

How to hit the happiness jackpot

Can money buy bliss? Psychologists, economists and Buddhists all seem to agree — probably not



BY JOANNE BLAIN
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When you hear about yet another big lottery winner who has decided to keep his job as a supermarket clerk or an insurance salesman, what's your first thought? If it's "why the heck did he buy a ticket in the first place?" or "why doesn't he give it to me?", welcome to the club, but you're probably missing the point. It's more than likely that spending his winnings on things other than early retirement, such as helping family members or donating money to charity, will give him greater pleasure.

Or maybe he realizes that his job — even one that many people would consider menial or monotonous — is what really makes him happy. That realization came too late to Kissun Lal of Burnaby, as did the knowledge that money can buy just as much grief as it can joy. Lal quit his graveyard-shift job as a janitor at McDonald's when he won a \$3-million lottery windfall last November. He bought a new house for his family, a car for his daughter and put most of the rest in the bank. But he doesn't exactly sound like a happy man. "Do you want the truth? When you win money, you end up with problems, family problems," he said. "The second thing is, there are plenty of people who are threatening you. When you have money and you want to go anywhere, you have to think twice about whether somebody is going to do something. "And when you stay at home, it's so boring," he said. "I am thinking of going back to work." Lal's problems aren't unique. Two San Francisco psychologists coined the phrase "sudden wealth syndrome" to describe the problems that can spring from a financial windfall — everything from alienating friends and relatives who want a piece of your good fortune to worrying how it will affect your children's values. So can money really buy happiness? Depending on what expert you ask, you'll get a different answer, but most of them lean toward "no."

not nearly as well as traits like extroversion or emotional stability," he said.

For people who come up short in the five key traits that predispose people to happiness — the others are agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience — even something as fortuitous as winning the lottery won't bring lasting happiness, said Zelenski.

"What we found is they that might be happy in the short term upon learning they won the lottery, but if you followed them up a few weeks later, you'd find they were probably back to their miserable old selves."

Barry Beyerstein, an associate professor of psychology at Simon Fraser University, agrees with Zelenski that "there is a big genetic component to how you view your lot in life, and it isn't really well related to what your objective status is."

"There are some generally happy people and there are people who have every advantage and good things life has to offer, and still feel unfulfilled and unhappy," Beyerstein said. "Provided you're over a certain threshold of comfort, your happiness quotient doesn't correlate all that well with how you're faring in life's game."

Zelenski and his Carleton colleagues plan to further study the personality traits of happy people and their effects in a soon-to-be-built "happiness lab," funded by a \$474,000 grant through the Canadian Foundation for Innovation.

And it's not just psychologists who are cashing in on our quest for happiness. Political scientist Alex Michalos of the University of Northern British Columbia recently won a \$100,000 award from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for his 42 years of research on quality-of-life issues, seeking an answer to the question: "What makes people happy?"

Economists have also entered the fray, putting a dollar value on events and life circumstances that contribute to or detract from personal happiness, based on demographics and how people describe their own satisfaction with life.

For example, a lasting marriage or common-law relationship is worth the equivalent of \$100,000 of annual income in terms of life satisfaction, according to an analysis by John Helliwell, a University of B.C. economics professor. High marks on five measures of job satisfaction — most importantly, having a job that requires skill, that offers a variety of tasks and a workplace with an atmosphere of trust — are also worth their weight in gold, he said.

"If you have all those fully instead of not at all, that's the equivalent to an annual income increase of \$300,000."

Taking a similar approach, economists Andrew Oswald and David Blanchflower came up



And if a Buddhist won \$1 million? Charity, says Tibetan studies specialist Marc Desjardins, but that's not the path to happiness.

with an even more provocative finding — having sex once a week instead of once a month is worth an extra \$50,000 US a year.

Some call it "happiness economics," but Helliwell prefers the term "eudemonics" or "the science of well-being." And he makes it clear that it's more about assigning value to things other than income than on telling people how much they have to ante up to buy happiness.

"Some people are more interested or amused when you see things as dollar values," he said. "It's just a way of comparing things to one another."

"Here are a whole lot of things we find influence happiness, some more than others. If a whole lot of other things all appear to have big money value, that's just telling you that income is not one of the primary determinants of happiness."

If a fat paycheck can't buy happiness, why do some successful business people spend most of their waking hours trying to earn more?

