

Back-to-school happiness not found in grades: Study

Interaction — not personal boosts — form most meaningful memories

BY MISTY HARRIS, POSTMEDIA NEWS AUGUST 30, 2010



A forthcoming study in the journal *Self and Identity* finds our most meaningful moments are those that involve social relationships.

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In a rare bit of happy news for kids headed back to school, compelling new evidence suggests the path to fulfilment isn't paved with straight As.

Though personal goal-setting and individual achievement can feel like the alpha and omega of education — and life in general — a forthcoming study in the journal *Self and Identity* finds our most meaningful moments are those that involve social relationships. That is, a student is more likely to be affected by making a new friend outside the classroom than earning a gold star inside of it.

The research — which applies equally to adults in the workplace — runs counter to North Americans' narcissistic tendency to seek meaning in a mirror as opposed to a window.

"We live in a very individualistic society where the emphasis is on personal achievement and being different from others and finding your own place," says Shira Gabriel, associate professor of psychology at the University at Buffalo. "That leads us to think that those accomplishments are more important in life than they necessarily are."

"We're not arguing that relationships are inherently better than individual events, because they also bring about more pain in our lives. But what we are saying is that they tend to be more impactful and meaningful to us over time."

The results of four experiments, involving a total of 376 people of varying age groups, formed the basis for the conclusions of Gabriel and fellow investigators Lisa Jaremka, of the University of California-Santa Barbara, and Mauricio Cavallo of the University of Oklahoma-Norman.

In each, there was strong evidence that the events which pack the biggest punch over time involve interactions with others.

"What we find means most to people are transformative moments in relationships, such as a marriage or a new best friend," says Gabriel. "But they're also the moments that tend to be the toughest in our lives — those when a relationship ends, or maybe when someone passes away or we feel betrayed by someone."

Canadians aren't advised to neglect personal goals completely, however, with a wide swath of psychological literature finding value in accomplishments that are independent of others. But researchers say to do so at the expense of social relationships — whether in the classroom or an office cubicle — is to miss out on the moments with the greatest potential to endow meaning.

"When we structure our days and think about goals for the coming year, we need to remember to pay attention to our relationships and to the bonds we form with other people," says Gabriel. "Because when we come to the end of our lives, this research suggests it's those moments that we'll look back on as meaning the most."

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