

# Positive Psychology

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## INTRODUCTION

For a decade or so, there has been a fairly dramatic shift in the way in which psychologists look at the human condition. For the last hundred years or more, they have based most of their understanding on our problems... essentially by studying people with known medical conditions and mental health issues, they have evolved a science of human dysfunction.

The radical change in direction has been to study instead what is 'normal' and what makes the majority of humans 'normal'. At one extreme of this has evolved a branch of psychology known as 'positive psychology' – which takes as one of its guiding principles the idea that it is not satisfactory to be 'normal' but instead it is preferable to be positive.

'Positive psychology' emerged as a new area of psychology in 1998 when Martin Seligman chose it as the theme for his term as president of the American Psychological Association. The term originates though with Abraham Maslow, who coined it in his 1954 book 'Motivation and Personality'.

Recently a number of 'meta-analyses' of positive psychology have been published, and from them some interesting aspects unfold. One such dimension involves happiness and what makes some of us predominantly happy and some of us predominantly unhappy. Three studies in particular have contributed to our current view of happiness – the German Socio-Economic Panel, the US General Social Survey and the World Values Survey. The findings provide a useful focus for those of us working with individuals who would like to be happier, organisations seeking to become places renowned for the happiness of their employees, as well as to policy makers in Government who are concerned with ways of promoting happier societies. If you are interested in a detailed summary of these issues, check out Lord Layard's book "Happiness – Lessons from a new science" on which much of the following is based.

Firstly, let's be clear about a few things that we can be sure do NOT really contribute to happiness;

- Age
- Gender
- Appearance
- IQ
- Physical energy
- Mental energy
- Education

## INDIVIDUAL HAPPINESS

For each of these, we now know that the contribution to an individual's happiness is extremely low or non-existent at all.

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Instead, we can say that there are seven factors that contribute to the bulk of an individual's happiness. In order of decreasing importance, they are;

1. Family relationships
2. Financial situation
3. Work
4. Community and friends
5. Health
6. Personal freedom
7. Personal values

**Family relationships** – When most people marry or have children they enjoy a peak of happiness for a year or so before returning to their previous level. When they separate or divorce they suffer a drop in happiness for a year or two. Men return to their underlying level sooner than women. Half of US children will be living in a single parent household by the time they are 15, so marriage break-up is a very real cause of reduced happiness. Couples who remain 'in love' tend to have better sex lives, have better hormonal balance, be healthier, live longer and be happier than they were four years before they were married.

**Financial situation** – There have been some fascinating studies on income. Absolute income has little or no effect on happiness. Two things do. Firstly, the relative level of income to who ever we compare ourselves with (generally our local community). Secondly, changes in our income. We are generally happier being poor but with good prospects of an increasing income than being well-off but with little chance of an increase.

The prospect of a drop in income of one third is used as a benchmark of many other factors in studies of happiness. For example, the impact of separation (as in splitting up with a life-partner) is FOUR times greater than that of a drop of income by one third, and the impact of being widowed is DOUBLE.

**Work** – Work provides not only income but also meaning in our lives. It also provides self-respect and a social network. The impact of being unemployed is three times greater than our benchmark of one third income drop. Being employed but in an environment where unemployment is increasing substantially, is also seriously bad for happiness. So, believing our job is stable and living in a society where unemployment is low and also stable are good predictors of happiness.

The nature of the work is also important. Dull repetitive work has a direct and substantial effect on our health, literally doubling the likelihood of arterial related diseases.

**Community and friends** – The impact of the quality of our community is two-fold – how much we trust people and how safe we feel. We feel happiest when we live in a community where we can trust people around us. Asked whether they could trust most people around them, 5% said so in Brazil and 64% in Norway. The impact of this on national happiness (still measured at an individual level) is the same as a drop of one third of income.

**Health** – Although we generally care about our health, it doesn't feature as a particularly high factor in determining happiness despite lots of reports in the 80s and 90s about endorphins as nature's 'prozac'. Generally, people adapt well to the loss of health and it has little impact on happiness, with two exceptions – mental illness and chronic pain. These two elements are largely a reflection of our inner feelings than any physical limitation. Their impact is roughly the same as becoming unemployed.

