

General Articles



The New Scientific Pursuit of Happiness

By David G. Myers and Ed Diener
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Researchers are now beginning to offer fresh perspectives on some questions often ignored by psychologists and psychiatrists, who have been more concerned about anger, anxiety, and depression. Which attitudes, activities, and priorities provide a sense of well-being? Does happiness favor a particular age, sex, or income level? Is it the result of certain personality traits or personal relationships?

Speculations about happiness are as old as civilization. Many ancient philosophers believed that it was the result of a life of intelligent reflection. "There is no fool who is happy, and no wise man who is not," wrote the Roman philosopher Cicero. In the centuries since, other sages have proposed that happiness comes from living a virtuous life or indulging pleasures, from knowing the truth or preserving illusions, from restraint or from purging ourselves of pent-up rage and misery.

Some believe that most people are unhappy most of the time. This tragic view of life has a long history. It extends from Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* ("Not to be born is, past all prizing, best") to Woody Allen's perceiving (in *Annie Hall*) two kinds of lives, the horrible and the merely miserable. Other artists, philosophers, and social observers, including Rousseau and Samuel Johnson, have echoed this judgment. It is also supported by the writers of recent warmhearted books for the would-be-happy, written by people who spend their days counseling the unhappy. Dennis Wholey (*Are You Happy?*) reports that the experts he interviewed believe that only 20% of Americans are happy. In *Happiness Is an Inside Job*, Father John Powell agrees: "One-third of all Americans wake up depressed every day. Professionals estimate that only 10% to 15% of Americans think of themselves as truly happy." Psychology students tend to agree. Most of them regard the elderly as unhappy, a third believe African-Americans are unhappy, and nine in ten think that unemployed men are unhappy.

Scientific study can sift myth from reality, truth from falsehood. Dozens of researchers around the world have now questioned more than a million people directly about their happiness or unhappiness: for example, "Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days -- would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" A subtly different question, also commonly asked, is about satisfaction with life: "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Are you very satisfied? Satisfied? Not very satisfied? Not at all satisfied?"

The results are less bleak than cynics imagine. Three out of ten Americans, for example, say they are very happy, one in ten say "not too happy," and the rest describe themselves as "pretty happy." Most people also say they are satisfied with their lives. In Western Europe and North America, eight in ten rate themselves as "satisfied" or "very satisfied," and three-fourths have felt excited, proud, or pleased at some time in the past few weeks. No more than a third say they have felt lonely, bored, or depressed, even for short periods of time. The only exceptions to this general rule are recently incarcerated prison inmates, new therapy clients, South African blacks under apartheid, and students living in conditions of economic and political suppression.

Are these questions answered truthfully? Could people who say they are happy be deceiving themselves, perhaps "in denial"? All the evidence supports them. People who describe themselves as happy seem happy to their friends, their families, and interviewers. Compared to very unhappy people, they smile more. They are more loving, forgiving, energetic, creative, decisive, hopeful, and helpful. They are even less vulnerable to illness.

But isn't the rate of depression rising? It is, but less than 2% of the world's population suffers from clinically recognized depression each year. In a recent international census of psychiatric disorders, the lifetime rate of depression was only 9% in the most vulnerable group. The data suggest that in general the biological set-point for mood is slightly positive. Positive emotions energize people and create a background against which negative emotions have maximum information value. Positive feelings are also conducive to other adaptive reactions, such as strong immune responses, sociability, and persistence in striving for goals.

Many people believe there are unhappy times of life -- perhaps stressful adolescence, the midlife crisis, or old age. But interviews reveal that age is no clue to well-being. Satisfying social relationships and good health become more important in later life, and adults are less likely than teenagers to rebound quickly from gloom or elation, but no time of life is generally happier or unhappier than any other. Self-reported well-being and rates of depression, suicide, and divorce do not change significantly during the mythical midlife crisis years.

Are men happier because of their greater income and social power, or women because of their reputedly higher capacity for intimacy and social connection? There are some gender gaps in misery: troubled men are more likely to be alcoholic, troubled women depressed or anxious. Yet surveys indicate that men and women are equally likely to say that they are "very happy" or "satisfied" with life. Nor are the beautiful necessarily more satisfied or happier than others. Despite the presumptions behind the billions spent on cosmetics, clothes, and diets, even the most physically attractive are barely happier than the physically unattractive. People with disabilities, too, usually report a nearly average level of well-being.

Although few of us believe that money can literally buy happiness, many suppose that a little more money would make them a little happier. Moreover, the American dream seems increasingly to have become life, liberty, and the purchase of happiness. In 1996, "being very well off financially" led a list of nineteen goals among students entering college. It exceeded even "raising a family" and "helping others in difficulty." Three-quarters of those polled said that wealth was "essential" or "very important" -- nearly double the proportion who said that in 1970.

Does wealth in fact predict well-being? First, we can ask whether people in rich countries are happier. Certainly there are some striking national differences. In Portugal only 10% of people say they are happy compared with 40% in the Netherlands. Could affluence account for these variations? The correlation between national wealth and well-being is generally positive (although there are curious anomalies; in the 1980s, for example, the Irish reported greater life satisfaction than the wealthier West Germans). But wealth at a national level is confounded with other factors that are also correlated with life satisfaction, such as civil rights, literacy, and number of continuous years of democracy.

