

8 happiness

Assessing Happiness
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Pursuing Happiness

Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.

—ARISTOTLE (384–322 B.C.)

Everything we do, suggested Aristotle, is motivated by our drive to experience happiness. In fact, he argued, it is the supreme good. We pursue health, fame, and wealth because we think they will make us happy. We seek happiness as an end in itself.

Test the idea with this mental challenge: Imagine someone could grant you fame and fortune *or* happiness. You could have the world's respect and own everything you could dream of but without happiness. Or you could live each day joyfully, having only your basic needs met. Which would you pick (Fordyce, 1977)?

For virtually everyone, it's no contest: Happiness wins hands down. No wonder that college students report thinking of happiness often, rating it 6.58 on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is "of no importance" and 7 is "extraordinarily important and valuable" (Diener, 2000). In almost every culture that researchers have examined, happiness ranks as one of life's most cherished goals (Lyubomirsky, 2001).

Assessing Happiness

The following scale was designed to gather data on people's general satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 1985a). Try it yourself.

SELF-ASSESSMENT ■

Satisfaction with Life Scale

There are five statements on the next page with which you may agree or disagree. Using the scale provided, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responses.

Bolt, M. (2004). *Pursuing Human Strengths: A Positive Psychology Guide*. New York, NY: Worth Publishers (pp. 117–137).

7 = strongly agree 6 = agree 5 = slightly agree 4 = neither agree nor disagree
3 = slightly disagree 2 = disagree 1 = strongly disagree

- ___ 1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
___ 2. The conditions of my life are excellent.
___ 3. I am satisfied with my life.
___ 4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
___ 5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

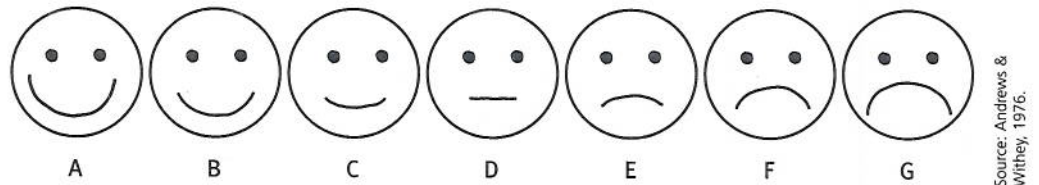
Source: Diener et al., 1985a.

Add up your answers to the five items to obtain your total score. Scores can range from 5 to 35. Scores above the midpoint of 20 suggest satisfaction with life. As we will see in the next section, most folks are pretty satisfied!

Are Most People Happy?

Is life a tragedy? Sophocles thought so. "Not to be born surpasses thought and speech," he observed. "The second best is to have seen the light and then to go back quickly whence we came." Centuries later, Rousseau agreed: "Our pains exceed our pleasures so that, all things considered, human life is not at all a valuable gift."

So, how happy are people? Below are some faces expressing various feelings (Andrews & Withey, 1976). Which face comes closest to expressing how you feel about your life as a whole?



Source: Andrews & Withey, 1976.

Which face do most respondents select? Contrary to the idea that most people are unhappy, a whopping 92 percent of respondents in the United States picked a happy face (Myers, 2000). Nearly two-thirds picked A or B.

And how do people score on the Satisfaction with Life Scale? Most Americans score in the 21 to 25 range. In other words, you would need a score above 25 to be more satisfied than most Americans. A recent Harris poll (Reilly & Simmons, 2003) reported that 57 percent of Americans indicated that they were "very satisfied" with life, and 34 percent said they were "fairly satisfied." A relatively small 6 percent were "not very satisfied," and a miniscule 2 percent were "not at all satisfied."

Americans are not uniquely happy. Research from around the world suggests that most people are happy. Although cultural differences exist—the Swiss are happier

than Bulgarians, and Danes seem happier than South Koreans—people of most nations average above the midpoint on happiness scales (Diener, 2000).

Still the idea that *others* are probably not happy persists. For example, more than two-thirds of respondents in Minnesota rated their capacity for happiness to be in the upper 35 percent of people their own age and sex (Lykken, 1999). And when Americans were asked “Who of the following people do you think is the happiest?” they responded Oprah Winfrey (23 percent), Bill Gates (7 percent), the Pope (12 percent), Chelsea Clinton (3 percent), and yourself (49 percent). The remaining 6 percent did not know (Black & McCafferty, 1998). Most people see themselves as even happier than the popular, powerful, and wise!

Why Be Happy?

