

# The Funds, Friends, and Faith of Happy People

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*New studies are revealing predictors of subjective well-being, often assessed as self-reported happiness and life satisfaction. Worldwide, most people report being at least moderately happy, regardless of age and gender. As part of their scientific pursuit of happiness, researchers have examined possible associations between happiness and (a) economic growth and personal income, (b) close relationships, and (c) religious faith.*

**W**ho is happy? Is happiness showered on those of a particular age, gender, or income level? Does it come with certain genetically predisposed traits? With supportive close relationships? With a spiritual perspective?

Such questions not only went unanswered during most of psychology's first century, they went largely unasked as psychologists focused on illness more than health, on fear more than courage, on aggression more than love. An electronic search of *Psychological Abstracts* since 1887 turned up 8,072 articles on anger, 57,800 on anxiety, and 70,856 on depression, while only 851 abstracts mentioned joy, 2,958 happiness, and 5,701 life satisfaction. In this sampling, negative emotions trounced positive emotions by a 14-to-1 ratio (even greater than the 7-to-1 margin by which *treatment exceeded prevention*).

Although human suffering understandably focuses much of our attention on the understanding and alleviation of misery, one sees harbingers of a more positive dimension to psychology. For example, a new scientific pursuit of happiness and life satisfaction (together called *subjective well-being*) has begun with two simple questions: (a) How happy are people? and (b) who are the happy people—what characteristics, traits, and circumstances mark happy lives?

## How Happy Are People?

A long tradition views life as tragedy, extending from Sophocles' observing (in *Oedipus at Colonus*) that "Not to be born is, past all prizing, best" to Woody Allen's discerning (in *Annie Hall*) of two kinds of lives: the horrible and the merely miserable. Albert Camus, Allen Drury, Tennessee Williams, and other novelists and playwrights similarly give us images of unhappy people.

Many social observers concur. "Our pains greatly exceed our pleasures," it seemed to Rousseau, "so that, all things considered, human life is not at all a valuable gift." "We are not born for happiness," agreed Samuel Johnson. In his book *The Conquest of Happiness*, philosopher Bertrand Russell (1930/1985) echoed that most people are

unhappy. Recent warm-hearted books for the would-be happy (often written by people who generalize from their counseling of the unhappy) concur. In *Are You Happy?* Dennis Wholey (1986) reported that experts he interviewed believed perhaps 20% of Americans are happy. "I'm surprised!" responded psychologist Archibald Hart (1988) in his *15 Principles for Achieving Happiness*. "I would have thought the proportion was much lower!" In *Happiness is an Inside Job*, Father John Powell (1989) agreed: "One-third of all Americans wake up depressed every day. Professionals estimate that only 10 to 15 percent of Americans think of themselves as truly happy." Thomas Szasz (quoted in Winokur, 1987) spoke for many in surmising, "Happiness is an imaginary condition, formerly attributed by the living to the dead, now usually attributed by adults to children, and by children to adults."

However, when asked about their happiness, people across the world paint a much rosier picture. For example, in periodic National Opinion Research Center surveys 3 in 10 Americans say they are "very happy." Only 1 in 10 say they are "not too happy." The remaining 6 in 10 describe themselves as "pretty happy." Yet, the idea that others are not so happy persists: More than two thirds of a representative sample of Minnesotans rate their "capacity for happiness" in the upper 35% "of other people of your age and sex" (Lykken, 1999).

Most people are similarly upbeat about their satisfaction with life (Inglehart, 1990; Myers, 1993). In western Europe and North America, 8 in 10 rate themselves as more satisfied than dissatisfied. Fewer than 1 in 10 rate themselves as more dissatisfied than satisfied. Likewise, some three fourths of people say yes, they have felt excited, proud, or pleased at some point during the past few weeks; no more than a third say they have felt lonely, bored, or depressed. Across languages, these self-reports seem to retain the same meaning. Whether they are German-, French-, or Italian-speaking, the Swiss report high levels of life satisfaction—higher than the levels of their German, French, and Italian neighbors (Inglehart, 1990).

Ed Diener (Myers & Diener, 1996) has aggregated data from 916 surveys of 1.1 million people in 45 nations representing most of humanity. He recalibrated subjective well-being onto a 0-to-10 scale (where 0 is the low ex-

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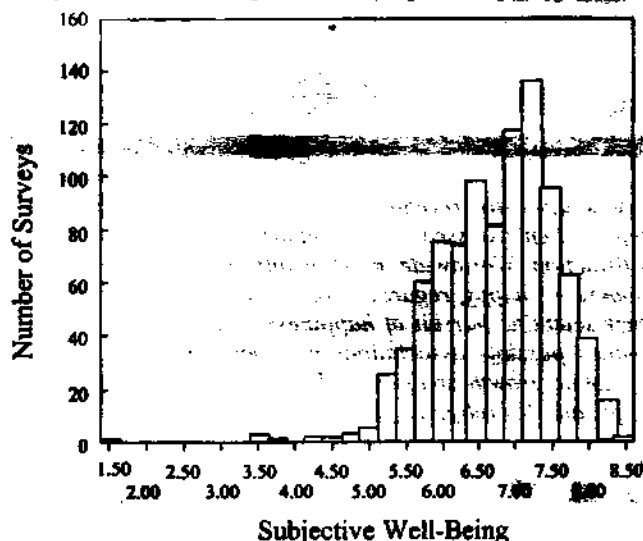
treme, such as *very unhappy* or *completely dissatisfied with life*, 5 is neutral, and 10 is the high extreme). As shown in Figure 1, the average response is 6.75.

These bullish self-reports were vividly illustrated in a survey of Detroit area residents. Asked which of the faces in Figure 2 "comes closest to expressing how you feel about your life as a whole," more than 9 in 10 people picked one of the happy faces. A 1998 survey of 1,003 American adults by Opinion Research Corporation painted a similarly upbeat picture (Black & McCafferty, 1998). Asked "Who of the following people do you think is the happiest?" people responded "Oprah Winfrey" (23%), "Bill Gates" (7%), "the Pope" (12%), "Chelsea Clinton" (3%), and "yourself" (49%), with the remaining 6% answering "don't know."

