

For the most part, Americans have never enjoyed so much “stuff”. We have more possessions and live in a more materialistic era than at any point in the last century. But at the same time, we are less happy than in past days. How is that possible?

Studies show that teens in England and America are actually less happy than their peers in developing nations. George Monbiot in *The Guardian* writes, “In one study, the researchers tested a group of 18-year-olds, then re-tested them 12 years later. They were asked to rank the importance of different goals – jobs, money and status on the one side, and self-acceptance, empathy and belonging on the other. They were then given a standard diagnostic test to identify mental health problems. At the ages of both 18 and 30, materialistic people were more susceptible to disorders. But if in that period they became less materialistic, they became happier.”

Thanks to social media and marketing, we are more “aware” than ever before. The marketer’s job is to make us feel insufficient, inadequate, and needy. If we succumb to those feelings, we’ll buy a product or a service. The marketer has succeeded. In a similar situation, a friend can post what she got for Christmas and suddenly, we feel discontent with what we have. The social media post can fuel our own materialism. It becomes a vicious cycle. By merely making us aware, they feed our appetites. The cycle might look something like this:

- I see an ad on television or a post on social media.
- I become aware that a product or service is available.
- Then, I see some people I know who have it. I fear missing out.
- I feed my appetite for the product, which only creates more craving.

Author Andy Stanley states, “Lack doesn’t fuel discontentment. Awareness fuels discontentment.” We are all aware of what’s out there. When we buy online, smart websites will tell us: “You may also like...” If you go on Amazon’s site, you will discover the site remembers what you purchased last and what you may want to buy next. This type of suggestive selling fuels your appetite. When you try to satisfy your appetite, it grows even more. Anything you feed tends to grow.

Psychologist Steve Taylor writes, “Our appetite for wealth and material goods isn’t driven by hardship, but by our own inner discontent. We’re convinced we can buy our way to happiness, that wealth is the path of permanent fulfillment.”

So, how can we begin to alleviate this vicious cycle? What if we feed our awareness differently? If awareness is what ignites our appetites and discontentment, then why not become aware of something else or something more?

New Year’s resolutions are usually made to get the year started on the right foot. What if this year, we require an effort to make our kids self-aware of what they already have and aware of those who don’t have what we have? Expose your children to community service efforts for those less fortunate – volunteer at a food pantry, thrift shop, organize a coat drive or community meal, visit a nursing home or assisted living. Many times, more effort is seen around the holiday season, but what happens to these less fortunate the rest of the year. Exposing your children to a different awareness is often times an eye-opener. We become aware of something different, something that could have a greater impact on those around us; issues and concerns that were previously invisible due to our “awareness”.

Contentment stems from a different awareness. We all have personal needs and meeting them is not wrong. But there is a difference between *appetites* and *hunger*. Hunger is the physical need for food, but appetites are fueled by your desire for food. If only hunger was involved in eating, we’d eat until we’re full and stop. Appetites kick in and cause us to eat the wrong kinds of food and too much of it. We overeat and become overweight. It’s the same way with contentment and discontentment. We buy what we *want* not just what we *need*. We crave things, and it’s almost always driven by awareness.

So, this year, what if we modeled and taught our kids a counter-cultural “awareness”? What if we all paid attention to something or someone different...for our own good? The richest people are not those who own the most, but those who need the least. The best way to combat bad attitudes and discontentment is to shift our awareness. Researchers estimate that much of happiness is under personal control. It’s all about where our awareness lies. Art Muchwald said, “*The best things in life aren’t things.*”

Tufts University conducted an in-depth, longitudinal study indicating that young people engaged in a 4-H program are committed to improving their communities showing that 4-H youth are 3.4 times more likely to actively contribute to their communities when compared with youth who do not participate in 4-H.

It’s not too late! Fuel a different awareness in your youth by enrolling them in our 4-H program. 4-H is the largest national youth organization that focuses on positive youth development with emphasis on the “5 Cs” – Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring/Compassion. These experiences result in the development of a Sixth C – Contributions (to self, family, community, and to the institutions of a civil society) -- or a “Different Awareness”.

Add one more item to that list of New Year’s Resolutions: re-focus social media and surrounding awareness on “stuff” and direct a “Different Awareness” to make an impact on those around you. Visit a nursing home, help a single parent family, donate items and volunteer time at a local food bank, make hospital visits, offer grocery shopping or lawn care for an elderly neighbor, and the list goes on. Create a long-term happiness for yourself by impacting someone else’s life.

Contact Twin Creeks Extension District 4-H Youth Development Agent, Patsy L. Maddy at your local Twin Creeks Extension District office in Decatur, Graham, Norton or Sheridan counties to take advantage of the benefits of participating as a 4-H member. (pmaddy@ksu.edu, 785-877-5755)

Information in this article has been adapted from Dr. Tim Elmore, founder of Growing Leaders.

Commented [PM1]:

Article Header

“Fueling A Different Awareness”

“Chasing Clovers”

By Patsy L. Maddy

Twin Creeks Extension District
4-H Youth Development Agent