The benefits of happiness extend beyond the enjoyment of good feelings. In fact, research indicates that joy pays major physical and psychological dividends.

Compared to their dour counterparts, happy people (Seligman, 2002):

- are healthier and live longer.
- are more productive at work and have higher incomes.
- are more tolerant and creative and make decisions more easily.
- select more challenging goals, persist longer, and perform better in a variety of laboratory tasks.
- demonstrate greater empathy, have more close friends, and enjoy better marriages.

Barbara Frederickson's (2001) theory of positive emotions states that a certain level of joy helps individuals build a variety of personal resources including physical (skills, health, longevity), social (friendships, social support networks), intellectual (expert knowledge, intellectual complexity), and psychological (resilience, optimism, creativity) resources. Her theory emphasizes that positive emotions strengthen resources that are drawn on throughout life to improve coping and our odds of survival.

Perhaps, then, Robert Louis Stevenson was right when he said, “There is no duty we so underrate as the duty of being happy. By being happy we sow anonymous benefits upon the world.” The “feel-good do-good effect” is in fact now a well-established psychological principle. People who are in a good mood not only display more empathy, they are also more helpful. Happy people are less self-focused, like others more, and seek to spread their good cheer.

Who Is Happy?

Helen Keller claimed, “External conditions are the accidents of life, its outer trappings. Success and happiness lie within you.” Was she right? What do you think? Are there also important demographic predictors of well-being?

Happiness

Complete the following true-or-false quiz.

- T F 1. Men have a greater sense of well-being than do women.
- T F 2. The teen and elderly years are the least happy times of life.
- T F 3. More years of formal education are linked with a more joyful life.
- T F 4. White people are happier than members of minority race groups.
- T F 5. By and large, the single life is happier than the married life.
- T F 6. Compared to religiously active people, the nonreligious tend to enjoy a greater sense of well-being.
- T F 7. In North America and Europe, those with higher annual incomes, and especially the very rich, live happier lives.

Researchers have addressed all of these issues, and all of the above statements are false!

Gender provides little clue to happiness levels. Although women may be more susceptible to depression and anxiety, and men more often experience antisocial disorders or become alcoholic, numerous studies indicate that the genders are equally likely to report being “very happy” and “satisfied” with their lives.

Like gender, age tells little about a person’s level of happiness. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that adolescent stress or physical decline in old age makes a person miserable, repeated surveys show that people of all ages report similar feelings of well-being. Unhappiness does not surge in women during menopause or when children leave home. (The “empty nest” for most parents is actually a happy place.) Nor do most people experience a mid-life crisis. One study of nearly 10,000 men and women found “not the slightest evidence” that distress peaks in the early forties (McCrae & Costa, 1990).

Years of formal education, IQ, and skin color are not significant predictors of happiness either. “People who go to work in their overalls and on the bus,” concludes David Lykken (1999, p. 17), “are just as happy, on the average, as those in suits who drive to work in their own Mercedes.” Studies in both North America and Europe show that education and race account for very little of the person-to-person variation in happiness. For example, in spite of decades of disadvantage, African-Americans report about the same sense of well-being as do white Americans.

Surveys of both Americans and Europeans report that married people experience greater happiness and life satisfaction than those who are single or widowed, especially compared to those who are divorced or separated. For example, among the thousands of Americans surveyed by the National Opinion Research Center over the past 30 years, 40 percent of married adults declared themselves very happy, almost

double the 24 percent of never-married adults who said the same (Seligman, 2002). Data from national surveys in 19 countries confirm this marriage-happiness link. The idea that the marriage-happiness link is gender specific—strongly predictive of men’s but not women’s happiness—is also a myth. Throughout the western world, both sexes report greater life satisfaction than those never married, divorced, or separated.

Active religious practices are also linked with happier and healthier lives. In reviewing the research on faith and well-being, David Myers (2000) notes how active religiosity is associated with several mental health criteria. Actively religious North Americans are much less likely than the nonreligious to become delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce, or to commit suicide. The religiously devout also seem to cope with stress more effectively. Compared with religiously inactive widows, recently widowed women who attend worship services regularly report greater life satisfaction. People of faith also tend to retain or regain greater happiness after suffering divorce, unemployment, or serious illness. For the elderly, the two best predictors of life satisfaction seem to be health and religiousness.