These positive reports characterize all ages, both sexes, all races studied, and all strategies for assessing subjective well-being, including those that sample people's experiences by paging people to report their moods. (The few exceptions to these happiness statistics, noted Diener & Diener, 1996, include hospitalized alcoholics, newly incarcerated inmates, new therapy clients, South African blacks under apartheid, and students living under conditions of political suppression.) This positivity, noted Diener and Diener, contradicts the intuitions of psychology students, half of whom think the elderly are "mostly unhappy." Another third guess the same of African Americans; 9 in 10 students assume the same of unemployed men.

Are these seemingly happy people merely in denial of their actual misery? By definition, the final judge of someone's subjective well-being is whomever lives inside that person's skin. "If you feel happy," noted Jonathan Freedman (1978), "you are happy—that's all we mean by the term." Although we presume happiness refers to something

Figure 1  
Subjective Well-Being

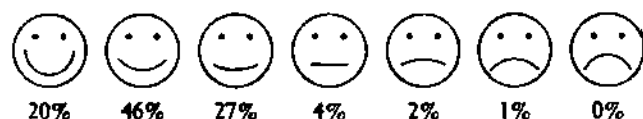


Note. As self-reported in 916 surveys of 1.1 million people in 45 nations (with answers calibrated on a 0 to 10 scale, with 5 being neutral and 10 being the high extreme). Figure by Ed Diener, from data collated by Ruut Veenhoven and reported in Myers & Diener, 1996 [i.e., from "The Pursuit of Happiness," by D. G. Myers & E. Diener, 1996, *Scientific American*, pp. 54–56. Copyright 1996 by E. Diener. Adapted with permission]. Average subjective well-being was 6.75.

deeper and more lasting than a momentary good mood, our working definition is simply whatever people mean when describing their lives as happy.

Self-reports of happiness are, in fact, reasonably reliable over time, despite changing life circumstances (Diener, 1994). Moreover, there is convergent validation for self-reported happiness. Those who report they are happy also seem so to their family members and close friends (Pavot, Diener, Colvin, & Sandvik, 1991; Sandvik, Diener, & Seidltz, 1993). Their daily mood ratings reveal mostly positive emotions. Further, their self-reported happiness predicts other indicators of well-being. Compared with those who are depressed, happy people are less self-foc-

Figure 2  
Faces Scale: "Which Face Comes Closest to Expressing How You Feel About Your Life as a Whole?"



Note. The scale and data are from *Social Indicators of Well-Being: Americans' Perceptions of Life Quality* (p. 207 and p. 306), by F. M. Andrews and S. B. Withey, 1976, New York, Plenum. Copyright 1976 by Plenum. Reprinted with permission.

cused, less hostile and abusive, and less vulnerable to disease. They also are more loving, forgiving, trusting, energetic, decisive, creative, sociable, and helpful (Myers, 1993; Veenhoven, 1988).

Yet, aren't depression rates on the rise? They are. Nevertheless, in one multinational assessment of psychiatric disorders, the lifetime rate of depression was only nine percent in the most vulnerable young adult age group (Cross-National Collaborative Group, 1992). At any time, only about two percent of people suffer major depression or bipolar disorder (National Advisory Mental Health Council, 1993).

Ergo, the set point for mood seems slightly positive, and for good reason: Positive emotions are conducive to sociability, optimistic goal striving, even healthy immune systems (Weisse, 1992). They also define an emotional background against which negative emotions, in response to threats, gain signal value. When something goes awry, the stone in the emotional shoe alerts the organism to act to alleviate the negative mood.

## Who Is Happy?

Although many people believe there are unhappy times of life—times of adolescent stress, midlife crisis, or old age decline—repeated surveys across the industrialized world reveal that no time of life is notably happiest and most satisfying (Myers & Diener, 1995). Emotionality changes with maturity, and the predictors of happiness change (later in life, satisfaction with social relations and health become more important). Yet, in every age group there are many happy and some unhappy people.

Like age, gender gives little clue to happiness. Despite the well-known gender gaps in misery—men more often act antisocial or become alcoholic, women more often ruminate and get depressed or anxious—men and women are equally likely to declare themselves “very happy” and “satisfied” with their lives. This conclusion is grounded in surveys of 170,000 adults in 16 countries (Inglehart, 1990), in surveys of 18,000 university students in 39 countries (Michalos, 1991), and in a meta-analysis of 146 other studies (Haring, Stock, & Okun, 1984).

Who are the relatively happy people? As Diener (2000, this issue) indicated, some cultures (especially affluent cultures marked by political freedom) are conducive to increased satisfaction with life, if not more positive emotions. Certain traits and temperaments also appear to predispose one to experience happiness. Some of these traits, notably extraversion, are known to be genetically influenced, which helps explain Lykken and Tellegen's (1996) finding that about 50% of the variation in current happiness is heritable. Like cholesterol levels, happiness is genetically influenced but not genetically fixed.

What else might influence personal happiness? Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1999) has observed increased quality of life when work and leisure engage one's skills. Between the anxiety of being overwhelmed and stressed and the apathy of being underwhelmed and bored lies a zone in which people experience what Csikszentmihalyi terms *flow*. When their experiences are sampled using

electronic pagers, people report greatest enjoyment not when mindlessly passive but when unself-consciously absorbed in a mindful challenge.

Additional research has focused on three other possible correlates of happiness. Even if money can't buy happiness, is there nevertheless an association between wealth and well-being? How important are supportive, close relationships for a sense of well-being? What connections, if any, exist between religiosity and happiness? Simply said, do funds, friends, or faith predict happiness?

