

'HAPPINESS IS NO LAUGHING MATTER'

Happiness Report – January 2003

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will summarise some of the emerging trends in cross-cultural happiness research in an effort to pinpoint *what it is that makes each of us happy*. The paper will then present an easy to use formula, designed to help readers conceptualise the core components of happiness, and gauge their own current levels of happiness. This framework will be ‘validated’ in light of recent research into popular beliefs about activities which people feel result in happiness/unhappiness. Finally, a range of lifestyle suggestions will be made to help readers improve their happiness, having diagnosed their personal happiness needs.

SOME MYTHS...

Any discussion of happiness provokes debate about whether it can be bought with money – we all assume that having a little more money will at least make us a little happier. However, research consistently shows that the path to happiness is somewhat more complex. With the exception of those countries where the lack of sufficient financial security results in deprivation, despite huge rises in wealth and consumer power relative to previous decades, nations are not reporting any significant shifts in how happy they feel.

What psychological research has shown happens in this scenario is that as we become wealthier, we adjust our expectations. What we aspired to yesterday becomes today’s new baseline. This adaptation means that it will take a further hike in wealth for us to get the same rush of happiness, even though in relation to previous earnings we may be considerably richer. Because these strategies focus on continually striving for some future state, and therefore by definition can never be satisfied, they will not result in long-term life happiness.

In the longer-term, those who choose to blindly follow monetary rather than relationship-based life strategies, as espoused by the 80’s ‘yuppie-values’, will feel significantly less content and happy with their lives over time. After all, if we pursue money instead of happiness, at best we will end up wealthy rather than happy. Recent survey trends demonstrate that graduates recognise the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance and in securing a stable job.

However, similar surveys conducted with young professionals, the equivalent group a few years later, show that transferable skills development and other career-focussed priorities are perceived to be more important than work-life balance needs – particularly in relation to other European young professionals. It would seem that the ‘yuppie values’ are alive and well – early ideals appear to give way to more materialistic needs as they become more obtainable.

Just as we appear to over-emphasise the perceived long-term benefits of these quick-hit factors (for example, winning at the lottery), we also tend to believe that sudden, dramatic negative events (for example, loss of mobility, sight or hearing) will have a lasting impact on our overall happiness. However, just as the effect of dramatic positive events is short-lived, research consistently shows that people who have experienced some traumatic event, whilst experiencing a short-term drop in well-being, soon return to near normal levels of happiness. Enduring happiness must therefore be something more than just a response to immediate environmental factors and quick fixes.

NATIONAL & INDIVIDUAL HAPPINESS

The absence of sufficient resources to provide basic food, shelter and clothing, social and racial inequality, political unrest and coercion, and poor access to a meaningful education are all critical factors in defining levels of national happiness. Not surprisingly for these reasons Eastern-block countries (e.g. Moldova, Armenia & Russia) currently report themselves to be significantly less happy than the more developed nation states – for example, Britain, USA, Canada, Denmark & Switzerland¹.

However, the mere presence of these factors is in itself not enough to guarantee happiness. With this baseline met, these conditions then allow individuals the opportunity to exercise certain social, spiritual and economic choices which define an individual’s level of happiness. This complexity can be simplified by thinking about happiness in terms of three fundamental building blocks:

HAPPINESS = PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS + EXISTENCE NEEDS + HIGHER ORDER NEEDS

¹ Average national happiness ratings on a 10-point scale, source – ‘Happiness in Nations’ by Ruut Veenhoven, 1992. Specific ratings: Moldova – 3.0, Armenia – 3.7, Russia, 4.2, Britain – 7.2, USA – 7.4, Canada – 7.7, Denmark – 8.0, Switzerland, 8.1.

Personal Characteristics: We as individuals bring with us to any situation a set of personal characteristics, some inherited and some learnt, which in part define how we relate to other people, face challenges and adapt. People whose characteristics emphasise being more outgoing, energetic, optimistic, resilient and flexible, will also tend to be happier. Our research suggests that this accounts for approximately 20% of our overall levels of happiness.

Existence Needs: As was seen nationally, individuals need to have a range of basic existence needs met before they will be able to experience happiness to any significant degree. Health, financial security, personal safety, a sense of belonging and engaging in meaningful activities are amongst the most important of these basic needs. As has already been discussed, in the absence of these needs, money for example, becomes important purely for survival, not happiness per se. In the USA, for example, billionaires see themselves as only slightly happier than people with average incomes.

