

# The Pursuit of Happiness

*New research uncovers some anti-intuitive insights into how many people are happy—and why*

by David G. Myers and Ed Diener

Compared with misery, happiness is relatively unexplored terrain for social scientists. Between 1967 and 1994, 46,380 articles indexed in *Psychological Abstracts* mentioned depression, 36,851 anxiety, and 5,099 anger. Only 2,389 spoke of happiness, 2,340 life satisfaction, and 405 joy.

Recently we and other researchers have begun a systematic study of happiness. During the past two decades, dozens of investigators throughout the world have asked several hundred thousand representatively sampled people to reflect on their happiness and satisfaction with life—or what psychologists call “subjective well-being.” In the U.S. the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago has surveyed a representative sample of roughly 1,500 people a year since 1957; the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan has carried out similar studies on a less regular basis, as has the Gallup Organization. Government-funded efforts have also probed the moods of European countries.

We have uncovered some surprising findings. People are happier than one might expect, and happiness does not appear to depend significantly on external circumstances. Although viewing life as a tragedy has a long and honorable history, the responses of random samples of people around the world about their happiness paints a much rosier picture.

In the University of Chicago surveys, three in 10 Americans say they are very happy, for example. Only one in 10 chooses the most negative description,



“not too happy.” The majority describe themselves as “pretty happy.” (The few exceptions to global reports of reasonable happiness include hospitalized alcoholics, new inmates, new psychotherapy clients, South African blacks during apartheid, and students living under conditions of economic and political oppression.)

How can social scientists measure something as hard

to pin down as happiness? Most researchers simply ask people to report their feelings of happiness or unhappiness and to assess how satisfying their lives are. Such self-reported well-being is moderately consistent over years of retesting. Furthermore, those who say they are happy and satisfied seem happy to their close friends and family members and to a psychologist-interviewer. Their daily mood ratings reveal more positive emotions, and they smile more than those who call themselves unhappy. Self-reported happiness also predicts other indicators of well-being. Compared with the depressed, happy people are less self-focused, less hostile and abusive, and less susceptible to disease.

We have found that the even distribution of happiness cuts across almost all demographic classifications of age, economic class, race and educational level. In addition, almost all strategies for assessing subjective well-being—including those that sample people’s experience by polling them at random times with beepers—turn up similar findings.

Interviews with representative samples of people of all ages, for example, reveal that no time of life is notably hap-

pier or unhappier. Similarly, men and women are equally likely to declare themselves “very happy” and “satisfied” with life, according to a statistical digest of 146 studies by Marilyn J. Haring, William Stock and Morris A. Okun, all then at Arizona State University. Alex Michalos of the University of Northern British Columbia and Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan, summarizing newer surveys of 18,000 university students in 39 countries and 170,000 adults in 16 countries, corroborate these findings.

Knowing someone’s ethnicity also gives little clue to subjective well-being. African-Americans are only slightly less likely than European-Americans to feel very happy. The National Institute of Mental Health found that rates of depression and alcoholism among blacks and whites are roughly equal. Social psychologists Jennifer K. Crocker of the University of Michigan and Brenda Major of the University of California at Santa Barbara assert that people in disadvantaged groups maintain self-esteem by valuing things at which they excel, by making comparisons within their own groups and by blaming problems on external sources such as prejudice.

## What Money Can't Buy

Wealth is also a poor predictor of happiness. People have not become happier over time as their cultures have become more affluent. Even though Americans earn twice as much in today’s dollars as they did in 1957, the proportion of those telling surveyors from the National Opinion Research Center that they are “very happy” has declined from 35 to 29 percent.

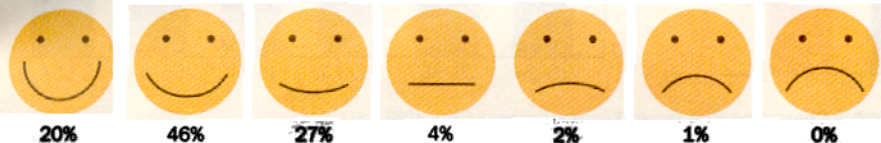
Even very rich people—those surveyed among *Forbes* magazine’s 100 wealthiest Americans—are only slightly happier than the average American. Those whose income has increased over a 10-year period are not happier than those whose income is stagnant. Indeed, in most nations the correlation between income and happiness is negligible—only in the poorest countries, such as Bangladesh and India, is income a good measure of emotional well-being.

Are people in rich countries happier, by and large, than people in not so rich countries? It appears in general that they are, but the margin may be slim. In Portugal, for example, only one in 10 people reports being very happy, whereas in the much more prosperous Netherlands

## Probing for Happiness

Researchers use various methods to survey people's subjective sense of well-being. Some employ images (top), others use words (middle), but all questions essentially come down to asking people how they feel about their lives. Different techniques yield remarkably similar results; we have collated data from almost 1,000 surveys of 1.1 million people to arrive at a global estimate of reported subjective well-being (bottom). —D.G.M. and E.D.