## Wealth and Well-Being

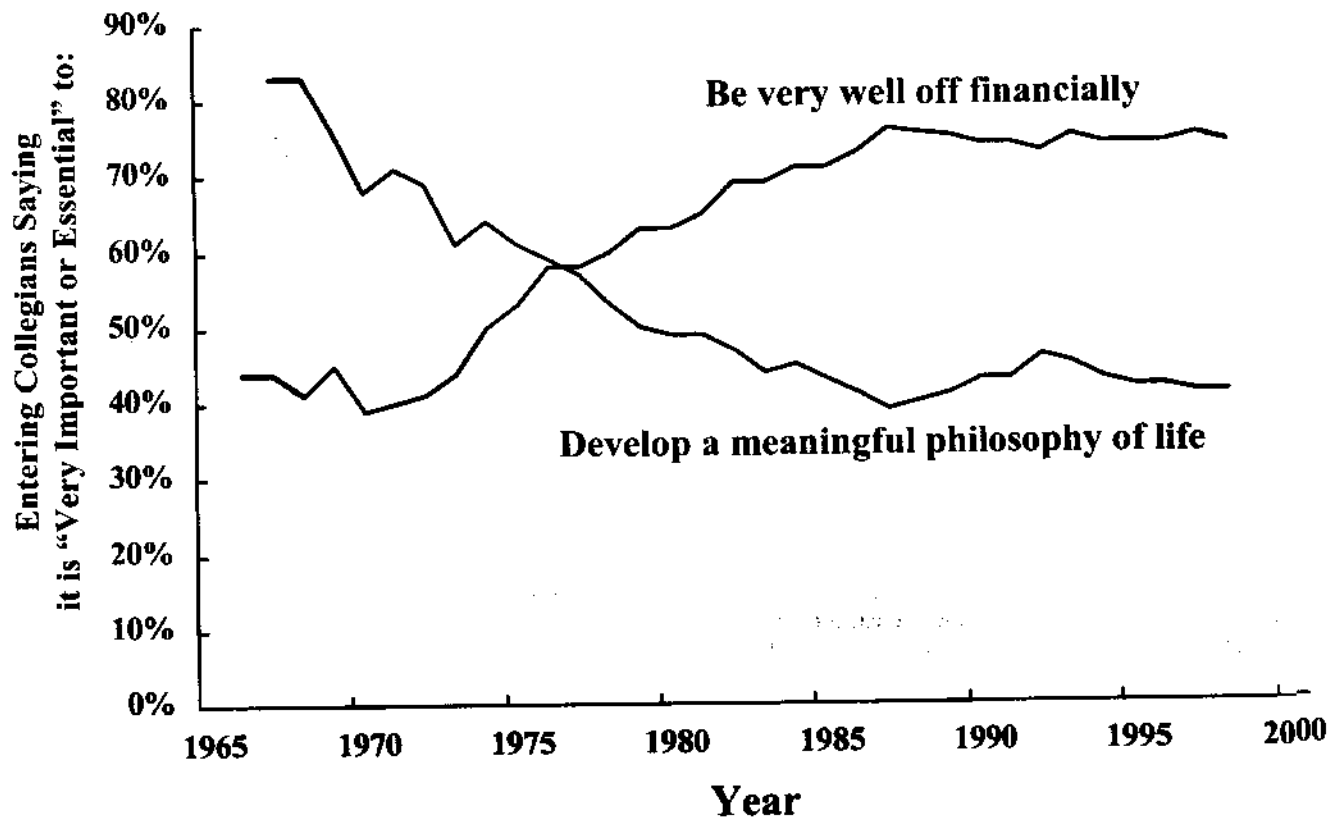
Could money buy you happiness? Most deny it. However, ask a different question—“Would a *little* more money make you a *little* happier?”—and many will smirk and nod yes. There is, we believe, some connection between wealth and well-being. Asked how satisfied they were with 13 aspects of their lives, including friends, house, and schooling, Americans expressed least satisfaction with “the amount of money you have to live on” (Roper Organization, 1984). What would improve their quality of life? “More money,” was the most frequent response to a University of Michigan national survey (Campbell, 1981, p. 41), and the more the better. In one Gallup Poll (Gallup & Newport, 1990), one in two women, two in three men, and four in five people earning more than \$75,000 reported they would like to be rich. Thus, the modern American dream seems to have become life, liberty, and the purchase of happiness. Although most realize that the seemingly happy lifestyle of the rich and famous is beyond their reach, they do imagine “the good life” that might become possible when they achieve greater wealth.

The clearest evidence of this “greening of America” comes from the annual UCLA and American Council on Education survey of nearly a quarter million students entering college. Those agreeing that a “very important” reason for their going to college was “to make more money” rose from one in two in 1971 to three in four in 1998 (Astin, Green, & Korn, 1987; Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1998). The proportion who consider it “very important or essential” that they become “very well off financially” rose from 39% in 1970 to 74% in 1998 (Figure 3). Among 19 listed objectives, this was number one, outranking “developing a meaningful philosophy of life,” “becoming an authority in my field,” “helping others in difficulty,” and “raising a family.” For today's young Americans, money matters.

Does being well off indeed produce—or at least correlate with—psychological well-being? Would people be happier if they could exchange a middle-class lifestyle for one with palatial surroundings, Aspen ski vacations, and executive class travel? Would they be happier if they won a publishers' sweepstakes and could choose from its suggested indulgences: a 40-foot yacht, deluxe motorhome, designer wardrobe, luxury car, and private housekeeper? “Whoever said money can't buy happiness isn't spending it right,” proclaimed a Lexus ad.

As Diener (2000, this issue) reported, there is some tendency for wealthy nations to have more satisfied people.

**Figure 3**  
Changing Materialism



Note. From annual surveys of more than 200,000 U.S. students entering college (total sample approximately 6.5 million students). Data from Dey, Astin, and Korn, 1991, and subsequent annual reports, including Sax et al., 1998.