**Personal freedom** – A fascinating effect on happiness (again, measured at the individual level) at the national level is that of perceived personal freedom. When people feel that they have more control over the government policies affecting them they feel happier. The impact is huge – as much as marrying (and this is sustained throughout rather than dropping off after a couple of years)!

**Personal values (our personal philosophy of life)** – There are two factors that have the greatest impact on personal happiness; believing in some kind of higher purpose for society and caring for others. People who care about other people, rather than being pre-occupied with themselves are happier. Interestingly, people who worry about "doing well" in their lives suffer from more anxiety than those who worry about "doing good" for society in general.

Whatever the belief system, when people believe in some higher purpose (whether it is God, spirituality, or mindfulness) they are TWICE as happy as the effect of our benchmark 1/3rd drop in salary.

## **THE IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR LEADERS**

Most of these key factors can be directly managed, or at least influenced, by organisations and their leaders, for the benefit of staff.

**Family relationships** - These days, peoples lives are complex. Nuclear families are far less common, and the generations within families are often separated by long distances. Organisations have spoken of trying to create a 'family friendly' workplace, and some achieve this through the provision of flexible hours, subsidised childcare, insurances and so on. However, what has been lost in the last half century and that has a profound impact on an individual's sense of family, is the permanence of their employment working alongside family members in one place. The obvious examples include coal pits, major manufacturing works, and family firms including those in the City of London where the enterprise revolved around the servicing of money. When they had the security of a job for life, employees formed a special bond similar to that of being within a family. While this kind of arrangement is probably gone for ever, there is a lot that an organisation can do to stimulate the sense of family. Few do.

**Financial situation** - Recognising that pay inequality leading to comparisons with peers, and that frustration with pay rather than absolute pay were significant demotivator, Dan Price of Gravity Payments was already aware of the problems of their personal financial situation on employees. However, it was when he discovered that there is an absolute level above which financial worries cease to impact on staff happiness, that he surprised his 120-person staff by announcing that he planned over the next three years to raise the salary of every employee to \$70,000 a year. For decades, HR professionals have valued themselves on the basis of how much they could save their firm by keeping wages in check. We don't always have to be so radical. A young woman recently described her employer's approach - whenever a member of staff was thinking of taking out a loan to pay for something, they were encouraged to approach the firm first. The company was happy to

lend at zero rate a significant proportion of an annual salary, paid for by affordable deductions from pay over an agreed period. This is just a simple example, but again, there's a lot more that firms could do to ensure that their staff's financial situation enhances happiness rather than detracting from it.

**Work** - Work provides not only income but also meaning in our lives, self-respect, and a social network. Leaders often assume that their employees come with a sense of values that already align to the purpose of the organisation, or that this purpose is self-evident anyway. This is rarely the case, and yet by simply making the connection between what the firm does and a greater humanitarian purpose they can palpably improve happiness with them. Helping employees explore themselves and their personal development, their emotional and spiritual needs, through discussions, courses, meditation and talks, costs little, but can deliver a great sense of happiness across the board.

**Community and friends** - We've already mentioned the ways in which firms can enhance the sense of family. But what about reaching out into the community? Fostering good links that deliver to both, creates a stronger bond with that community, and greater pride in the employee's minds.

**Health** - The response to this varies enormously across the world, nevertheless taking a strong interest in the health of staff, through gyms, occupational health advisors, insurance schemes and generous allowances for those who are affected by poor health, will promote the culture of happiness.

**Personal freedom** - While studies tend to focus on the impact on national happiness, a savvy employer will find ways of allowing their staff to largely self-direct. Giving them control over their own work and life can now be seen to enhance their sense of personal freedom and thence happiness.

**Personal values** - Discovering a personal sense of higher purpose improves happiness, as does contributing to other people's happiness. The latter is easy to orchestrate. Whether it is painting a school, collecting donations, or whatever - looking for creative ways of reaching out by the employees is a powerful reinforcer of happiness.

## **SUMMARY**

So, to capture all of this; working on our relationships, managing our finances, having meaningful work, living in a community in which we feel safe and can trust people, seeking help promptly for mental health and chronic pain, taking an active part in government and developing our sense of connectedness and spirituality, will all have a profound impact on our own happiness.

Savvy organisations recognise this and seek to institutionalise the behaviour, knowing that they will benefit enormously.