Higher Order Needs: Finally, there are a number of higher-order happiness factors which relate to a deeper outlook on life and personal relationships. Specifically, self-esteem, challenge, meeting expectations, depth of relationships and intensity of experience are all critical factors. Once our basic needs have been met, our levels of happiness become a reflection of the choices we make, the friendships we form and our emerging comfort with ourselves.

Put together, these three components form a framework which can be used to gauge an individual's overall level of happiness, and to help in pinpointing the things they will need to work on if they are to become happier. There are four sections to the HQ questionnaire: the first two relating to personal characteristics, the third to unhappiness factors, and the fourth to happiness factors. To find out how happy you are, read each of the four statements and circle the number on the scale which you feel reflects you most accurately at this point in your life. Enter the four ratings into the equation and complete the calculation.

Happiness Quotient (HQ) Questionnaire

Self Assessment (circle the number which best describes you)

Q1 Personal Traits: To what extent do you see yourself as someone who is outgoing, energetic, flexible and open to change?

To a large extent

Not at all

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Q2 Outlook on Life: To what extent do you see yourself as someone who takes a positive outlook on life, bounces back quickly from setbacks, feels that you, and not fate, is driving your life?

To a large extent

Not at all

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Q 3 (circle the number which best describes you)

Basic existence needs: To what extent do you feel your basic needs in life are met in relation to personal health, financial subsistence, personal safety, freedom of choice, sense of community/belonging and, access to education/knowledge?

Definitely met

Definitely not met

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Q 4 (circle the number which best describes you)

Higher-order happiness needs: To what extent are you currently able to....

- Call on the support of people close to you
- Immerse yourself in what you're doing
- Meet your expectations
- Engage in meaningful activities that give you a sense of purpose
- Feel a clear sense of who you are and what you're about

Completely

Not at all

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

Happiness Quotient

Happiness = Personal Traits & Outlook + (5 x ExistenceNeeds) + (3 x Higher-order Needs)

Your Score:

Happiness = Q1 + Q2 + (5 x Q3) + (3 x Q4)

Happiness = / 100

Our research has shown that there is an important dynamic relationship between the existence needs (unhappiness factors) and higher order needs (happiness factors). By themselves the absence of existence needs does not guarantee happiness – it simply provides a platform on which feelings of self-esteem, intensity of experience, etc can be enjoyed. For example, were someone with all the required personal traits and outlook on life required to achieve real happiness to meet all of their higher order needs (a score of 10/10 on Q4 on the HQ questionnaire), but score low on the existence needs (2/10), our research would suggest that they'd be significantly less happy than the person who had removed all their existence needs (10/10), but only met one or two of their higher order needs (2/10) – overall, 60% versus 76% happy.

Existence needs (unhappiness factors) aren't enough to enable happiness by their absence alone, but by their presence they are enough to prevent happiness. This influence is reflected in the HQ equation where existence needs account for approximately 50% of an individuals level of happiness, relative to the 30% for higher order needs (happiness factors). This is why in our coaching and consultancy work, we would typically work with individuals to address their existence needs before moving on to help develop their higher-order happiness needs.

RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS

A recent opinion poll² identified some clear trends about what people in the UK feel are the important factors in determining whether they feel happy or unhappy. These trends confirm several of the suggestions already discussed in this paper.

Several core happiness factors can be seen in those experiences rated as being amongst the ones most likely to result in happiness. Time with friends and family, although differing in relative priority depending on marital status and number of children, are seen as vital support and belonging happiness factors. Typically holidays involve spending intense time with close friends or family, as well as pursuing important hobbies, meeting like-minded people and striking a balance between activity and rest. Hence, whilst certain economic factors need to be met to be able to go away on holiday – it's the content of the holiday that reinforces this

² 1000 respondents sampled in November 2002, ages in range 15 to 65+

enduring sense of happiness, not just the ability to buy it. These findings remain constant irrespective of socio-economic grouping.

Which experiences make you most happy?