The Swiss and Scandinavians, for instance, are generally prosperous and satisfied. When people in poorer nations compare their lifestyles with the abundance of those in rich nations, they may become more aware of their relative poverty. However, among nations with a gross national product of more than \$8,000 per person, the correlation between national wealth and well-being evaporates (Figure 4). Better (so far as happiness and life satisfaction go) to be Irish than Bulgarian. But whether one is Irish, Belgian, Norwegian, or American hardly matters. Indeed, the Irish during the 1980s reported consistently greater life satisfaction than did the doubly wealthy but less satisfied West Germans (Inglehart, 1990). Moreover, noted Diener, Diener, and Diener (1995), national wealth is entangled with civil rights, literacy, and the number of continuous years of democracy. For a clearer look at money and happiness, researchers have therefore asked whether, across individuals and over time, people's well-being rises with their wealth.

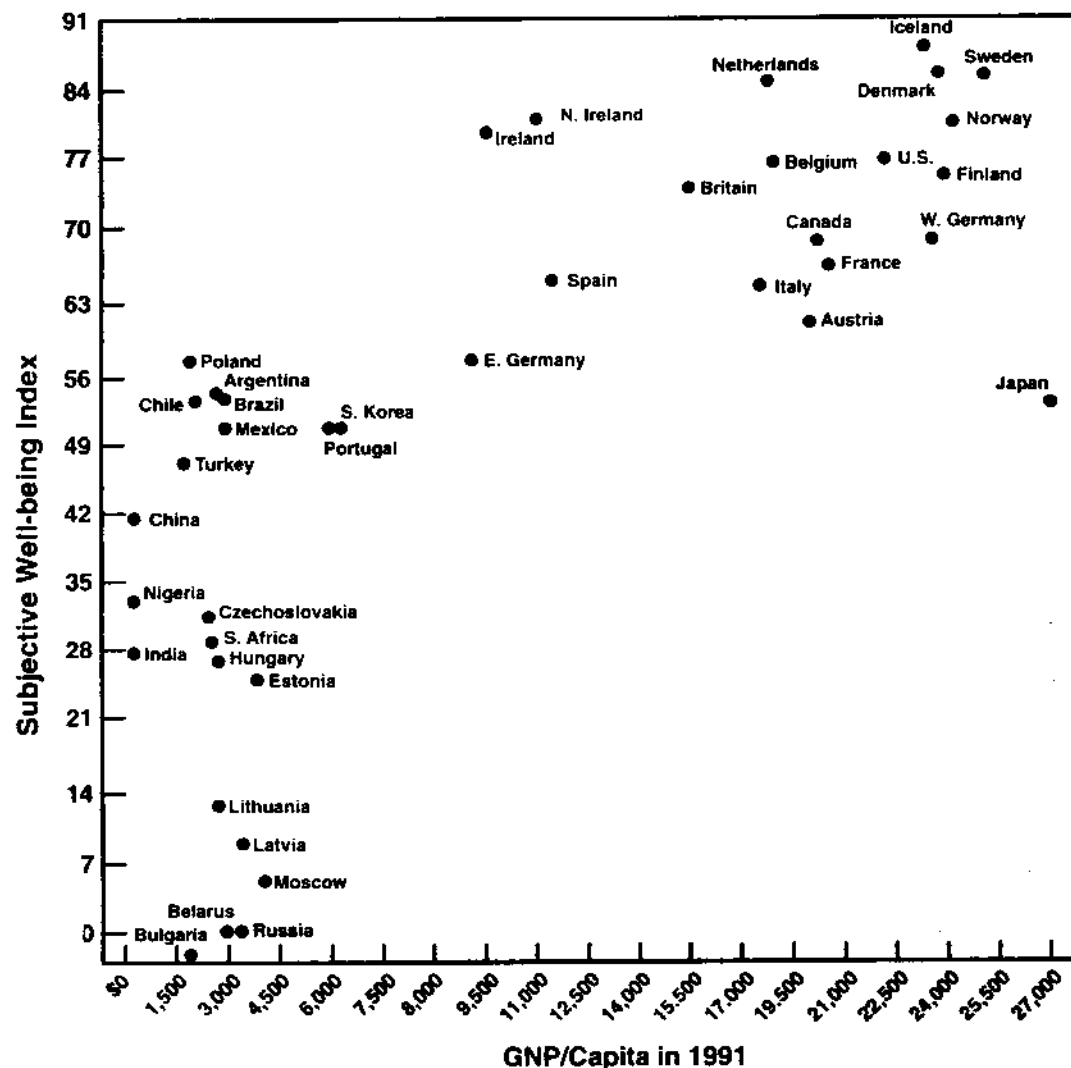
### Are Rich People Happier?

In poor countries such as India, where low income threatens basic human needs more often, being relatively well off

does predict greater well-being (Argyle, 1999). Psychologically as well as materially, it is better to be high caste than low. However, in affluent countries, where most can afford life's necessities, affluence matters surprisingly little. In the United States, Canada, and Europe, the correlation between income and personal happiness, noted Ronald Inglehart (1990), "is surprisingly weak (indeed, virtually negligible)" (p. 242). Happiness tends to be lower among the very poor. Once comfortable, however, more money provides diminishing returns on happiness. Summarizing his own studies of happiness, David Lykken (1999) observed that "People who go to work in their overalls and on the bus are just as happy, on the average, as those in suits who drive to work in their own Mercedes" (p. 17).

Even very rich people—the *Forbes* 100 wealthiest Americans surveyed by Diener, Horwitz, and Emmons (1985)—are only slightly happier than the average American. Although they have more than enough money to buy many things they don't need and hardly care about, 4 in 5 of the 49 super-rich people responding to the survey agreed that "Money can increase OR decrease happiness, depending on how it is used." Some were indeed unhappy. One

**Figure 4**  
National Wealth and Well-Being



Note. From World Bank data and the 1990–1991 World Values Survey. The subjective well-being index combines happiness and life satisfaction (average of percentage describing themselves as [a] “very happy” or “happy” minus percentage “not very happy” or “unhappy,” and as [b] 7 or above minus 4 or below on a 10-point life satisfaction scale). Figure from *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (p. 62), by R. Inglehart, 1997, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press. Copyright 1997 by R. Inglehart. Reprinted with permission.

fabulously wealthy man could never remember being happy. One woman reported that money could not undo misery caused by her children’s problems. When sailing on the Titanic, even first class cannot get you where you want to go.