WHICH OF THESE FACES REPRESENTS THE WAY YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR LIFE AS A WHOLE?



“In most ways my life is close to my ideal.”

“The conditions of my life are excellent.”

“I am satisfied with my life.”

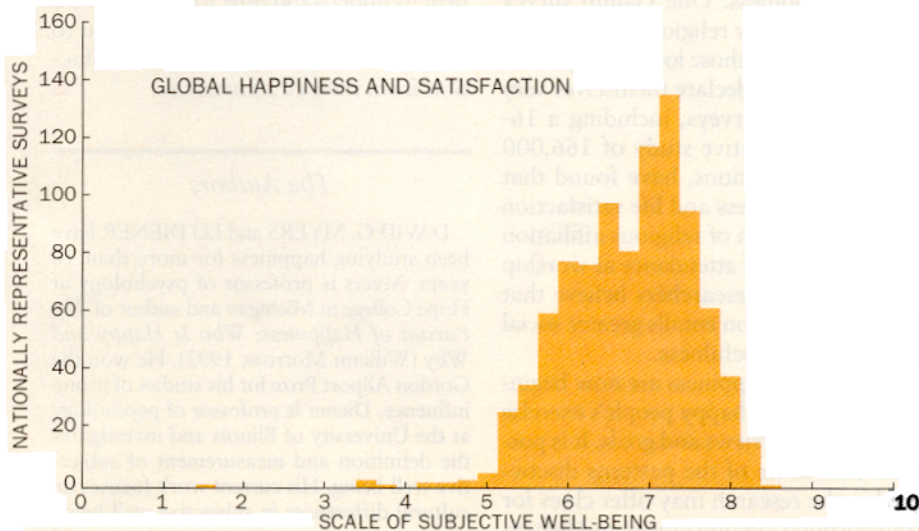
“So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.”

“If I could live my life over,

I would change almost nothing.”

Do you strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, agree or strongly agree?

GLOBAL HAPPINESS AND SATISFACTION



the proportion of very happy is four in 10. Yet there are curious reversals in this correlation between national wealth and well-being—the Irish during the 1980s consistently reported greater life satisfaction than the wealthier West Germans. Furthermore, other factors, such as civil rights, literacy and duration of democratic government, all of which also promote reported life satisfaction, tend to go hand in hand with national wealth. As a result, it is impossible to tell whether the happiness of people in wealthier nations is based on money or is a by-product of other felicities.

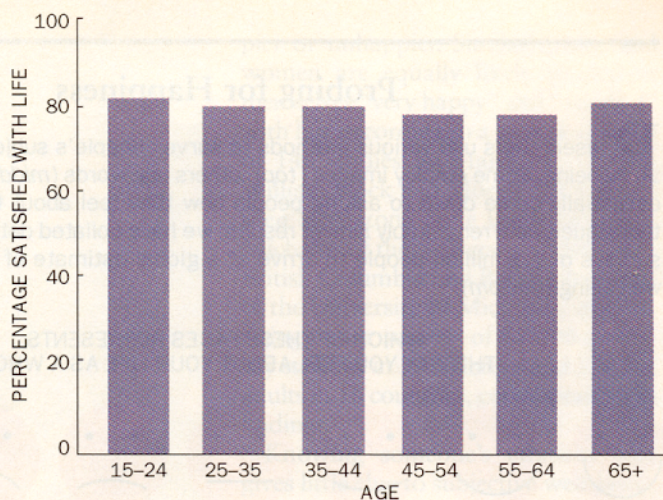
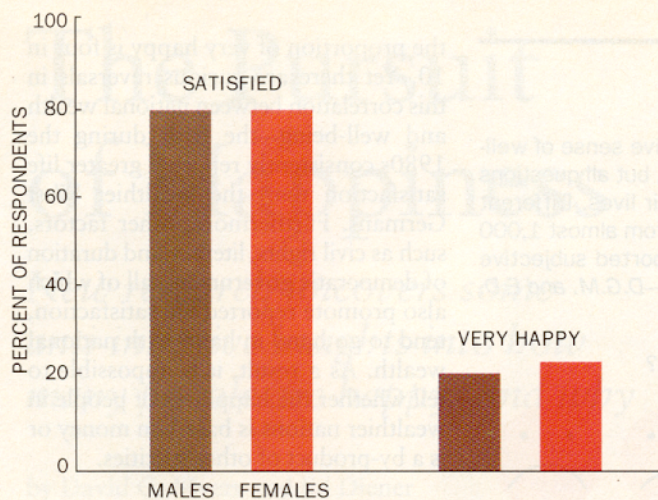
## Habits of Happy People

Although happiness is not easy to predict from material circumstances, it seems consistent for those who have it. In one National Institute on Aging study of 5,000 adults, the happiest people in 1973 were still relatively happy a decade later, despite changes in work, residence and family status.

