



## “Are you Happy?” and Other Misunderstandings.

This story is about happiness, misunderstanding, and the importance of shared meaning. But first, you might be wondering who I am and why I am writing Wickman’s blog this month. Which brings me to how I met Wickman, which is also how I know the main character in today’s story, as he introduced us.

So about me. I am a licensed psychologist, having practiced for the past decade in my hometown of Covington, Georgia. I have worked in mental health clinics, hospitals, and co-owned a group practice. My most recent focus was working within an interdisciplinary practice in a primary health care setting. I also work with the court system, helping mediate high conflict divorce cases to advocate for children’s needs. But then I met Wickman....



(my husband, self, Lynn W, Mark, my two children)

.... at a conference through my husband’s work. We had a lunch where the four of us spent hours talking books (of course, have you met Wickman???) and business. At the end of lunch, Wickman says in parting “you should come work for me” to which I replied “why not?” Of course, there was another six months of actually investigating this, but those details are as boring as you imagine.

This brings us back to our main character for this story, as he is a mutual work-friend of my husband’s and the Wickman’s, ultimately responsible for introducing us. Like most connectors, he is a truly lovely human being with a heart of gold.

...but he has this annoying habit of asking “are you happy?” And before you go worrying that I’m a dreadful curmudgeon of a person because I find the query “are you happy” irritating, let me explain.....

All communication has both an [instrumental](#) (how people share **facts**) component and [affective](#) (how people share **feelings**) component. Healthy systems communicate well in both domains. For example, telling a colleague when you can complete your portion of a project is instrumental, letting them know you are pleased to be collaborating is affective. Telling your siblings, you coordinated Mother’s Day brunch (instrumental-> time/place) for the sixth *hundredth* year in a row (affective-> annoyed you always have to do the coordinating).

COMMUNICATION = SHARING —> FACTS + FEELINGS

To further complicate matters, our past experiences and assumptions means that people can use the SAME words to mean DIFFERENT things based on both **internal** (someone’s beliefs, upbringing, culture, interpretation) and **external** (what is happening in the situation) context. You might have already heard Wickman talk about this concept by saying *Intent vs Impact*.

CONTEXT : INTERNAL & EXTERNAL

Please consider my *context* or [family of origin](#):

I am the second of five children, raised by two scientifically minded, extremely practical parents with a LOT to accomplish in any given day. My father works as a surgeon, my mother worked in the natural sciences before staying home to raise us. I am deeply privileged to have their love, guidance, and support as my foundation. But no one would mistake them as "touchy feely" types. In other words, never ever have they asked "are you happy?" It's not how we do things. We would hear "is your work done?" and "do you have everything you need?" and maybe a "what's the matter?" In fact, my father tells us to "walk it off" as though it is some Franciscan benediction, and given the *affective* warmth, it does feel more like a blessing or encouragement of "you've got this." I can't imagine saying to my parents "I'm unhappy" and getting anything more than a look of confusion and a "handle it" from either of them. But they managed to raise 5 fairly competent, dare I say [Happy, children](#). So, something worked.

My first significant experience with our mutual friend came when I tagged along on a business trip to Turkey with my husband, also bringing our two young children (age 3 and 7 at the time). Although it was a wonderful trip, it was NOTHING that I was led to expect. And I'm happiest when fed ALL THE TIME and have the [recommended 9 hours of sleep](#) at night. But on this trip, lunch was late afternoon, dinner hours past my bedtime, and breakfast seemingly nonexistent. In other words: I was sleepy, starving, and the "you can sit by the pool and read while tending to the children" is a FAR cry from the actual daily activities. Now having some sense of decorum, a generally adventuresome spirit and contented heart, coupled with a TREMENDOUS love for my husband, I tried to keep it together however starving and frazzled I actually felt. But at the end of the week when mutual friend asked:

"Are you happy?"

I immediately concluded he must be suffering some sort of brain damage (no disrespect to those with actual TBI intended) if this was what he thought might make me happy. I mean I was grateful for the experience and connections made, and perhaps grateful for the adventure. But happy???

So, I just stood there blinking. He probably also concluded I had brain damage.