Our human capacity for adaptation (Diener, 2000, this issue) helps explain a major conclusion of subjective well-being research, as expressed by the late Richard Kammann (1983): “Objective life circumstances have a negligible role to play in a theory of happiness.” Good and bad events (e.g., a pay hike, being rejected for tenure) do temporarily

influence our moods, and people will often seize on such short-run influences to explain their happiness. Yet, in less time than most people suppose, the emotional impact of significant events and circumstances dissipates (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). In a society where everyone lived in 4,000-square-foot houses, people would likely be no happier than in a society in which everyone lived in 2,000-square-foot houses. Thanks to our capacity to adapt to ever greater fame and fortune, yesterday’s luxuries can soon become today’s necessities and tomorrow’s relics.

## Does Economic Growth Improve Human Morale?

Over time, does happiness rise with affluence? Will Frank and Shirley Mae Capaci be enduringly happier for having in 1998 won the \$195 million Powerball lottery? Likely they will not be as happy as they initially supposed. Lottery winners typically gain only a temporary jolt of joy from their winnings (Argyle, 1986; Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Although they are delighted to have won, the euphoria eventually fades. Likewise, those whose incomes have increased over the previous decade are not happier than those whose income has not increased (Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, & Diener, 1993). As Richard Ryan (quoted by Kohn, 1999) noted, such satisfactions have "a short half-life."

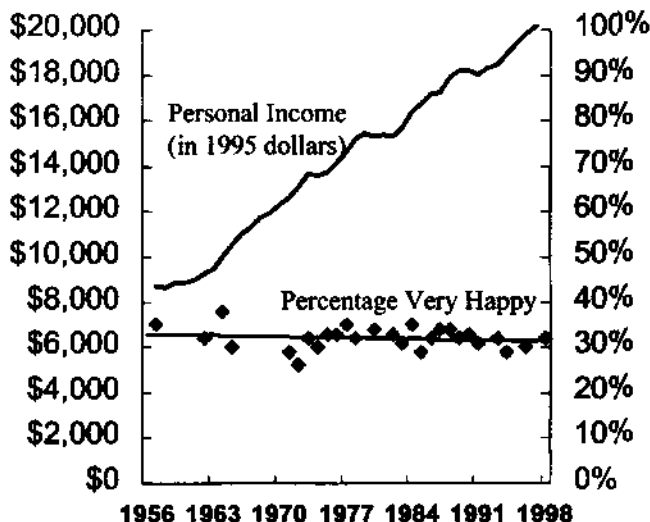
If not surrounded by wealth, the pain of simplification may also be short-lived. Economist Robert Frank (1996) experienced this:

As a young man fresh out of college, I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in rural Nepal. My one-room house had no electricity, no heat, no indoor toilet, no running water. The local diet offered little variety and virtually no meat. . . . Yet, although my living conditions in Nepal were a bit startling at first, the most salient feature of my experience was how quickly they came to seem normal. Within a matter of weeks, I lost all sense of impoverishment. Indeed, my \$40 monthly stipend was more than most others had in my village, and with it I experienced a feeling of prosperity that I have recaptured only in recent years.

If enduring personal happiness generally does not rise with personal affluence, does collective happiness float upward with a rising economic tide? Are Americans happier today than in 1940, when two out of five homes lacked a shower or bathtub, heat often meant feeding a furnace wood or coal, and 35% of homes had no toilet ("Tracking the American Dream," 1994)? Consider 1957, when economist John Galbraith was about to describe the United States as *The Affluent Society*. Americans' per person income, expressed in today's dollars, was about \$9,000. Today, it is \$20,000, thanks to increased real wages into the 1970s, increased nonwage income, and the doubling of married women's employment. Compared with 1957, today's Americans are therefore part of "the doubly affluent society," with double what money buys. Although income disparity has increased between rich and poor, the rising tide has lifted most boats. Americans today own twice as many cars per person, eat out more than twice as often, and often enjoy microwave ovens, big-screen color TVs, and home computers. From 1960 to 1997, the percentage of homes with dishwashers increased from 7% to 50%, clothes dryers increased from 20% to 71%, and air conditioning increased from 15% to 73% (U.S. Commerce Department, Bureau of the Census, 1979, Table 1383; 1998, Table 1223). So, believing that it is "very important" to be very well-off financially and having seen their affluence ratchet upward little by little over four decades, are Americans now happier?

They are not. As Figure 5 indicates, the number of people reporting themselves "very happy" has, if anything,

**Figure 5**  
Has Economic Growth Advanced Human Morale?



Note. While inflation-adjusted income has risen, self-reported happiness has not. Income data from the U.S. Commerce Department, Bureau of the Census (1975), and *Economic Indicators*. Happiness data from General Social Surveys, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. See Footnote 1.

declined slightly between 1957 and 1998, from 35% to 33%: We are twice as rich and no happier. Meanwhile, the divorce rate doubled. Teen suicide tripled. Reported violent crime nearly quadrupled. Depression rates have soared, especially among teens and young adults (Seligman, 1989; Klerman & Weissman, 1989; Cross-National Collaborative Group, 1992). Compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness, and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathologies. I call this conjunction of material prosperity and social recession *the American paradox* (Myers, in press). The more people strive for extrinsic goals such as money, the more numerous their problems and the less robust their well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

It is hard to avoid a startling conclusion: Our becoming much better off over the last four decades has not been accompanied by one iota of increased subjective well-being. The same is true of European countries and Japan, according to Richard Easterlin (1995). In Britain, for example, sharp increases in the percentages of households with cars, central heating, and telephones have not been accompanied by increased happiness. The conclusion is startling because it challenges modern materialism. So far as happiness goes, it is not "the economy, stupid." Economic growth in affluent countries has provided no apparent boost to human morale.