Maybe because the work itself is what makes them happy, says Aidan Vining, an SFU business professor. He evaluates that scenario through the lens of "utility economics," in which utility

refers to which option in any given situation has greater value to an individual.

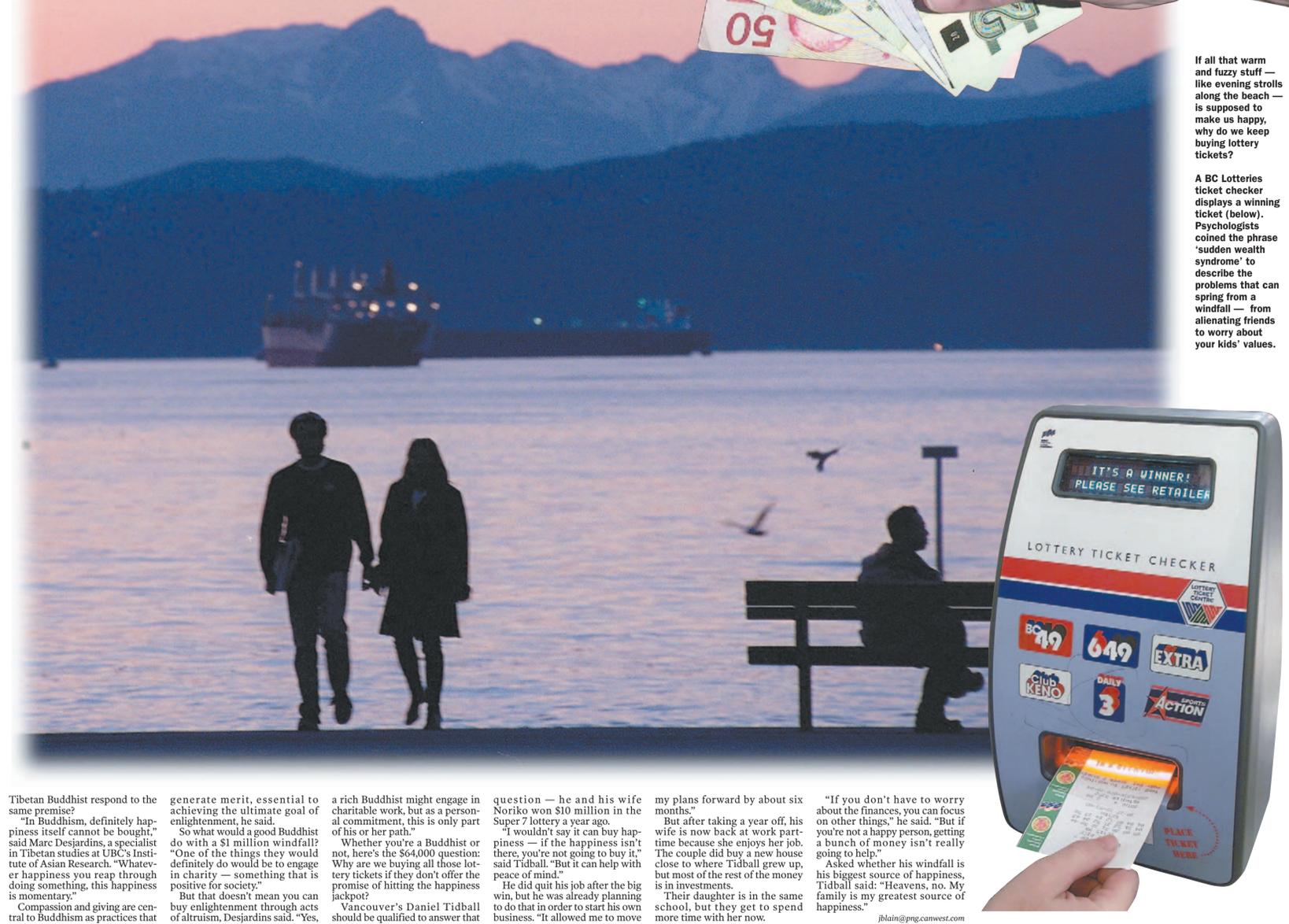
"Some people with money want to buy time off and other people want to buy the ability to boss people around at work," he said. "Certainly we know that owner/managers get a lot of utility from that — that's what they enjoy doing."

