

Opening session keynote speaker and Harvard researcher Daniel Gilbert kicked off APA's convention with his finding that the life goals we strive for don't always make us happy.

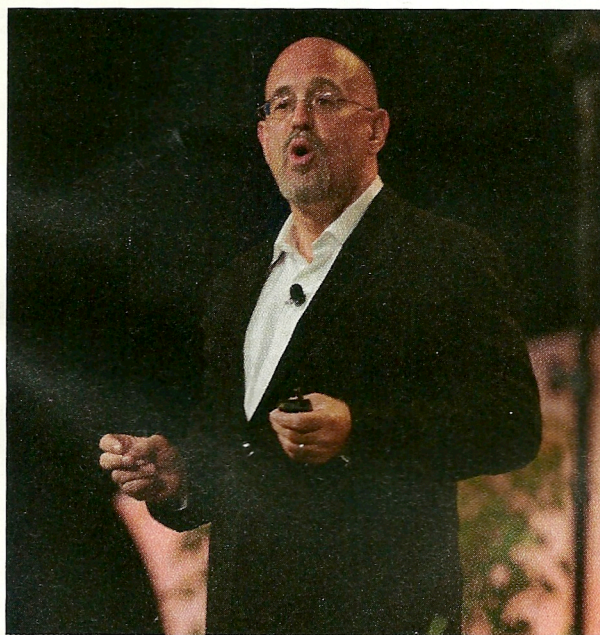
BY CHRISTOPHER MUNSEY • *Monitor* staff

When he was growing up, best-selling author and Harvard psychology researcher Daniel Gilbert, PhD, said his mom urged him to aim for three things in life — finding someone nice and getting married; building a fulfilling, well-paid career; and above all, having children — a sentiment echoed by American culture.

In the past 20 years, research led by psychologists is shedding light on whether the trifecta of marriage, money and kids does bring happiness, said Gilbert, author of “Stumbling on Happiness” (Knopf, 2006). As it turns out, his mom and society were right about some points and wrong on others, including:

- **It's not marriage that makes you happy, it's happy marriage that makes you happy,** Gilbert said. Married people are happier than unmarried ones, perhaps because the single best predictor of human happiness is the quality of social relationships. “Marriage seems to buy you a decade or more of happiness,” Gilbert said.

And people in unhappy marriages experience a spike in happiness once the marriage is dissolved, he said. Using a sampling application that contacts people via their iPhone, one of Gilbert's graduate students has found that people are happiest when they're having sex and talking, or otherwise investing in social relationships. Resting and relaxing don't bring happiness because when you're not engaged in a task — even a generally unpleasant one — your mind wanders, and



A good marriage appears to buy at least a decade of happiness, said Dr. Daniel Gilbert in his keynote address.

Kevin Lock Photography

you may ruminate on unhappy experiences.

- **If you hear someone say “money can't buy happiness,” say “give me yours,”** Gilbert joked. People with money enjoy better nutrition, can go places with loved ones, worry less about their children and have more freedom to set their own schedules, he said. But money's ability to buy happiness levels out for people in the United States, with huge increases in happiness for people who vault into a middle-class income of \$40,000 to \$70,000. Once that level is reached, increases in wealth generate smaller rises in happiness.

- **Happiness falls for both men and women after**

the first child is born. Some 20 years of research shows that people without children are happier than people with children and that people with young children living with them are the least happy of all, Gilbert says. For women, spending time with their children ranks about the same as vacuuming on happiness scales. While the data establish that children don't make their parents happy — a fact that Gilbert acknowledged as contrary to his own intuition — parents need to *believe* that they do because of all the time and effort it takes to raise them well.

“As a result of that sacrifice, we love them all the more,” Gilbert said. “We don't value our children in spite of how difficult they are, we value our children because of how difficult they are.” ■