

Well-being and Happiness

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

(The 1776 United States Declaration of Independence).

There are two broad definitions of happiness. The first is the moral-laden definition. Aristotle, for example, defined happiness as the “activity of soul in accordance with virtue”, supported by a long life, health and money. The second type is the morally-neutral definition of happiness, favoured by psychologists to characterise “quality of life” or “well-being”. Psychologists, for example, refer to subjective well-being when examining the way that people evaluate their level of life satisfaction over a period of time. The Director of the World Database of Happiness, Ruut Veenhoven, defined happiness as “the degree to which an individual evaluates the overall quality of his/her life-as-a-whole positively”.

Happiness studies tend to make a distinction between external (state) influences and personality (trait) dispositions. British economist, Lord Richard Layard, identified the “big seven” of happiness as: family relationships, financial situation, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom and personal values. Happiness, according to this perspective, is not necessarily stable over periods of time but varies according to changing situations and relationships. Internal (trait) happiness, on the other hand, is concerned with the individual’s innate or acquired personality or psychological disposition. Taking a slightly different perspective, Buddhist philosophy claims that happiness depends upon a state of mind; what Matthieu Ricard defines as “a deep sense of flourishing that arises from an exceptionally healthy mind”.

The means of achieving human happiness have long occupied the minds of the world’s greatest thinkers. In *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Alain de Botton shows in what way six philosophers, stretching back over two millennia, have

explored the sources of happiness. From Socrates we learn that moral courage is as important as physical courage, that, if we believe that what we are doing is right, we should not be upset if people oppose us, that we will better rewarded if we listen to the dictates of reason rather than of public opinion and that the best way to dispel worry is to assume that what you most fear may happen will certainly happen. For Epicurus, what makes a person happy is friendship, freedom and a willingness to confront worries about such matters as money, illness and death. Small incomes are necessary for happiness but happiness does not grow with large ones. From Seneca we learn about the malign influence of unreasonable expectations and the need to accept tribulations without resentment. To Montaigne, happiness is only possible through personal experience, self-knowledge and an important balance between the mind and body. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche tell us how we might best cope with loss and suffering.

The utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham defined happiness as “the sum of pleasure and pain.” Utilitarian philosophy argues that the rule of utility is the goodness of the action which brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people; described by Bentham as “the greatest happiness principle”. According to Bentham’s “greatest happiness principle”, public policy should seek to minimise inequalities in education, employment, income and health to maximise the happiness of the greatest number of people.

Contemporary philosopher A. C. Grayling has argued that happiness is too vague a concept and that instead of talking about happiness we should talk about satisfaction, achievement, interest, engagement, growth, enjoyment and the constant opening of fresh possibilities. He also echoes ‘the wise teaching of philosophers and poets of antiquity that a rich person is one who has enough. If his needs are modest and his habits frugal, then so long as his resources are enough to meet both, he is rich.

Unhappiness

Depression, anxiety, sadness, boredom, discontent and dissatisfaction are manifestations of unhappiness. Unhappiness can be attributable to internal disturbances such as psychological, hormonal or physical illness as well as external influences such as war, deprivation, unemployment, abject poverty, disconnection, death, divorce and loss. According to the Australian Government's National Depression Initiative, on average, one in five people in Australia will experience depression at some point in their lifetime, with around one million adults and 100,000 young adults living with depression each year. Some people turn to short-term gratification such as consumption of material goods, crime, drugs, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, aggression and so forth to enhance or pursue happiness and/or to mask unhappiness. According to psychologist Martin Seligman, it is "rampant individualism" that has come to plague modern society, contributing to an unprecedented depression and anxiety epidemic.

Contemporary studies of happiness

Happiness studies constitute a rapidly expanding area of contemporary research, especially in psychology, sociology and economics. One example is the study of subjective well-being. Diener, Suh and Oishi describe subjective well-being "as a field of psychology that attempts to understand people's evaluations of their lives." Standard questions used in such studies might include "how happy are you with your life?" or "how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life?" with respondents asked to record answers according to a point-scale system (e.g. 1-10). Researchers in this area claim that studies measuring subjective well-being are important as they give weight to the respondent's view of his or her own experience of well-being. In addition to these studies, researchers have looked to other indicators such as brain structure, saliva cortisol levels and facial electromyography (EMG) to measure happiness.