Basic needs must be met for us to be happy. However, once we have life’s necessities, income makes little difference. For example, in those nations whose gross national product is more than eight thousand dollars per person, there is little relationship between wealth and well-being. Moreover, within wealthier countries such as the United States and Canada, the correlation between income and personal happiness, reports Ronald Inglehart (1990, p. 242), “is surprisingly weak (indeed virtually negligible).” A survey of the Forbes 1000 list of the wealthiest Americans found the very rich to be only slightly happier than the average American (Diener et al., 1985b). In fact, 37 percent were less happy.

Given that age, gender, race, educational level, and income play little role in happiness, might we gain better clues from knowing people’s personality traits?

CRITICAL THINKING ■

Personality and Happiness

Think of a person you know well who seems especially happy. Identify at least three of that person’s distinguishing traits:

When asked to name one condition for happiness, psychologist Ed Diener (Elias, 2002) responded, “The happiest people all seem to have good friends.” When Diener and Martin Seligman (2002) studied very happy people—those who scored about 30 on the Satisfaction with Life Scale at the start of this chapter—they found that they were highly social. In contrast to those who were only moderately happy or very unhappy, the happiest people spent the least amount of time alone and the most time socializing. Outside observers rated the happiest people highest in interpersonal relationships.

Indeed, happy people are *extraverts*. They are sociable, outgoing people. Extraverts are more successful in meeting the fundamental need to belong. Happy people have both the desire and the ability to foster strong social relationships. This motivation and competence seems linked to their basic *trust* in others. They assume the best, seeing others as fundamentally honest and trustworthy. In contrast, those who are skeptical, cynical, and assume that others may be dishonest or dangerous tend to be unhappy. Extraverts' greater sensitivity to positive information also seems to foster their sense of well-being. Told that they have done well on a test or to imagine they have won a lottery, they are happier than introverts given the same news. Interestingly, extraverts' and introverts' reactions to negative news (hearing about a poor test performance or imagining being expelled from school) are the same (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991).

Happy people are also *conscientious*. One study of the happy personality found that the trait of conscientiousness was the strongest positive correlate of life satisfaction (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). The researchers suggest that engaging in goal-directed activity—exerting control over ourselves and our environment—enhances quality of life. Conscientious people set higher goals for themselves and tend to achieve more in work settings. When they are highly challenged and have the skills to meet the challenge, they are especially likely to report *flow*, an optimal experience we will focus on later in this chapter.

Linked closely to conscientiousness is a sense of *personal control*. In reviewing the University of Michigan's nationwide surveys, Angus Campbell (1981, p. 218) concluded that “having a strong sense of controlling one's life is a more dependable predictor of positive feelings of well-being than any of the objective conditions of life we have considered.” Those with a strong desire for control are assertive, decisive, and are more likely to attain their personal goals. They take credit for their successes but also accept responsibility for their failures.

Happy people also enjoy high *self-esteem* (Schimmack & Diener, 2002). They like themselves. People who feel good about themselves are less susceptible to insomnia and ulcers, are more persistent after failure, and are less likely to conform. The University of Michigan surveys (Campbell, 1981) have shown that satisfaction with self is a more powerful predictor of well-being in America than is satisfaction with family life, friendships, or income. Self-esteem is, however, a stronger predictor of well-being in countries that value personal autonomy, such as the United States and Europe, than in collectivist cultures such as China, Korea, and India, where people think more about how their families are doing.

Have you noticed the common thread that runs through these personality characteristics? Happy people tend to make optimistic interpretations in everyday life. They see the best in others, in their work, and in themselves. Optimists don't deny their setbacks but rather seem to interpret them differently. Because they are convinced that effort and self-discipline make a difference, they believe the future is bright. They are *hardy* individuals who utilize more effective coping strategies in managing stress. Ironically, those who deny threatening life events and the existence of negative emotions are among the unhappiest (DeNeve, 1999).

IN REVIEW

Happiness is one of life's most important goals. Happy people live longer, are more productive, and enjoy better interpersonal relations. Most people report relatively high levels of life satisfaction. Gender, age, race, formal education, and income level seem to make little difference in people's level of happiness. On the other hand, those who are married, actively religious, extraverted, conscientious, and self-confident express greater life satisfaction.

Satisfying Life Experiences

Some psychologists have attempted to understand happiness by studying specific life experiences.

SELF-ASSESSMENT ■

Satisfying Life Event

Consider the past month of your life. Think back to the important occurrences of this period of time. Bring to mind the single most personally satisfying event that you experienced. Use your own definition of "satisfying." That is, think of "satisfying" in whatever way makes sense to you. Take a couple of minutes to come up with a very impactful experience and then describe it (Sheldon et al., 2001).