## Close Relationships and Well-Being

One can easily imagine why the stress of close relationships might exacerbate illness and misery. "Hell is other

people," mused Jean-Paul Sartre. Thus, people may fret over dysfunctional relationships. Pop psychology books warn us against the yoke of codependent connections, marked by too much support and loyalty to a troubled partner at the cost of one's self-fulfillment. Recognizing how the "chains" of marriage and the "shackles" of commitment can put people in "bondage," modern individualism advises us to give priority to enhancing our own identity and self-expression. "The only question which matters," declared Carl Rogers (quoted in Wallach & Wallach, 1985), "is, 'Am I living in a way which is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?'"

### **Need to Belong**

Without disputing the human quest for personal identity, social and evolutionary psychologists remind us that we are also, as Aristotle recognized, social animals. Social bonds boosted our ancestors' survival chances. Children kept close to their caregivers were protected from harm. Adults who formed attachments were more likely to come together to reproduce and conurture their offspring to maturity. Groups shared food, provided mates, and helped care for children. For hunting, six hands were better than two. Facing enemies, there was strength in numbers. As inheritors of this legacy, we therefore have a deep need to belong, contend Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995).

Because of our panhuman quest for close relationships, new social bonds are typically marked and cemented by celebration. When we marry, have a child, gain a new job, or join a fraternity, sorority, or religious community, we celebrate the event with food, ritual, or parties. Thrown together at school, at summer camp, or on a cruise, we often resist our newly formed group's dissolution. Hoping to maintain the relationships, we promise to call, to write, to come back for reunions. Seeking acceptance and belonging, we spend billions on clothes, cosmetics, and diet and fitness aids, especially in cultures where the absence of arranged marriages and the possibility of divorce make romantic attachment more dependent on attractiveness.

To be sure, the need to belong feeds both deep attachments and menacing threats. Out of our need to define a "we" come loving families, faithful friendships, fraternal organizations, and team spirit, but also teen gangs, isolationist cults, ethnic hostilities, and fanatical nationalism. Because the fear of aloneness sometimes seems worse than the pain of emotional or physical abuse, attachments may also keep people in degrading relationships. When our social ties are threatened or broken, negative emotions may overwhelm us. Exile, imprisonment, and solitary confinement are progressively more severe forms of punishment. Recently bereaved people often find life empty and pointless. Those denied others' acceptance and inclusion may feel depressed. Anxiety, jealousy, loneliness, and guilt all involve disruptions to the human need to belong.

The known toxicity of such negative emotions for human health and the healing power of confiding self-disclosure (Pennebaker, 1990) help explain why epidemiologists, after following thousands of lives through time, have consistently found that close, intact relationships pre-

dict health. Compared with those having few social ties, people supported by close relationships with friends, family, or fellow members of church, work, or other support groups are less vulnerable to ill health and premature death (Cohen, 1988; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Nelson, 1988). When afflicted with leukemia or heart disease, those who experience extensive social support have higher survival rates (Case, Moss, Case, McDermott, & Eberly, 1992; Colon, Callies, Popkin, & McGlave, 1991; Williams et al., 1992). When social ties break, with widowhood, divorce, or dismissal from a job, immune defenses weaken for a time, and rates of disease and death rise (Dohrenwend et al., 1982; Kaprio, Koskenvuo, & Rita, 1987; National Academy of Sciences, 1984). "Woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help," observed the writer of Ecclesiastes (4:10).

### **Friendships and Well-Being**

Do the correlates of social support include psychological as well as physical well-being? Being attached to friends and partners with whom we can share intimate thoughts has two effects, believed Francis Bacon (1625): "It redoubleth joys, and cutteth griefs in half." Three hundred and fifty years later, John Lennon and Paul McCartney (1967) sang the same idea: "I get by with a little help from my friends."

Indeed, people report happier feelings when with others (Pavot, Diener, & Fujita, 1990). When asked by the National Opinion Research Center, "How many close friends would you say you have?" (excluding family members), 26% of those reporting fewer than five friends and 38% of those reporting five or more friends said they were "very happy."<sup>1</sup>

Other findings confirm the correlation between social support and well-being. For example, those who enjoy close relationships cope better with various stresses, including bereavement, rape, job loss, and illness (Abbey & Andrews, 1985; Perlman & Rook, 1987). Among 800 college alumni surveyed, those with "Yuppie values"—those who preferred a high income and occupational success and prestige to having very close friends and a close marriage—were twice as likely as their former classmates to describe themselves as "fairly" or "very" unhappy (Perkins, 1991).

### **Marriage and Well-Being**

For more than 9 in 10 people worldwide, reported the United Nations' *Demographic Yearbook*, one example of a close relationship is eventually marriage. Given our need to belong and the resulting links between friendship and well-being, does marriage predict greater well-being, or is happiness more often associated with independence?

A mountain of data reveal that most people are happier when attached than when unattached. Repeated surveys in Europe and North America have produced a con-

<sup>1</sup> Analyses of National Opinion Research Center General Social Survey data for this article were conducted at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/gss/> and at <http://csa.berkeley.edu:7502/>.

sistent result: Compared with those who never marry, and especially compared with those who have separated or divorced, married people report being happier and more satisfied with life. For example, among the 35,024 Americans surveyed by the National Opinion Research Center between 1972 and 1996, 40% of married adults declared themselves very happy—nearly double the 24% of never-married adults who said the same (Figure 6). Pooling data from national surveys of 20,800 people in 19 countries, Arne Mastekaasa (1994) confirmed the marriage-happiness correlation. Married people are also at decreased risk of depression (Figure 7).

Even less happy than those unmarried or divorced are those in not-very-happy marriages. However, those reporting their marriage as “very happy” are among the happiest of people: 57% declared life as a whole to be very happy (compared with 10% of those whose marriage is “pretty happy” and 3% of those with a “not-too-happy” marriage). Henry Ward Beecher would not have been surprised: “Well-married a person is winged; ill-matched, shackled.” As it happens, three in four married Americans say their spouse is their best friend, and four in five say they would marry the same person again (Glenn, 1996; Greeley, 1991).