One factor that has occupied the minds of many happiness researchers is income. According to Lord Robert Layard, the standard findings in happiness studies report three conclusions:

1. Happiness (life satisfaction) is relative and is affected by comparing one's own income to that another;

2. A person's happiness adapts rapidly to high levels of income;
3. The happiness we derive from "what we have" is culturally determined.

Layard argues that the growth of rich nations since the 1950s has not resulted in greater happiness; rather happiness is derived from comparative income as opposed to absolute income. Layard argues that as people obtain higher income levels, their expectations and aspirations rise, and so their happiness levels will eventually adapt to the higher level of income. (Note: social researchers tend to agree that the obsession with accumulating material wealth has a negative impact on people's happiness and well-being as it often means they neglect what is important in life, such as family and friends.) Other research shows that poor people have lower subjective well-being than richer people. Psychologist Bob Cummins, for instance, argues that levels of income have "a major influence on the subjective well-being of people living in poverty".

In *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, sociologist Robert E. Lane draws on extensive research in many fields to show that the main sources of well-being in advanced economies are friendship and a good family life. Lane comments that,

[A]s our material prosperity increases, the gap between income and satisfaction with life seems to be widening. Predictably, money has its most positive effect on the poor, but once a person has achieved a minimal standard of living, level of income has almost nothing to do with happiness. Close relationships, rather than money, are the key to happiness. Indeed, the number of one's personal friends is a much better indicator of overall satisfaction with life than is personal wealth. One stands a better chance of achieving a satisfying life by spending time with friends and family than by striving for higher income.

The study of well-being is a complex field of research. There are at times discrepancies between studies. For instance, some studies claim that education, age, sex and ethnicity have no correlation to reported well-being, whereas other studies indicate that women report higher levels of well-being than men, and that those with more education report higher well-being than those with less

education. Care therefore needs to be taken when interpreting individual pieces of research.

Recently happiness studies have gained popularity in some countries as a basis for public policy. In Bhutan, for example, “gross national happiness” has replaced gross national product as a measure of national progress.

Measuring happiness in Australia

In 2006, Australia ranked third out of 177 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI), after Norway and Iceland. The Human Development Report is commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as a comparative measure of three key indices: (1) life expectancy index (life expectancy at birth); (2) education index (adult literacy; school and university enrolment); and (3) GDP index (GDP per capita). David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald have, however, argued that although Australia ranks high on the Human Development Index, Australia performs poorly in a range of happiness indicators according to the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), a survey of about 50,000 adults in 35 nations in 2002. One example is that Australians rank close to the bottom of an international ranking of job satisfaction levels.

In 2001, the World Values Survey conducted a study of more than 65 countries, suggesting that the world’s happiest people live in Nigeria, followed by Mexico, Venezuela, El Salvador and Puerto Rico with the least happiest in Romania, Russia and Armenia. Australia ranked 20th according to this survey. These findings contradict other studies, which suggest richer nations are happier than poor nations. For example, the creator of the first world map of happiness, Adrian White, lists Denmark, Switzerland and Austria as the happiest nations, with Australia ranking 26th.

In a national telephone poll of 1000 people, conducted by Ipsos Mackay in August 2006, 40 per cent of Australians thought life was getting worse, despite a sustained period of economic growth, rising income and low unemployment. Twenty-five per cent believed life in Australia was getting better. Again, this would tend to support the growing consensus that extra wealth does not equate to extra well-being. Seventy-seven per cent of respondents believe that the government’s prime objective should be promotion of the greatest happiness of people rather than the

greatest wealth. The poll further revealed that personal relationships are central to happiness—with nearly 60 per cent of respondents rating family and partner relationships as the most important factor contributing to their happiness. Only 4 per cent considered money and financial situation as the most important factor in happiness. The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index also conducts regular surveys to assess satisfaction with life in Australia. The survey examines the role of income, gender, age, household composition, marital status, health and life events in terms of personal wellbeing.