Gratitude

Use the following scale to respond to each question:

1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = slightly disagree 4 = neutral
5 = slightly agree 6 = agree 7 = strongly agree

- ___ 1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.
- ___ 2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.
- ___ 3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for.
- ___ 4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.
- ___ 5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.
- ___ 6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.

Source: McCullough et al., 2002.

Reverse the numbers you gave in response to items 3 and 6 (i.e., 1 = 7, 2 = 6, 3 = 5, 4 = 4, 5 = 3, 6 = 2, and 7 = 1), then add up the numbers for all six statements. Scores range from 6 to 42, with higher scores suggesting a more grateful disposition. A sample of 156 undergraduate psychology students obtained a mean score of about 35.

Gratitude is rooted in the experience of positive outcomes and in seeing oneself as the recipient of another's generosity. Stretching our attributions for success to include the wide range of people who contribute to our well-being leads us to feel affirmed, esteemed, and valued (McCullough et al., 2002). Such an interpretation boosts our self-esteem and our feelings of social support. Highly grateful people may possess a worldview in which everything they have, indeed life itself, is a gift. Such appreciation helps people to avoid taking benefits for granted. They may be less likely to adapt to positive life circumstances and thus may sustain happiness and well-being over time.

Research with the gratitude questionnaire identifies several important correlates of a grateful disposition. In addition to experiencing greater life satisfaction, grateful people are less prone to negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, and envy. Furthermore, they are more empathic, forgiving, and helpful. Grateful people seem less focused on materialistic goals.

Do these correlations reflect a causal relationship? Does a grateful outlook actually contribute to health and happiness? In a recent Gallup (1998) survey, American

teens and adults certainly thought so. Over 90 percent of the respondents indicated that expressing gratitude helped them to feel happy.

A series of studies asked different groups of volunteers to remember “things in your life you are grateful for,” hassles, life events, or “ways in which you are better off than others” (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Both undergraduate students without disabilities and persons suffering from neuromuscular disease participated in the research and kept records of their moods, life satisfaction, physical symptoms, and coping behaviors. Relative to other groups, those with a grateful mindset, regardless of their physical disabilities, exhibited heightened well-being, especially on the measures of positive affect.

IN REVIEW

People report their most satisfying experiences to be the times when they felt worthy, competent, related to others, and free of external pressure. Aspirations of fame, fortune, and image are linked with a lowered sense of well-being. A state of consciousness called *flow* occurs when our concentration is so focused that we are completely absorbed in an activity. It is most likely to happen when we have clear goals, when the challenge matches our level of skill, and when we receive immediate feedback.

People’s perceptions of their lives are more important to their well-being than objective circumstances. The desire to maximize all of our outcomes is often associated with feelings of regret and decreases our life satisfaction. Savoring life’s best moments fosters joy. Those who have a grateful outlook on life and see themselves as the recipients of others’ generosity report greater positive feelings.

Pursuing Happiness

Current happiness research points to a number of recommendations. Here’s a quick summary:

1. *Don’t confuse well-being with being well-off.* Don’t equate stuff with success. Remember: A growing income, along with all it can purchase, is not associated with an iota of increased well-being. We quickly adapt to our changing circumstances, including income increases, and only notice momentary variations from it. Rather, acknowledge the joy of non-material experiences. “When you’re outside at night with your kids,” counsels Jane Hammerslough, “say ‘I love it when the stars are out and the snow looks so beautiful!’ Put emphasis on things that aren’t stuff—on the nonpurchasable” (cited in Hamilton, 2001).

