

Serious Research on Happiness

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Ed Diener is a happy man. In happiness ratings of over 80 psychologists, he came in first (never mind that he had read the study detailing what makes a happy autobiography before writing his own). His new book is called *Happiness* and his position at the University of Illinois is — I'm not making this up — the Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology. Diener is also the Editor of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

Diener has spent decades researching what makes people happy. In the 2008 APS David Myers Lecture on the Science and Craft of Teaching Psychology, delivered at the APS 20th Annual Convention, Diener shared some of the basic findings of research into well-being and how those findings can be brought to the classroom.

In the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the pursuit of happiness is protected as a fundamental human right, up there with life and liberty. But exactly what is happiness? How do you get and keep it? Why do some people always seem to be happy and some are never happy? Psychological scientists have uncovered some answers and along the way have even examined whether and why happiness matters. As it turns out, happiness does matter in very important ways. There is preliminary evidence that people who score higher on the well-being scales have better social and work relationships; make more money; live longer, healthier lives; and are more contributory societal citizens.

So, happiness is good. But, how do we get it? Diener identifies five factors that contribute to happiness: social relationships, temperament/adaptation, money, society and culture, and positive thinking styles.

Happy people have strong social relationships. In one study conducted by Diener, the happiest 10 percent of the participants all had strong supportive relationships. A strong social network didn't guarantee happiness, but it was a requirement to be in the happiest group. Temperament, which appears to have a genetic component according to several recent studies, also affects mood. Diener discussed the set point theory of temperament, which states that people have ups and downs in reaction to life events, but that they adapt and return to a set point. There is evidence for this, but studies have shown that people who have experienced a major loss, like being fired or losing a spouse, often don't fully adapt or take years to do so. In Diener's words, it's more like "a moving baseline" than one set point over a lifetime.

Whoever said money can't buy happiness needs to look at the research. According to Diener, wealth actually is correlated with happiness, particularly in poorer societies. But there are caveats. Money has declining marginal utility. Those first few dollars that move someone out of poverty contribute much more to a person's happiness than a billionaire earning her next million. In fact, money can be toxic to happiness. When participants in one study were asked if money was more important than love, those who answered "yes" were less likely to be happy and seemed destined never to catch up to happiness no matter how much money they make.

The broader society also influences happiness. Some of the most familiar findings of well-being research are the happiness ratings by country. Denmark is the happiest, the U.S. is high but behind several European countries and Canada, and poverty stricken or war-torn nations are at the bottom. It may be harder for individualistic Westerners to see, but happiness depends not only on what is going on with your own temperament or life events, but is affected by the larger world around you.

Happiness is also affected by cognitive patterns — for example, seeing opportunities instead of threats and generally trusting and liking other people. Diener identifies three facets of this positive cognition: attention (seeing the positive and beauty in things), interpretation (not putting a negative spin on things), and memory (savoring past experiences rather than ruminating on negative experiences).

Teaching Happiness

Happiness research is uniquely suited to the classroom, said Diener. It is a way to engage students in understanding psychological science because of the inherent interest in this topic and the relevance to daily life. Material can be brought in from different areas within psychology for general courses or, for more specific courses, instructors can focus only on the aspects of happiness research that most relate to their topic, for example, discussing social support's role in happiness in social psychology courses, or happiness's influences on work success in I/O psychology courses. Well-being research is rife with what Diener calls "fun studies," everything from looking at the longevity of nuns to exploring colonoscopy memories (obviously, the definition of fun is debatable — more fodder for the positive psychologists!). Another advantage in teaching stems from the fact that it is a relatively new area of research. It's a popular subject, and there is a wealth of research to discuss, but you can also "take students to the edge of the science" and encourage them to come up with questions that still need to be answered. This allows students to envision future research directions and implications of the subdiscipline for themselves.