We can also ask whether rich people are happiest in a given country. In very poor countries, such as Bangladesh and India, income does predict well-being to some extent. But for those who can afford life's necessities, further wealth matters surprisingly little. In the United States and Europe, the correlation between income and happiness is weak. Even the very rich -- those surveyed among Forbes's 100 wealthiest Americans -- are only slightly happier than average. Wealth, it seems, is like physical health. Although its complete absence can bring misery, possessing it is no guarantee of happiness.

What about the effects of joyful and tragic events? People often explain their happiness or unhappiness by short-term influences; for example, they notice that an influx of cash feels good and therefore mistakenly believe that the rich are much happier. But people whose income has increased in the last ten years are not happier than others. Even lottery winners receive only a temporary jolt of joy. We adapt so quickly to new circumstances that the long-term effect of good or ill fortune is often astonishingly small. As Benjamin Franklin surmised, happiness "is produc'd not so much by great Pieces of good Fortune that but seldom happen, as by little Advantages that occur every day."

Have Americans become happier as they have become richer? Since the late 1950s, the average income of Americans adjusted for inflation has doubled. Today we own twice as many cars per capita and eat out more than twice as often. We enjoy abundant air conditioning, CD sound systems, and color televisions. But the proportion of "very happy" people has declined from 35% to 30%. The divorce rate

has doubled, teenage suicide has tripled, juvenile crime arrests have increased fivefold, and the rate of depression has steadily increased. The trends have been similar in Europe. These findings are an implicit critique of our culture's materialism: economic growth in rich countries apparently does not improve human morale.

Most people's responses to questions about happiness and satisfaction are consistent over the years. Some of us have a capacity for joy that persists undiminished through life. In one National Institute on Aging study of 5,000 adults, the people who were happiest in 1973 were still relatively happy a decade later, whatever the changes in their lives. Surprisingly, happy and sad feelings correlate only weakly in frequency and intensity and are predicted by different variables. Some people have high highs and low lows; others are more persistently happy or melancholy or unemotional.

Who, then, is very happy? To begin with, heredity is important. From their study of 254 identical and fraternal twins, David Lykken and Auke Tellegen estimate that 50% of the variance (individual differences) in happiness ratings is heritable. Some people are temperamentally upbeat and others dour.

Four traits distinguish happy people. First, they report high self-esteem. Especially in individualistic Western cultures, most people do like themselves -- and believe themselves to be more ethical, more intelligent, less prejudiced, better able to get along with others, and healthier than average. Second, they typically feel that they are in control of their lives. People deprived of such control -- prisoners, nursing home patients, subjects of totalitarian regimes -- suffer lower morale and worse health. Severe poverty is demoralizing when it erodes the feeling of control over one's circumstances.

Third, happy people are usually optimistic. "Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed," wrote Alexander Pope. He was wrong: surveys suggest that positive thinking is conducive to happiness. Fourth, happy people are extroverted. Extroverts are happier even if they are living alone or working in solitary occupations. Outgoing people also marry sooner, get better jobs, and make more friends.

In each of these correlations, the causal arrows could run either way. Does happiness make people more outgoing, or are outgoing people more high-spirited? In any case, it seems possible to become somewhat happier by acting out the traits that mark happy lives. In experiments, people who feign high self-esteem begin to feel better about themselves, and people who are manipulated into smiling feel happier.

"Hell is other people," wrote Jean-Paul Sartre. But the benefits of close relationships apparently outweigh the stress. People who can name several intimate friends are healthier and happier and live longer. For more than 90% of us, marriage is one such close relationship. Some 24% of never-married and 39% of married adults say they are "very happy." Three out of four married Americans say that their husband or wife is their best friend, and four out of five say they would marry the same person again.

It is sometimes said that marriage makes men but not women happier, or even that single women are happier than married ones. Not so. Although a bad marriage may be more depressing for a woman, many studies and surveys in Europe and North America indicate that the happiness gap between the married and the never-married is the same for both sexes.

"Joy is the serious business of heaven," wrote C. S. Lewis. In Europe and in North America, people who are religiously active also report greater happiness. In one Gallup survey, highly religious people (those who, for example, agreed that "my religious faith is the most important influence in my life") were twice as likely as those lowest in religious commitment to declare themselves very happy. Other surveys find that happiness and satisfaction with life are correlated with religious affiliation and frequency of worship attendance. Among the elderly, an active faith has been one of the best predictors of life satisfaction. Widows and mothers of disabled children report more joy in their lives and are less vulnerable to depression if they have a deep religious faith. People with strong faith also recover sooner from the effects of divorce, unemployment, serious illness, and other misfortunes. Religion may provide a sense of community, a feeling of meaning and purpose, and a source of hope in the face of death and disaster. Religious faith is also a motive for thinking about others: according to public opinion polls, people who attend church weekly have much higher rates of volunteerism and charitable giving.

This new scientific pursuit of happiness suggests that William Cowper was correct when he wrote in 1782 that "Happiness depends, as Nature shows/ Less on exterior things than most suppose." It depends, rather, on possessing certain traits, enjoying a network of close relationships, and having a faith that provides social support, purpose, and hope.

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