2. *Make wise comparisons.* Research suggests that as we climb the ladder of success we tend to compare ourselves with those a rung or two above. Choose not to. Instead, compare yourself with those who have less. Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1972, p. 108) suggested, "All you have to do is to go to a hospital and hear all the simple blessings that people never before realized *were* blessings—being able to urinate, to sleep on your side, to be able to swallow, to scratch an itch, etc. Could *exercises* in deprivation educate us faster about all our blessings?" Even imagining others' misfortune produces renewed life satisfaction (Dermer, 1979). College women who merely viewed vivid depictions of how grim life was in 1900 or who imagined and then wrote about various personal tragedies such as being burned or disfigured expressed greater life satisfaction.
3. *Keep a gratitude journal.* Savor the present moment and say thank you often. When you say thank you, argues Hammerslough, "you're reminding yourself that something good has come to you" (Hamilton, 2001). In her book *Simple Abundance*, Sarah Ban Breathnach (1995) suggests that each night you write down five things that happened that day for which you are thankful. These need not be major surprises or achievements but simple gifts such as finding a good parking space, enjoying a sunny day, meeting a work deadline, tasting a delicious dessert, or watching a child laugh. Robert Emmons found that those who did this in daily or even weekly journals were not only more joyful; they were healthier, less stressed, more optimistic, and more likely to help others (Morris, 2001).
4. *Discover your flow.* Keep a diary of the high points and low points of each day. Notice patterns. We all experience life differently. An important step in improving the quality of our lives is to pay close attention to what we do every day and to notice how we feel doing different things, in different places, at different times, and with different people (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). It may be helpful to experiment with one's surroundings, activities, and companions. There may be surprises. It may be that you really like being alone, that you like work more than you thought, that grocery shopping is really not so bad, that reading makes you feel better than watching television, that socializing with friends is actually more satisfying than going to the movies. When it becomes clear which activities produce the high points for you, increase their frequency.
5. *Finish what you start and wholly experience it along the way.* Be conscientious and accomplish something every day. Strive for excellence, not necessarily perfection. Heed Father Laurence's sage advice (Monks of New Skete, 1999, p. 311):

Being happy means entering wholeheartedly into everything—no matter what kind of challenge it presents, no matter what the possible difficulties involved—entering into it body, soul, mind, and spirit. We have to enter into it in such a way that we're

no longer separate from what we're doing. We forget ourselves at the same time that we give ourselves completely. And when we do enter into life totally and completely, then, if we stop and reflect for just a moment, we'll notice that somehow we're beginning to experience happiness. This is what we're made for.

David Niven (2001) relates how a Chicago Transit Authority motorman has made his work a true expression of himself. Victor loves his job. "Thank you for riding with me this evening on Electric Avenue. Don't lean against the doors, I don't want to lose you," he tells his passengers as the train departs. He points out all the interesting sites and identifies the connecting buses in the street below. "Our equipment may be junky," the veteran motorman admits, "but for a dollar-fifty, I want to give a Lincoln Town Car ride." Victor's commitment has deep roots: "My father is a retired motorman, and one day he took me to work with him and I was so impressed looking out that window. Ever since I was 5 years old, I knew I wanted to run the trains" (p. 98).

6. *Find a hobby.* Turn off the TV. It fosters our hunger for possessions while reducing our personal contentment (Wu, 1988). Most important, television steals time from engagement in more mindful leisure challenges. Researchers of flow found that only 3 percent of those watching TV reported flow, while 39 percent felt apathetic. In contrast, of those engaged in arts and hobbies, 47 percent reported flow and 4 percent experienced apathy. The less expensive and more involving a leisure activity, the happier people tend to be while pursuing it. Most people are happier gardening than power boating, conversing than watching TV (Myers, 1992).
7. *Cultivate family ties.* Remember your roots. "The sun looks down on nothing half as good," observed C.S. Lewis (1949, p. 32), "as a household laughing together over a meal." As we grow older and typically more distant from our origins, this is easy to forget. We do better when bonds are maintained. "Call your mother," is the final word of advice from "Life's Little Instructions," a poster on my office wall.
8. *Know your neighbors.* Join a group. Build friendships. Aristotle labeled us the "social animal." Research concurs: we have a fundamental need to belong. Relative to more communal societies, those in individualist societies who learn independence at an early age often end up experiencing greater loneliness, alienation, and stress-related diseases. Those who enjoy close relationships cope better with life's challenges.
9. *Volunteer.* Do something that turns attention from yourself. As we have seen, researchers of altruism have uncovered a "feel-good, do-good effect," that is, happy people are helpful people. However, the link goes both ways. Kind acts lead one to think more kindly about oneself. Service to others contributes to well-being by decreasing boredom and increasing a sense of meaning in life.

10. *Practice spirituality.* "Don't let your religious beliefs fade," suggests author David Niven (2001). "Take care of the soul," advises psychologist David Myers (1992). A wealth of research has found that religious people are happier. They cope better with life's challenges. For many, faith provides a supportive community, a sense of meaning, the experience of acceptance, and a focus beyond self.

IN REVIEW

To foster life satisfaction, research suggests that we not confuse well-being with being well-off. Comparing ourselves with those who have less rather than more is likely to foster gratitude and happiness. Monitoring the daily activities that bring us the most satisfaction may enable us to increase life's flow. Clearly, the mindful challenge of a hobby is preferable to the mindless passivity of watching television. Strengthening family ties, fostering friendships, and volunteer service are all likely to increase well-being. Practicing spirituality can infuse life with meaning and provide a focus beyond self.