



## Using science to discover the secrets to happiness.

# DR.

By Stephen J. Lyons

Happiness was the lingua franca when Ed Diener—a.k.a. Dr. Happy—finally met his match on an autumn evening in 2006 before 3,000 rapt souls in Vancouver, Canada. The LAS professor of psychology, and the guru of good feeling, sat attentively to the right of a man dressed in a crimson robe who had taken the subject of self-satisfaction to Himalayan heights.

"My main commitment is how to achieve a happy life, successful life," said the Dalai Lama to no one and to everyone. "I feel for a happy, successful life, much depends on our mental attitude, our mental outlook."

Exactly!, thought Diener, and, boy, do I have the research to prove it!

When it was his turn to "dialogue" with His Holiness, Diener quoted the French novelist Gustave Flaubert: "To be stupid, selfish, and have good health are three requirements for happiness, though if stupidity is lacking, all is lost."

Diener remembers that the "Dali Lama laughed and laughed, and he said, 'yeah, some kinds of happiness are just stupid. When a bear is chasing you and going to kill you, you better be afraid and probably not worry about being too happy, right?'"

Today, when he recalls this story, Diener grins, not quite as large as the ubiquitous smiley face on display in his Psychology Building office, but he is clearly tickled by the memory of an event known as the Vancouver Dialogues.

"It's a very strange situation because you're sort of talking with him, but you're sort of not talking with him because there are so many people there."

Subjective well-being—how people evaluate their lives—is Diener's sweet spot of study. A case could

be made that he is the original founder of the research field. Diener's list of accomplishments would even make the doourest of academics downright cheery. His citations number more than 12,000. Of his 180 publications, 140 are in the field of subjective well-being. He is the editor of *Perspectives on Psychological Science* and a senior scientist for the Gallup Organization.



Psychology professor Ed Diener is one of the founders of the growing field of subjective well-being—how people evaluate their lives. Studying the secrets of happiness has gained him fame as Dr. Happy.

# HAPPY

Among his numerous honors is the Distinguished Researcher Award from the International Society of Quality of Life Studies and the Oakley-Kundee Award for Undergraduate Teaching. He has been the subject of a host of media publications that include *The New York Times*, *Reader's Digest*, *Time*, and *Esquire*.

Diener has evaluated levels of well-being among Africa's Masai, Greenland's Inuit, and our own Amish. He has also compared satisfaction levels between the slum dwellers of Calcutta, India, with California's homeless. (Surprisingly, India's slum dwellers are happier. Diener found they have more family ties and more respect than their counterparts in California.)

The youngest of six children, Diener grew up on a tomato, cotton, and lettuce farm in California's San Joaquin Valley. "If you have ever eaten Mexican food, Italian food, tomato soup, or ketchup, you likely have partaken of some of our tomatoes." He was the curious and sometimes rebellious son (he climbed Golden Gate Bridge and experimented with gunpowder) of parents who always stressed the sunny side of life. "They were optimists, but also transmitted the idea that we must all work to improve the world. My four older sisters lavished attention on me, and made me think I was special. Because my parents almost never argued and never moved from their farm, the universe was a secure and benevolent place for me.

"Although I was no more special than anyone else, feeling secure and valued gave me a self-confidence that helped me take on new and big projects later in life."

As an undergraduate at California State University in Fresno, Diener proposed a research study on the happiness levels of nearby migrant workers. His professor promptly turned him down for two reasons: one, they are not happy and, two, there was no way to measure happiness. Diener tucked the idea away where it would not emerge again until many years later when he was awarded tenure at the U of I.

"It was a bit of a dangerous topic because it sounded kind of flaky. But once I got tenure I was free to do what I wanted. Critics wondered how can you measure happiness? But nobody ever said, 'Can you measure depression?' Psychologists studied depression from day one. Why would depression be any easier to measure than happiness?"

Diener found that it wasn't. Using the same rigorous empirical methods that other scientific disciplines employ, Diener found that high levels of happiness almost always led to better outcomes in life. "Happiness not only feels good but it's good for you. We know that happy people on average have

better health. Happy people live longer. Happy people have more friendships and are more likely to give money to charity compared to unhappy people."

Similar traits among the happy emerged: The happiest people seek out and enjoy good social relationships and possess stable mental health. Other factors that influence subjective well-being include genetics. The larger environment plays a role. Former Communist countries show lower rates of well-being than more affluent Western nations. The unemployed are less happy than the employed and married women on average are happier.

The obvious question arises when reviewing Diener's career: Is he truly happy or a victim of his own research findings? Is there extra pressure to be extra pleasing?

"So they call you Dr. Happy and it's like, gee, I'd hate to ever commit suicide or be unhappy. People would be so disappointed in me.

"But, no, on the serious side, just because you study happiness doesn't mean you're happy. My own assessment is that I am extremely high in life satisfaction, but I am only average in levels of positive moods. Turns out I have a pretty good life so I'm pretty happy. I recently said to my wife, [Carol Diener, LAS adjunct associate professor of psychology] 'You know we have a lot of good things going on in our lives.' And she said, 'Not really, it's just that you notice them more.'"

Diener, LAS adjunct associate professor of psychology

**You can be too happy, according to recent studies by Diener. A life-satisfaction rating of 8 or 9 on a 10-point scale generally equates with greater success in life. Read more at: [www.las.uiuc.edu/news/2008Spring/08feb\\_happiness.html](http://www.las.uiuc.edu/news/2008Spring/08feb_happiness.html)**



Diener shared the stage with the Dalai Lama as part of a dialogue on happiness, organized to inaugurate the Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education in Vancouver, Canada, in September 2006.

## So Just How Satisfied Are You?

Professor Ed Diener's research proves that happiness not only feels good but it's also good for us. Happy people on average have better health and live longer. Happy people have more friendships, are more likely to give money to charity, and are more likely to perform better on the job.

Happiness and "life satisfaction" go hand-in-hand, and Diener has devised a simple test to assess your level of satisfaction. Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1 to 7 scale below, 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.

- 7 - Strongly agree
  - 6 - Agree
  - 5 - Slightly agree
  - 4 - Neither agree nor disagree
  - 3 - Slightly disagree
  - 2 - Disagree
  - 1 - Strongly disagree
- \_\_\_ In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
  - \_\_\_ The conditions of my life are excellent.
  - \_\_\_ I am satisfied with my life.
  - \_\_\_ So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
  - \_\_\_ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

31-35 Extremely satisfied    26-30 Satisfied    21-25 Slightly satisfied    20 Neutral  
15-19 Slightly dissatisfied    10-14 Dissatisfied    5-9 Extremely dissatisfied