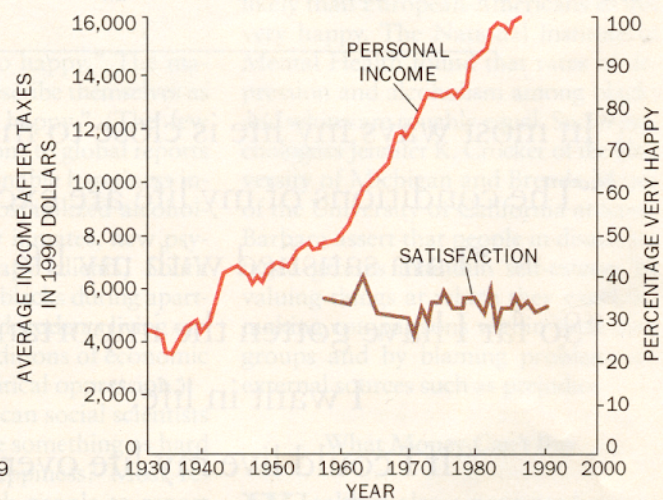
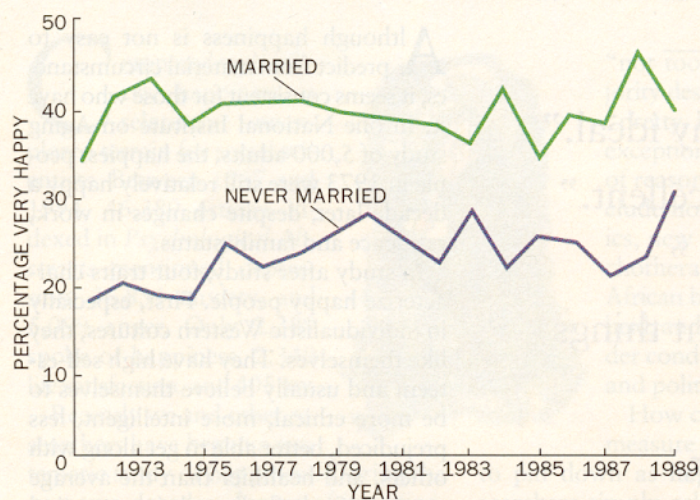
In study after study, four traits characterize happy people. First, especially in individualistic Western cultures, they like themselves. They have high self-esteem and usually believe themselves to be more ethical, more intelligent, less prejudiced, better able to get along with others, and healthier than the average person. (Such findings bring to mind Sigmund Freud's joke about the man who told his wife, "If one of us should die, I think I would go live in Paris.")

Second, happy people typically feel personal control. Those with little or no control over their lives—such as prisoners, nursing home patients, severely impoverished groups or individuals, and citizens of totalitarian regimes—suffer lower morale and worse health. Third, happy people are usually optimistic. Fourth, most happy people are extroverted. Although one might expect that introverts would live more happily in the serenity of their less stressed, contemplative lives, extroverts are happier—whether alone or with others.

The causal arrows for these correlations are uncertain. Does happiness make people more outgoing, or are outgoing people more likely to be happy, perhaps explaining why they marry sooner, get better jobs and make more friends? If these traits indeed predispose their carriers to happiness, people might become happier by acting in certain ways. In experiments, people who feign high self-esteem report feeling more pos-



SOURCE: Based on data reported by Ronald Inglehart in *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, Princeton University Press, 1989 (top graphs)



SOURCE: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago (bottom graphs)

**HAPPINESS APPEARS CONSISTENT** across many different sectors of the population. Both sexes report roughly the same satisfaction with life (*top left*), as do various age groups (*top right*). Among the few consistent differentials is that between

married and never-married people (*bottom left*); other data indicate that divorced people are less happy than either of these two groups. Happiness has remained relatively constant over time in the U.S., even as national income has increased (*bottom right*).

itively about themselves, for example.

Whatever the reason, the close personal relationships that characterize happy lives are also correlated with health. Compared with loners, those who can name several intimate friends are healthier and less likely to die prematurely. For more than nine out of 10 people, the most significant alternative to aloneness is marriage. Although broken marital relationships can cause much misery, a good marriage apparently is a strong source of support. During the 1970s and 1980s, 39 percent of married adults told the National Opinion Research Center they were "very happy," as compared with 24 percent of those who had never married. In other surveys, only 12 percent of those who had divorced perceived themselves to be "very happy." The happiness gap between the married and the never-mar-

ried was similar for women and men.

Religiously active people also report greater happiness. One Gallup survey found that highly religious people were twice as likely as those lowest in spiritual commitment to declare themselves very happy. Other surveys, including a 16-nation collaborative study of 166,000 people in 14 nations, have found that reported happiness and life satisfaction rise with strength of religious affiliation and frequency of attendance at worship services. Some researchers believe that religious affiliation entails greater social support and hopefulness.

Students of happiness are now beginning to examine happy people's exercise patterns, worldviews and goals. It is possible that some of the patterns discovered in the research may offer clues for transforming circumstances and behaviors that work against well-being into

ones that promote it. Ultimately, then, the scientific study of happiness could help us understand how to build a world that enhances human well-being and to aid people in getting the most satisfaction from their circumstances. ■

### The Authors

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