### Scenario 1 "Are you Happy?"

Translation -> I can tell that you are NOT happy, but I'm not sure why or what to do about it.

Now of course I was too tired and hungry to "translate" his question at the time and several years later still do wonder about his brain functionality. But please notice how what he was asking and what I was hearing differed SIGNIFICANTLY. Our context varied, therefore disrupting communication.

Also, he proceeded to ask "Are you Happy?" at such regular intervals over the next years when I was (obviously I thought and my husband knew) anything but happy, it turned into an inside joke at our house. My husband took to saying "Are you Happy?" in mutual friend's voice any time I was doing something miserable like calculating taxes, cleaning vomit, or dealing with insurance companies. Of course, when my husband did it I totally cracked up and it made a hard situation into something amusing. #samewordsdifferentmeaning. But back to our story.

This leads us into yet another misunderstanding of the same question, in a different context...

My darling husband and mutual friend had just finished a fairly big work project. As I said before, I really like my husband (and most people in general actually), so I do rather keep up with his work. But it is still that, HIS work. Anyway, they finish this project that has nothing to do with me, and mutual friend bounces around to me and says (in front of a bunch of people, which to me inherently means I can give nothing but a "boxed" answer and leaves me feeling on the spot which I HATE, and catching me completely off-guard):

"Are you Happy?"

My thoughts: *Huh??? What are we happy about? Did our football team win? Is it my birthday and I forgot? ...Obviously the answer he wants is "Very Happy" but that's NOT what I was feeling and now I'm getting the answer wrong and IN PUBLIC and WHAT IS HAPPENING?!?!*

### Scenario 2 "Are you Happy?"

Translation -> I am happy and thus want you to be happy too. Celebrate with me!

OHHHHHHH. You mean: "Be Happy!"

Ahh, I can do that. Happy to be happy for someone else, regardless of whatever is actually going on with me. Check. Now I would like to say I figured this out on my own, but I didn't. It took another year before Mutual Friend actually spontaneously translated it for me, stating first "Are you Happy?" followed immediately by "Be Happy!" and then I got it! Now just when I thought I knew the correct answer to "Are you Happy?", Mutual Friend ended a visit asking "Are you Happy?"

Like me you're probably thinking at this point "*Of course he did. Because it's like he has NOTHING else to say!!*"

Only this time was one of those moments where it really felt like a *question* versus a *concern* (scenario 1) or a *command* (scenario 2). I *still* didn't know how to answer because it seemed after the fact and subsequently pointless to me. I mean he didn't start out with a stated plan of "What can I do to make you happy?" so what good would the post-hoc analysis do?? So yet again I fumbled with the answer!!! And by this point you have also likely concluded I have brain damage.

But then later that week I was reading a study that emphasized the importance of "checking in" at the end of any encounter: be it physician/patient, business/customer, parent/child, with "*Is there anything else you need?*" and that's when I realized:

### **Scenario 3 "Are you Happy?"**

Translation -> What can I do to contribute to your happiness? or.... "*is there anything else you need?*"

I finally realized at the heart of all this "happy" chatter was the most basic check in.

Given my upbringing or context I would have understood "*what can I do to help?*" and "*celebrate with us*" and "*what do you need?*" but completely misunderstood "*are you happy?*" as a means of communicating about facts and feelings.

Understanding the components of communication involved in misunderstandings helped me decipher meaning. Well, that and a well-researched scientific explanation. Through sorting out our misunderstandings, we create *shared meaning*. And this is what comes to matter in human communication. *Shared meaning*.

So Mutual Friend and I now have muddled through enough "Are you Happy" scenarios to have *shared meaning* around "happy". It has become an endearing and ubiquitous check-in for well-being.

*This ability to exchange **facts** and **feelings** is COMMUNICATION.*

And I can say, yes, yes I AM HAPPY.

So, in case you got lost in my scientific explanations about communication or stories of my life, let me just summarize:

**Pay attention to the *FACTS* and *FEELINGS* of communication.**

**Consider *INTERNAL* and *EXTERNAL context* of communication.**

**Work to understand, creating *SHARED MEANING***

**Always, always feed me. It makes me happy.**