is why so much stress and distress exists in society today even though we are by far the wealthiest nation in the world. Why isn't there more understanding available about the internal quality of life? The answer to that is just as simple: the field of psychology and our society labors under the same false assumption that internal quality of life is a function of external circumstances. It is assumed that if you get your circumstances the way you want them, you will be happy. There is no understanding in society that happiness is generated from within and operates independently of external circumstances.

People tend to assume that if you have a lot of money you will be financially secure and that if you are physically attractive you will have a positive body image. Similarly, people assume that if you have a spouse you won't be lonely and that if you accomplish great achievements you will feel successful. The fact is that accomplishing great things won't make you feel successful unless you think of yourself as successful. No matter how physically attractive you are, you won't have a positive body image unless you honestly think of yourself as attractive. No matter how much money you have, you won't feel financially secure if your mind is filled with financial worries. You can feel lonely in the midst of a million people including adoring family members if your mind is so filled with thoughts that you cannot connect with other people. Loneliness is generated and exists within the mind of the individual. The operating principles of the internal quality of life point you inside to the power of your own mind.

This article is trying to make one point: people's successes, achievements, life conditions, and circumstances have absolutely no power to create satisfaction or even enjoyment for human beings. All of our feelings, perceptions, and experiences are created within the mind of the individual via one's thoughts and consciousness. Whatever feelings we bring to our life pursuits will determine the experience of that life pursuit. People who look within themselves for their well-being do not have a gap between their standard of living and their internal quality of life. As a result, they have a learning curve as they go through life about how to develop more well-being for themselves. In contrast, people who look to their standard of living for feelings of enjoyment, security, and satisfaction find such feelings elusive. Subsequently, they have little learning or development around their own well-being.

Thus it could be said that in terms of well-being, the "rich" get richer, while the "poor" get poorer. Those who look inside feel "rich" with well-being even with meager circumstances. They then get even "richer" with well-being as their standard of living improves. In contrast, those who measure wealth externally are "poor" with well-being and remain so even with more external "wealth".