



“Summary of article by David G. Myers and Ed Diener: Who is Happy?”
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What makes people happy? An abundance of new empirical research offers surprising answers. This article surveys recent findings on the sources of personal happiness, dispels myths about who is likely to be happy, and sketches a theory of happiness that recognizes the importance of adaptation, culture, and personal goals.

In the past two decades scientific interest in the determinants of joy and life satisfaction has surged, leading to thousands of new studies. By the end of the 1980s, nearly 800 articles annually cited "well-being," "happiness" or "life satisfaction" in published abstracts. From these studies, one finding stands out: most people in the industrial world consider themselves reasonably happy, contrary to a tradition of writers who reject the possibility of widespread happiness.

The literature on subjective well-being (SWB) takes seriously self-reports of happiness and dissatisfaction. But can these measures be trusted: do people tell the truth about their happiness? Many considerations confirm their reliability. Over time (from 6 months to 6 years), self-reports of global well-being change little. Individuals who describe themselves as happy appear happy to peers and family members. Positive events are recalled more frequently than negative events. Social desirability effects, such as the desire to please interviewers, do not invalidate SWB measures. In general, "SWB measures exhibit construct validity. They are responsive to recent good and bad events and to therapy...They correlate inversely with feeling ill...And they predict other indicators of psychological well-being. Compared with depressed people, happy people are less self-focused, less hostile and abusive, and less vulnerable to disease. They also are more loving, forgiving, trusting, energetic, decisive, creative, helpful, and sociable..."(11)

Many studies indicate that happiness and unhappiness stem from different sources, or at least are predicted by different variables. Positive and negative emotions are only weakly correlated with one another. These surprising findings suggest that positive and negative affect do not lie on opposite ends of a single spectrum. An individual's global sense of satisfaction may not provide clues about his or her global sense of dissatisfaction.

HAPPINESS MYTHS

Many beliefs about the relationship between age, gender, race, culture, income and happiness have been proven false by recent studies. For instance, despite the widespread belief that teenage stress, mid-life crisis, and declining years of old age are unhappy times, interviews with

people of all ages reveal that life satisfaction is about the same in all time periods. Research also disputes the "empty nest syndrome" -- the despondency and lost meaning said to be experienced by couples when their children leave home. In fact, most couples find their marriages rejuvenated by an empty nest. Gender and race contribute little to happiness. Men and women share the same distributions of happiness levels, although women seem to experience both happiness and sadness more intensely. African-Americans report happiness levels very close to European-Americans, and are slightly less vulnerable to depression.

Does happiness vary by culture? In Portugal, only 10% of people report themselves as very happy, but in the Netherlands, 40% make the same assertion. Such marked differences occur even when income variance above certain levels is controlled for and cannot be explained by differences in cultural interpretations of the questions. At low levels of income, SWB covaries with the satisfaction of basic physical needs. But above basic needs levels, SWB is only weakly affected by income; relatively low levels of SWB are observed, for instance, in high-income Japan. "In general, collectivist cultures report lower SWB than do individualistic cultures, where norms more strongly support experiencing and expressing positive emotions."(12)

Thus, contrary to the assumptions of policy-makers and economists, subjective well-being does not necessarily rise with income. At the national level, the correlation between national wealth and well being is positive (+.67 in a 24-nation study reported by Inglehart). This relationship, however, may mask other factors such as continuous years of democracy, which correlate even better with life satisfaction. At the individual level, studies of happiness levels in the United States, Europe, and Japan indicate that wealth is like health: "Its absence can breed misery, yet having it is no guarantee of happiness."(13) While most Americans express the belief that more money would make them happier, the actual correlation between income and happiness is very weak in both the U.S. and Europe. Americans today average twice the inflation-adjusted income of their counterparts 40 years ago, but report themselves as no happier.

HAPPY PEOPLE

High levels of subjective well-being are linked with the presence of certain traits, strong supportive relationships, challenging work and religious faith. Studies consistently show that happy people share the same four traits: self-esteem, a sense of personal control, optimism, and extraversion. Happy people typically like themselves. When individuals lose control over their own lives, they become less happy compared to those who feel empowered. Optimists tend to be more successful, healthier, and happier than are pessimists. "Compared with introverts, extraverts are happier both when alone and with other people, whether they live alone or with others, whether they live in rural or metropolitan areas, and whether they work in solitary or social occupations."(14) Research has yet to determine the extent to which these traits are the cause or result of happiness. Twin studies indicate genetic influences on SWB.

Intimacy, close relationships, and openness to others are all characteristic of happy people. Individuals who can name several friends with whom they share intimate concerns are "healthier, less likely to die prematurely, and happier than people who have few or no such friends."(14) Holocaust survivors who self-disclose enjoy better health than those who cannot discuss their experiences. Married people of both sexes are more likely to say they are very happy than those

who are not married. However, it is also true that happy people make better marriage partners and are more likely to marry. Contrary to the myth that men benefit more from marriage than women, European surveys and a meta-analysis of 93 studies indicate that "the happiness gap between the married and never-married was virtually identical for men and women."(15).

Work satisfaction is a major component of life satisfaction. It can provide a sense of identity, community, and purpose. Of course, work can also produce anxiety or boredom if one's skills are challenged too much or too little. The best kind of work engages skills with just enough challenge that motivation is intrinsic to the activity rather than extrinsically driven by rewards. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the term "flow" to describe the heightened state of consciousness associated with intrinsically motivated, challenging activities.¹

Religious people report high levels of life satisfaction. Compared with persons of low spiritual commitment, highly spiritual people are twice as likely to say they were "very happy." People with a strong faith have better coping skills, achieving greater happiness after divorce, unemployment, serious illness or bereavement.

A THEORY OF HAPPINESS

The human ability to adapt, the cultural context in which one lives, and the advancement of personal goals must all be considered in a viable theory of happiness. Individual happiness is determined more by the frequency of positive affect and less by infrequent events that carry high intensity emotions. For instance, people adapt to euphoric events, such as lottery winnings, as well as paralyzing automobile accidents, returning to baseline happiness levels after periods of adjustment. In addition to adaptation, cultural world-view plays an important role. Cultural world-views vary; some construe the world as benevolent, while others normalize negative emotions such as anxiety and guilt. As a result, personal interpretations of life events may be shaped by this cultural template. Finally, progress toward a coherent set of goals is an accurate predictor of SWB. Interestingly, resources such income, social skills, and intelligence "were predictive of SWB only if they were relevant to a person's goals. This finding helps explain why income predicts SWB in very poor nations, and why self-esteem predicts SWB in wealthy, individualistic nations."(17)

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1. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990)