- **Going on holiday/travelling (64%)**
- **Family time (63%)**
- **Time with friends (50%)**
- **Time outside on a beautiful day (40%)**
- **Doing a favourite hobby/past-time (31%)**
- Inheriting/winning money (30%)
- Having a healthy sex life (30%)
- Birthday celebrations (29%)
- Getting promoted/pay rise (18%)
- Falling in love (17%)
- Losing weight (16%)
- Favourite team winning (15%)
- Going to a wedding (12%)
- Being chatted up (9%)
- Going to a religious service (9%)
- Donating to charity (8%)
- Receiving a valentines card (8%)
- Getting praise at work (6%)

Which experiences make you most unhappy?

- **Falling ill (56%)**
- **Attending a funeral (54%)**
- **Being in debt (40%)**
- **Arguing with a friend/loved one (39%)**
- Losing money (31%)
- Being cheated on (29%)
- Being bored (27%)
- Breaking up with a partner (27%)
- Becoming unemployed (24%)
- Hearing about a national disaster (24%)
- Time outside on a grey day (21%)
- Unable to take a holiday (18%)
- Being overworked (13%)
- Feeling overweight/dieting (12%)
- Having a poor sex life (11%)
- Getting criticised at work (10%)
- Favourite team losing (9%)
- Breaking a resolution (2%)

Leisure activities in general were rated highly, and this would seem to be as much a reflection of the social benefits which they bring with them than for the activities themselves. Research consistently shows that people on holiday are less paced and more tolerant – making it easier for people to cross social barriers and break into new social groupings.

Two of the most significant unhappiness experiences relate to previously mentioned existence needs (or unhappiness factors) – ill-health and financial insecurity. These were felt to be particularly significant amongst those widowed, divorced, or separated, aged 65 or above, perhaps understood best in terms of fears about lack of support structure. Funerals were seen by all groups across the UK to be one of the most significant factors in making someone unhappy – this was particularly the case for women. In a similar way, falling out with a friend or loved one was felt to have a greater negative impact for women than for men. These findings suggest that there is a slight gender divide in the perceived importance of relationship factors in impacting on levels of happiness.

As people get older, family time becomes more important, particularly for older women, although less so generally for single people. A similar age trend was found in relation to spending time with friends. In general more women felt that time with friends was an important activity to ensure happiness, although overall the 15 – 24 and 65+ age groups felt this to be significantly more important than their 25 – 64 yr old colleagues. Some of this effect is likely to be due to family effects – time with children and the inner-family is felt to be more important than time with friends for this group.

However, it's also likely that the 25 – 64 career period places its heaviest burden on people – both in terms of being seen to be successful, making ones mark and providing the basic security needs for the family. The trade-off being that social activities need to be prioritised. Interestingly, couples with children at home felt that having a healthy sex life was significantly more important than their single counterparts – a case of opportunity meeting expectation! However, overall Scots seemed less concerned with equating a healthy sex life with happiness – whether this is a reflection of higher levels of activity or lower expectations remains open for debate!

Other findings included:

- Given the findings about a need to belong/have a sense of community its not surprising that single people felt that birthdays, falling in love and being chatted up were amongst the most significant factors.
- Whilst losing weight made far more women happy than men (four times as important), favourite sports team successes had the opposite effect (three

times as important for men than for women), particularly for those living in the North of England.

- People living in the Midlands and in London reported falling in love as more important than other regions as a key happiness factor.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A HAPPIER LIFE

Our research would suggest that there are many things individuals could focus on to enhance their happiness in life. In the first instance we would recommend that they develop a clearer understanding of what it is that is making them unhappy – try completing the questionnaire. If there are any significant unhappiness factors present in your life we would recommend focussing on these first. To move beyond these, our suggestions are as follows:

- **Try to regain a balance in your life** – make sure you have enough time in your life dedicated to your family, your friends & yourself.
- **Invest in your close relationships** – put some effort back into your close relationships. It's not important that you have countless friends, but that you have close, trusting relationships.
- **Make the most of your holidays** – use them to fulfil your interests and hobbies, challenge yourself to meet new people and break out of established patterns
- **Immerse yourself in the moment** – whether on holiday or walking to work, try to forget about past or future temporarily and immerse yourself in that moment
- **Exercise & rest!** – don't compromise, but make sure you have time for exercise and rest in your life
- **Set yourself a challenge** – remind yourself what it felt like to be stretched and have a clear purpose