(See: http://www.deakin.edu.au/research/acqol/index_wellbeing/index.htm)

Ways of increasing happiness

One of the most intriguing and enduring questions for humankind is how to achieve fulfilment, well-being and contentment. Psychological and sociological studies more or less agree that people who live in countries where human rights, autonomy and freedom are respected are happier than those living in countries where they are not. Happiness is also apparently higher for those involved in social or volunteer organisations; leisure and exercise activities; paid employment; marriage or partnerships; and child rearing. These are the external situations that we can work on to increase our levels of happiness. However, as Buddhist monk, Matthieu Ricard, has suggested, while sociological studies of happiness are important, they “tell us very little about the inner conditions of happiness and nothing at all about the ways each individual can develop them.” In other words, happiness studies have important implications for helping others, but they don’t tell us how to achieve and sustain happiness in our own lives.

To achieve personal happiness, four related strategies are commonly advocated. They are: physical exercise and control over the body; finding balance in one’s life; acting, where possible, to reduce or eliminate stress; and the training of the mind.

First, physical exercise is widely known to release endorphins, which are natural, biochemical compounds that produce a sense of well-being. In addition to exercise, the consumption of food and exposure to sunlight (in moderate amounts) boost serotonin levels in the central nervous system, serving to control both mood and behaviour.

THE AUSTRALIAN COLLABORATION

Second, balance and equilibrium in life are considered vital for both physical and emotional health. Some widely advocated strategies are maintaining a balance between work and play and work and home, keeping to a balanced diet and maintaining a balanced and equal relationship.

Third, while stimulation and a little stress can be beneficial, high levels of stress are very damaging. Seeking to reduce stress through physical exercise, sleep, relaxation, good eating habits and a balanced lifestyle contributes powerfully to happiness and well-being.

The fourth strategy, advocated by Buddhism, is the training of the mind away from negative and destructive thoughts such as envy, desire, hatred and anger and towards the cultivation of positive emotions such as compassion and empathy. In particular, meditation is described as a valuable strategy for increasing happiness. Buddhist philosophy resonates with the field of positive psychology. According to positive psychology, depressed or unhappy people think about the world in self-defeating ways and believe that negative things are going to happen to them, whereas happy people are more likely to think about the world in brighter terms, interpret events positively, and recall neutral or negative events in a positive way.

These are four different but interrelated strategies to seek happiness by personal action. According to a Tibetan saying: "Seeking happiness outside ourselves is like waiting for sunshine in a cave facing north". Arguably, true or pure happiness is only possible through compassion and love for others (reciprocity). The Dalai Lama, for example, argues that it is our relationships with others that brings ourselves and others the greatest happiness. Psychological studies also confirm that the most altruistic people are the happiest.

Useful sources

Grayling A.C. The Age, 12th April 2008
Professor Grayling is a philosopher at the University of London.

Dalai Lama & Cutler, H.C. (1998). *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, Riverhead Books.

From the collaboration between the Dalai Lama and psychiatrist, Howard Cutler, this book examines happiness as a way of living.

Diener, E., Suh, E., & Oishi, S. (1997). "Recent Findings on Subjective Well-Being", *Indian Journal of Clinical Psychology*: <http://www.psych.uiuc.edu/~ediener/hottopic/paper1.html>

This article examines the subjective well-being (SWB) field of psychology, reviewing the current research on measurements of SWB.

Layard, R. (2005). *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, London: Allen Lane.

In this book, Lord Richard Layard, a leading British economist, raises important questions about happiness in society.

McMahon, D. (2006). *The Pursuit of Happiness: A History from the Greeks to the Present*, London: Allen Lane.

This book traces the history of happiness from ancient Greece to the present day.

Ricard, M. (2007). *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*, UK: Atlantic Books.

Ricard, a Buddhist monk with a background in cellular genetics, shows that durable happiness is not just an emotion but a skill that can be developed.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), (2006). *Human Development Report 2006: Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis*, <http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/statistics/>

This latest UN Report expands on the framework for human development as reflected in the vision of the Millennium Development Goals.

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