"I see people who are in their own businesses and they're kind of working at it 24 hours a day, but if you try to stop them, they are more unhappy," said Vining. "Time off in that sense is a lesser good — it's not as valuable."

He said some research does show the rich are happier than the poor, although that effect tends to diminish as income climbs — that is, being a lot richer won't make you that much happier.

"Those of us who are poorer tend to like to believe the stories about how people who get rich are unhappy," he said. "By the way, if you're ever in doubt and you get a bit unhappy with your money, send it to me."

We know what *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw would say about buying happiness — it's the price of the perfect pair of Jimmy Choo shoes. But how would a



If all that warm and fuzzy stuff — like evening strolls along the beach — is supposed to make us happy, why do we keep buying lottery tickets?

A BC Lotteries ticket checker displays a winning ticket (below). Psychologists coined the phrase 'sudden wealth syndrome' to describe the problems that can spring from a windfall — from alienating friends to worry about your kids' values.

From \$10 to \$1 million, there are many ways that money can bring joy into your life

Oh, all right — money can't really buy happiness. But a slice of bliss, a rush of good feelings, a frisson of delight? You bet it can. Whether you've got a spare purple bill in your wallet or you've just won the lottery, we've got ways for you to spend your money that are custom-designed to boost your well-being.

\$10: CHOCOLATE NIRVANA

Go for quality, not quantity, for the maximum pleasure hit — invest in a few pieces of high-quality dark Belgian chocolate. Chocolate makes us feel good because it triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural opiate. It also contains phenylethylamine — nicknamed the "love chemical" or "chocolate amphetamine" — which releases dopamine, the neurochemical most responsible for activating the brain's pleasure centre. Dark chocolate in particular is high in antioxidants, which may play a role in helping you enjoy life longer.



\$100: THRILLS AND CHILLS

It's hard to beat zinging over the treetops suspended only by a wire cable as a source of high-octane thrills. For \$98, Whistler's Ziptrek adventure ride lets you glide along 20 metres above trees, rocks and water — even upside-down if you're truly adventurous. Thrill-seeking activities like this trigger our "fight or flight" response, says SFU psychologist and psychopharmacologist Barry Beyerstein. They send adrenaline rushing through the body, raising the heart rate and giving you a feeling similar to a runner's high.



\$1,000: LOOKING FOR LOVE

Money may not be able to buy love, but it might improve your odds. For \$1,000, you can invest in the services of a professional matchmaker through Hearts (www.hearts.ca). After an hour-long interview and questionnaire to determine what you're looking for in a partner, they'll search their files for your perfect partner and follow through with letters of introduction to both parties until you meet your match. If it works, the payoff could be big — UBC economist John Helliwell calculates that a long and happy marriage is worth an extra \$100,000 a year in income.



\$10,000: SUN AND FUN

Invest in a winter vacation for two at a luxury spa in a sun spot, such as the top-rated Las Ventanas resort in Los Cabos, Mexico. A four-night pampering package for two, which will cost you just under \$10,000 (excluding airfare), will get you matching massages, facials, manicures, pedicures and yoga classes, as well as a garden-view suite. As well as giving you time to spend with a loved one and relief from the stresses of day-to-day life, getting away from our dull winter climate for a dose of sunlight can help improve the mood of people with seasonal affective disorder. So you could say it's just what the doctor ordered.



\$100,000: SHELTER AND SHARING

Upgrade your home and help out a family member or your favourite charity. Renovating the rooms in your house that you spend the most time in will reward you daily for years to come. A gourmet cook deserves a great kitchen, and someone who works from home will reap the rewards of a functional home office. But remember to share part of your wealth with others — it will give you the inner glow of altruism to temper the rampant consumerism all around us. Buddhists believe compassion and giving generate merit, the bricks on the road to achieving enlightenment.



\$1,000,000: CHASING A DREAM

If you've been working all your life in a job that doesn't give you joy, retire early and use your remaining good years to explore a personal passion. When you know you've got money in the bank to pay the bills, you can afford to pursue goals that don't necessarily have a monetary payoff. Whether that's learning to fly a plane, writing a novel or taking up the violin, there are inner rewards to fulfilling a lifelong dream. And along with love, isn't that one of the heavyweights of happiness?

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