Is marriage, as is often supposed, more strongly linked with men’s happiness than women’s? Do “guys wed for better, wives for worse,” as one newspaper headlined (Peterson, 1993)? Given women’s greater contribution to household tasks, we might expect so. Domestic equity—an ideal not yet realized in most marriages—is a predictor of marital happiness (Feeney, Peterson, & Noller, 1994; Schaffer & Keith, 1980). Nevertheless, the married versus not-married happiness gap is similar for women and men. This is the consistent finding of national surveys in the United States (Figure 6), in Canada and Europe (Inglehart, 1990), and in a meta-analysis of 93 studies of gender, marriage, and well-being (Wood, Rhodes, & Whelan, 1989). Although there are some indications that a bad marriage may

be more depressing to a woman than to her husband, the myth that single women are generally happier than married women can be laid to rest.

So, why are married people happier? Is marriage conducive to happiness, or is happiness conducive to marriage? The traffic between marriage and happiness appears to be two-way.

First, happy people may be more appealing marriage partners. Because they are more good-natured, more outgoing, and more focused on others (Veenhoven, 1988), they generally are socially attractive. Unhappy people are more often socially rejected. Misery may love company, but research on the social consequences of depression reveals that company does not love misery. An unhappy (and therefore self-focused, irritable, and withdrawn) spouse or roommate is often not perceived as fun to be around (Gotlib, 1992; Segrin & Dillard, 1992). For such reasons, positive, happy people more readily form happy relationships.

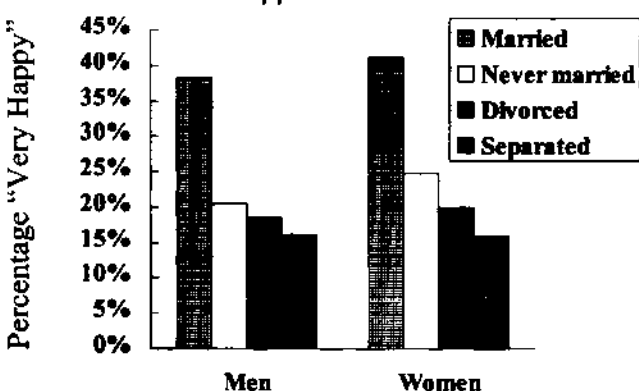
Yet, “the prevailing opinion of researchers,” reported Mastekaasa (1995), is that the marriage-happiness correlation is “mainly due” to the beneficial effects of marriage. Consider: If the happiest people marry sooner and more often, then as people age (and progressively less happy people move into marriage), the average happiness of both married and never-married people should decline. (The older, less happy newlyweds would pull down the average happiness of married people, leaving the unhappiest people in the unmarried group.) However, the data do not support this prediction, which suggests that marital intimacy, commitment, and support do, for most people, pay emotional dividends. Marriage offers people new roles, providing new stresses but also additional rewards and sources of identity and self-esteem (Crosby, 1987). When marked by intimacy, marriage—friendship sealed by commitment—reduces loneliness and offers a dependable lover and companion (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1997).

## Faith and Well-Being

Is religion, as Freud (1928/1964, p. 71) surmised, corrosive to happiness—by creating an “obsessional neurosis” that entails guilt, repressed sexuality, and suppressed emotions—or is it more often associated with joy? Accumulating evidence reveals that some forms of religious experience correlate with prejudice and guilt, but that in general an active religiosity is associated with several mental health criteria. First, actively religious North Americans are much less likely than irreligious people to become delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce, and to commit suicide (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Colasanto & Shriver, 1989). Thanks in part to their lessened smoking and drinking, religiously active people even tend to be physically healthier and to live longer (Koenig, 1997; Matthews & Larson, 1997).

Other studies have probed the correlation between faith and coping with crises. Compared with religiously inactive widows, recently widowed women who worship regularly report more joy in their lives (Harvey, Barnes, & Greenwood, 1987; McGloshen & O’Bryant, 1988; Siegel

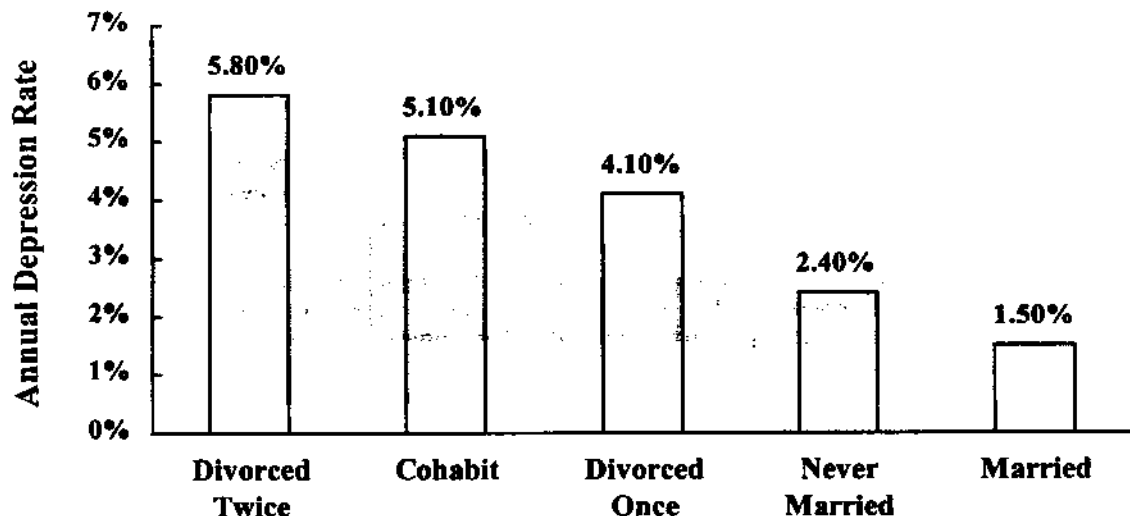
**Figure 6**  
Marital Status and Happiness



Note. Data from 35,024 participants in the General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center, 1972 to 1996. See Footnote 1.



