

**What this fact sheet covers:**

- What is happiness?
- The science of happiness
- Life in the fast lane: time, money and happiness

INTRODUCTION**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 a eudemonic state. A hedonic state is a transitory state of pleasure, while a eudemonic state is one associated with ongoing wellbeing, engagement and contentment. Eudemonia 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 possess life satisfaction and/or positive mood plus at least 6 eudemonic qualities including:

- Making a contribution to society
- Being socially integrated
- Expanding in terms of social groups
- Being accepting of others
- Experiencing self-acceptance
- Demonstrating environmental mastery
- Having positive relationships with others
- Having autonomy
- Demonstrating personal growth
- Having purpose in life

The science of happiness**Happiness and evolution**

Barbara Fredrickson from the University of Michigan claims that positive emotions have a grand purpose in evolution. Positive emotional mind sets 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 the 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 a high level of right brain activity. Meditation increased activity in their left prefrontal cortex, the 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 a genetic predisposition. Neuroscientists have learnt that the brain is highly plastic. It rewires and changes itself in response to experience. A genetic predisposition does not mean a particular trait is always expressed or can't be modified.

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 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 of those moments are lost to us forever. We keep memories very selectively and certain moments count more than others. We tend to hold onto beginnings, the peak moments and the 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.

Happiness and life circumstances

In David Lykken's twin studies he found that life circumstances such as marital status, education, religion and income count for just 8% of life satisfaction. That is consistent with the studies that show very little connection between income and happiness levels. Interestingly, high education or IQ levels are not associated with greater happiness. Older people are consistently more satisfied with their lives than the young. Married people are happier but that could be because they were happier people to begin with. Religion has a positive effect on wellbeing. Ultimately, it's family and friends that are the most important. We need these interpersonal ties and social support to be happy.

Health and happiness

Numerous studies have shown that eudemonic (not state) happiness is associated with longer life and superior health. In one study, involving 1,300 men over 10 years, Laura Kubzansky found that optimists had half the rate of heart disease. Other research has shown that happy people are better at health maintenance, such as spending more time exercising and having routine check ups.

Life in the fast lane: Time, money and happiness

Money doesn't make you happy.

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 & 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.



Keeping up with the Joneses.

It seems we are driven to compare ourselves with others, and now that we have access to pay TV and the internet, it has never been easier to see how the very wealthy live. Instead of asking 'do my possessions meet my needs', we become anxious about how we are faring relative to others.

The hedonic treadmill

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 Slow' by Carl Honore is something of a handbook for an emerging 'slow movement'. The 'slow movement' is a backlash against the idea that 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. An 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.

Community happiness

In Western countries, as GDP has gone up, happiness levels have either stayed the same or have decreased. Are we ready for a new approach? A BBC poll has asked 'should the government's primary objective be the greatest happiness or the greatest wealth?'; 81% of people chose the greatest happiness. In the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan they are doing just that, 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 U.S. Scandinavian countries have high levels of community integration which further supports wellbeing. Community integration can also be activated by events such as wars, emergencies and sporting events.

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 book, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, 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

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Hamilton C, Denniss R (2005) **Affluenza**. Allen and Unwin

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Useful Websites

Time Magazine article: **The New Science of Happiness**. Jan 2005

www.time.com/time/2005/happiness/

6 Part BBC Series: **The Science of Happiness**. April 2006

www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/happiness_formula/

Centre for Confidence and Well-being, Scotland

www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/

The University of Pennsylvania, Positive Psychology Centre

www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/index.html

An online resource for Martin Seligman's book **Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Happiness**. The website includes questionnaires to help you identify your personal strengths and measure your current level of happiness: www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/

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