

The science of happiness



What the fact sheet covers:

- What is happiness?
- The science of happiness
- Life in the fast lane: time, money and happiness
- Can we change our level of happiness?

What is happiness?

The term happiness captures a huge variety of positive emotional responses, including such things as cheerfulness, serenity, optimism, and joy. Throughout history, philosophers, religious writers and poets have pondered on the meaning of happiness and how it might be achieved. More recently, scientists, psychologists and even politicians, have joined the pursuit.

Psychologists have found it useful to distinguish between a hedonic and an eudaimonic states of happiness. A hedonic state is a transitory state of pleasure, while a eudaimonic state is one associated with ongoing wellbeing, engagement and contentment. Eudaimonia is based on Aristotle's notion of the 'good life'.

Sociologist Corey Keyes argues that wellbeing is more than just the absence of persistent negative emotions.

His concept of 'flourishers' describes people who have high life satisfaction and/or enduring positive mood plus at least six of the following eudaimonic qualities:

- Contributing to society
- Social integration
- Wide range of social groups
- Accepting others
- Self-acceptance
- Mastery over their environment
- Positive relationships with others
- Autonomy
- Personal growth
- Purpose in life.





Happiness and evolution

Barbara Fredrickson from the University of Michigan claims that positive emotions have a grand purpose in evolution. Positive emotional mindsets widen our range of thoughts and actions, fostering play, exploration and creativity. We become open to new ideas and new experiences. These states then help us create lasting personal resources, such as social connections and knowledge. We can draw on those resources during trying times.

Happiness and the brain

Neuroscientist Richard Davidson measured electrical activity in the prefrontal cortex area of the brain. He found that the left side is activated when people are feeling happy and that the balance of activity between right and left moves as mood changes. He studied the brain activity of Tibetan monks whose meditation training resulted in extremely high activity on the left side. In fact, Matthieu Ricard, a Buddhist monk and translator to the Dalai Lama, has been dubbed 'the happiest man in the world'. The activity in his left prefrontal cortex was the highest ever measured.

It's not just highly trained Buddhist monks who benefit from meditation. Davidson gave meditation therapy to a group of highly stressed unhappy employees with high levels of right brain activity. Meditation increased activity in their left prefrontal cortex, employees felt happier and they reported renewed enthusiasm. Techniques such as meditation, relaxation, yoga

and mindfulness therapy can boost activity in the left side of your prefrontal cortex leading to increased wellbeing.

Happiness and our genes

David Lykken, from the University of Minnesota, studied the role of genes in determining satisfaction in life. He gathered information on 4000 sets of twins and found that about 50% of one's satisfaction with life comes from genetic predisposition. However, neuroscientists have learnt that the brain is highly plastic and can rewire and change itself in response to life experiences.

Health and happiness

Numerous studies have shown that eudaimonic happiness is associated with longer life and superior health. In one study, monitoring 1,300 men over 10 years, Laura Kubzansky found that optimists had half the rate of heart disease. This research has shown that happy people are better at health maintenance, such as spending more time exercising and having routine check ups.

Memories and happiness

Daniel Kahneman, from Princeton University, studies what makes experiences pleasant or unpleasant. When thinking about happiness, he says that it is important to recognise that life is a long series of moments. In any of those moments there is a lot going on and you could



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stop and ask, what is happening right now? We all have mental, physical and emotional activity at each of those points in time. However, almost all those moments are lost to us forever.

We selectively keep memories and certain moments count more than others. We tend to hold onto beginnings, peak moments, and endings. For example, a parent might remember with great pleasure the day their child scored their first goal at sport. They'll have forgotten the early start, the driving back and forth and the uneventful evening that accompanied that event.

Life in the fast lane: time, money and happiness

Research has shown that there is no significant relationship between how much money a person makes and how happy they are. For example, Ed Diener, a psychologist at the University of Illinois, interviewed members of the Forbes 400 (the richest Americans), and found that they were only a tiny bit happier than the rest of the population.

Kasser and Ryan discovered that people for whom money, success, fame and good looks are especially important are less satisfied than those who strive for good relationships with others, develop their talents and are active in social causes.

Researchers Brickman and Campbell studied a process called adaptation. They found that when we want something and then attain it, we don't seem to be any better off. They called this the hedonic treadmill. It's like we are walking

on a treadmill but not really getting anywhere because we are adapting to things. They studied lottery winners and found that one year later, life satisfaction was not significantly greater for the winners. This process of adaptation explains why we are not significantly happier despite significant increases in the standard of living over the last 50 years.

The slow movement

The book 'In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed' by Carl Honore, is something of a handbook for an emerging 'slow movement'.

The 'slow movement' is a backlash against the idea that faster is always better. The idea is that by slowing down we can enjoy richer, fuller lives. It's not about rejecting modern life, but rather striking a balance between fast and slow. That might mean making time for a hobby that slows you down or leaving some gaps in your day rather than striving to fill every moment with activity. Setting aside time where you turn off all technology or seeking out flexible working arrangements may also help you find balance. Some people make even more significant changes such as changing careers or locations. A 2003 Australian study by Hamilton and Mail found that over 90% of people who have made those significant changes are happy with their decision to downsize their lives.

In Western countries, as GDP (Gross Domestic Product) has gone up, happiness levels have either stayed the same or have decreased. Are we ready for a new approach? A BBC poll



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has asked “should the government’s primary objective be the greatest happiness or the greatest wealth?” The greatest happiness was chosen by 81% respondents.

In the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan they have been measuring happiness levels in the population since 1972. They use their Gross National Happiness (GNH) level as a basis for making policy decisions. For example, they restrict tourism in order to preserve their culture and they banned smoking in 2004 in order to promote national wellbeing. Countries with high levels of income equality, like Scandinavian countries, have higher levels of wellbeing than countries with an unequal distribution of wealth, such as the United States.

Can we change our level of happiness?

David Lykken’s twin studies found that about 60% of our life satisfaction relates to either our genetic predisposition or our life circumstances. Beyond that, he feels it is clear that we can change our happiness levels widely – up or down.

Psychologist Martin Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association in 1998. During his term, he drew together the

existing knowledge about the positive side of life and ignited the profession’s interest in finding out more. In his 2002 book, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfilment*, Seligman draws on the research and outlines three ways to increase happiness; get more pleasure out of life, become more engaged in what you do and find ways of making your life feel more meaningful.

See the Black Dog Institute fact sheet on Positive Psychology for practical strategies on how to increase happiness.

Where to get more information

The University of Pennsylvania, Positive Psychology Centre: www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu

Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Happiness: an online resource for Martin Seligman’s book. The website includes questionnaires to help you identify your personal strengths and measure your level of happiness.

www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu



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