**Figure 7**  
*Marital Status and Depression Rate*



Note. Data from Robins and Regier, 1991, p. 72.

& Kuykendall, 1990). Among mothers of developmentally challenged children, those with a deep religious faith are less vulnerable to depression (Friedrich, Cohen, & Wilturner, 1988). People of faith also tend to retain or recover greater happiness after suffering divorce, unemployment, serious illness, or bereavement (Ellison, 1991; McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993). For people later in life, according to one meta-analysis, the two best predictors of life satisfaction have been health and religiousness (Okun & Stock, 1987).

In surveys taken in various nations, religiously active people also report somewhat higher levels of happiness (Inglehart, 1990). Consider a U.S. Gallup Organization (1984) survey. Those responding with highest scores on a spiritual commitment scale (by agreeing, e.g., that "My religious faith is the most important influence in my life") were twice as likely as those lowest in spiritual commitment to declare themselves "very happy." National Opinion Research Center surveys reveal higher levels of "very happy" people among those who feel "extremely close to God" (41%) rather than "somewhat close" (29%) or not close or unbelieving (23%). Self-rated spirituality and happiness may both be socially desirable responses, however. Would the happiness correlation extend to a behavioral measure of religiosity? As Figure 8 indicates, it does.

Seeking to explain these associations between faith and well-being, researchers have considered several possibilities. A partial explanation seems to be that faith communities provide social support (Ellison, Gay, & Glass, 1989). Religion is usually practiced communally, involving "the fellowship of kindred spirits," "the bearing of one another's burdens," "the ties of love that bind." This was the vision of John Winthrop (1630/1965), who, before

leading one of the first groups of Puritans to shore, declared, "We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body" (p. 92). Pennsylvania's old-order Amish, who are known for their agrarian, nonmaterialistic culture, their pacifism, and their self-sufficient communal life, suffer low rates of major depression (Egeland & Hostetter, 1983; Egeland, Hostetter, & Eshleman, 1983).

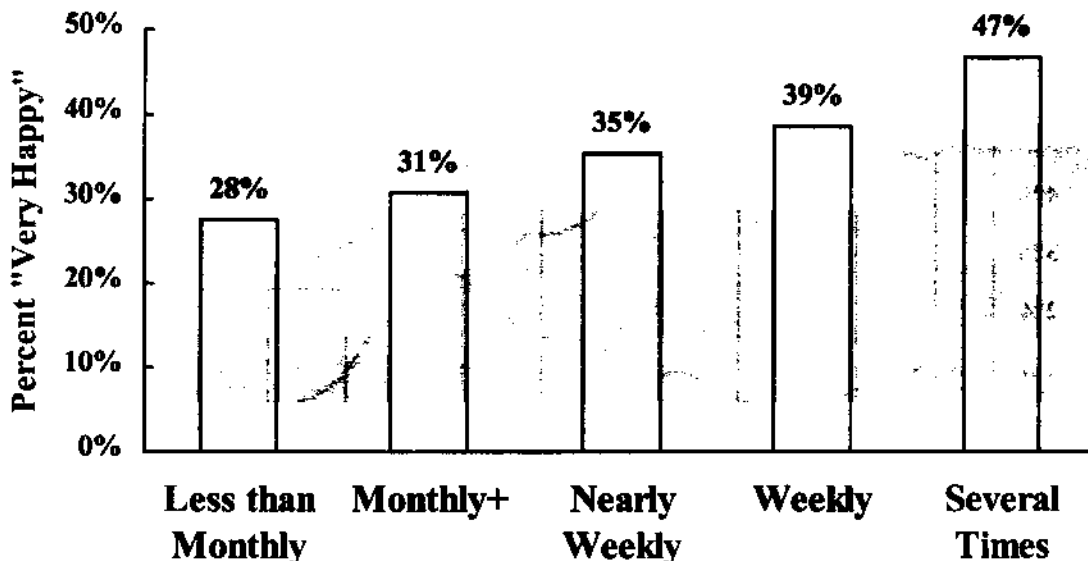
Another possible explanation for the faith-well-being correlation is the sense of meaning and purpose that many people derive from their faith. Seligman (1988) has contended that a loss of meaning feeds today's high depression rate, and that finding meaning requires

an attachment to something larger than the lonely self. To the extent that young people now find it hard to take seriously their relationship with God, to care about their relationship with the country or to be part of a large and abiding family, they will find it very difficult to find meaning in life. To put it another way, the self is a very poor site for finding meaning. (p. 55)

For Rabbi Harold Kushner (1987), religion satisfies "the most fundamental human need of all. That is the need to know that somehow we matter, that our lives mean something, count as something more than just a momentary blip in the universe."

Many religious worldviews not only propose answers to some of life's deepest questions; they also encourage hope when confronting what Sheldon Solomon, Jeffery Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski (1991) call "the terror resulting from our awareness of vulnerability and death." Aware as we are of the great enemies, suffering and death,

**Figure 8**  
**Religious Attendance and Happiness**



Note. Data from 34,706 participants in the General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center, 1972 to 1996. See Footnote 1.

religion offers a hope that in the end, the very end, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, all manner of things shall be wellfi (Julian of Norwich, 1373/1901).

## Conclusion

The correlational evidence that marks this young enterprise leaves many "elds for future researchers to plow as they explore the roots and fruits of happiness. However, this much we now know: Age, gender, and income (assuming people have enough to afford life's necessities) give little clue to someone's happiness. William Cowper's 1782 hunch appears correct: "Happiness depends, as Nature shows, Less on exterior things than most suppose. Better clues come from knowing people's traits and the quality of their work and leisure experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Diener, 2000, this issue), knowing whether they enjoy a supportive network of close relationships, and knowing whether the person has a faith that encompasses social support, purpose, and hope. Research on subjective well-being complements society's emphases on physical and material well-being and psychology's historic preoccupation with negative emotions. By asking who is happy and why, those engaged in the scienti"ic pursuit of happiness can help our culture rethink its priorities and envision a world that enhances human well-being.

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