Chapter 1

Overview on Our Tenth Anniversary

John F. Helliwell
Vancouver School of Economics, University of British Columbia

Richard Layard
Wellbeing Programme, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science

Jeffrey D. Sachs
University Professor and Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University

Jan-Emmanuel De Neve
Director, Wellbeing Research Centre, University of Oxford

Lara B. Aknin
Distinguished Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University

Shun Wang
Professor, KDI School of Public Policy and Management
Research on happiness

increasing interest in new and subjective measures of well-being
This is the tenth anniversary of the World Happiness Report. From its first year, the report has had a large and growing readership — reaching over 9 million in 2021. It has been widely cited. But more important has been the message the Report has carried. The true measure of progress is the happiness of the people; that happiness can be measured; and that we know a lot about what causes it. Given this knowledge, it is now possible for policy-makers to make people’s happiness the goal of their policies. And each of us can live a wiser life.

We take the tenth anniversary as an opportunity to consider how far happiness research has come, where it stands, and the promising opportunities that lie ahead.

Looking back

Over the last ten years, there has been a transformation of public interest in happiness (see Chapter 3). Policy-makers worldwide increasingly see it as an important and overarching objective of public policy. With encouragement from the OECD, nearly all its member countries now measure the happiness of their people annually. The European Union asks its member countries to put well-being at the heart of policy design.

While interest in happiness has mushroomed over the ten years of World Happiness Reports, the global average of national life evaluations has been relatively stable. This average stability masks a great variety of national and regional experiences. As Chapter 2 demonstrates, life evaluations have risen by one full point or more in some countries (led by three Balkan countries, Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia) and fallen this much or more in other countries in deep trouble, with Venezuela, Afghanistan, and Lebanon dropping the most. There has, on average, been a long-term moderate upward trend in stress, worry, and sadness in most countries and a slight long-term decline in the enjoyment of life.

Happiness, benevolence, and trust during COVID-19 and beyond (Chapter 2)

Chapter 2 contains the national happiness rankings, explores trends over the past ten years, and provides a deeper examination of emotions, behaviour, and life in general during 2020 and 2021. The 2021 data confirm the 2020 finding that average life evaluations, reflecting the net effects of offsetting negative and positive influences, have remained remarkably resilient during COVID-19. For the young, life satisfaction has fallen, while for those over 60, it has risen — with little overall change. Worry and stress have risen — by 8% in 2020 and 4% in 2021 compared with pre-pandemic levels.

On the positive side, the most remarkable change seen during COVID-19 has been the global upsurge in benevolence in 2021. This benevolence has provided notable support for the life evaluations of givers, receivers, and observers, who have been gratified to see their community’s readiness to reach out to help each other in times of need. In every global region, there have been large increases in the proportion of people who give money to charity, help strangers, and do voluntary work in every global region. Altogether the global average of these three measures was up by a quarter in 2021, compared with before the pandemic.

COVID-19 has also demonstrated the crucial importance of trust for human well-being. Deaths from COVID-19 during 2020 and 2021 have been markedly lower in those countries with higher trust in public institutions and where inequality is lower.

Looking forward

For the future, the prospects for happiness will depend on a whole range of factors, including the future course of the pandemic and the scale of military conflict. But an important contribution will come from improvements in the science of happiness. In this tenth anniversary issue, we celebrate three major promising developments in our ability to measure and explain happiness.
The first is our new ability to measure the happiness content of printed text, be it in books or social media. This can be done mechanically by counting the frequency of different types of words or by machine learning which also analyses content.

These methods show that references to happiness have increased sharply over the last ten years (see Chapter 3). Meanwhile, references to income and GDP have fallen, and they have become less common than references to happiness. These are encouraging long-term trends.

Automated text analysis can also be used to measure changes in emotion over weeks or even days — at least among those who tweet (see Chapter 4). It turns out that measures of emotion on Twitter move closely in line with the replies about emotion given in social surveys — which reinforces one’s confidence in both methods of measuring emotion.

A second major area of progress concerns the relationship between biology and happiness. We now have many ‘biomarkers’ of happiness. In addition, the genes we inherit provide important clues as to why some people are happier than others (see Chapter 5).

The third area of advance is the range of emotions covered in happiness research. Happiness research in the West has tended to ignore important positive emotions which involve low arousal — such as calm, peace, and harmony. Recent research shows how significant these emotions contribute to overall life satisfaction (see Chapter 6).

As the science of happiness develops further, the World Happiness Report will continue to search for even deeper insights into the secrets of human happiness. This search will be aided by new data and research tools like those described in Chapters 3 to 6, as summarised below.

**Trends in conceptions of progress and well-being (Chapter 3)**

• Interest in happiness and subjective well-being has risen sharply, whether measured by the frequency of those words in books in multiple global languages, or by the scale of published research, or by the number of government measurement initiatives.

• By contrast, attention to income and GDP is decreasing, and in books published since 2013, the words GDP (or the like) have appeared less frequently than the word ‘happiness’.

• The World Happiness Report is referred to widely, and it is now mentioned twice as often (in books) as the phrase ‘Beyond GDP’, which itself has also been on a rapidly rising trajectory.

• Academic research on happiness has exploded and now involves authors from all over the world.

• When organisations, academics, or governments try to define progress through creating a new set of indicators, they increasingly include measures of happiness. This reflects the strong public appetite for this conception of progress and the growing availability of data on happiness.

• Thus, the science of happiness has much to offer governments devising better policies. But it can never tell them how to handle inequality or questions of long-run sustainability.

**Using social media data to capture emotions before and during COVID-19 (Chapter 4)**

• Millions of people share their thoughts and feelings online via social media each day. Automated analysis of social media data offers exciting promise for measuring trends in emotions. The methods used include counts of emotional words listed in emotion dictionaries and machine learning methods which also take into account the structure and meaning of sentences.
• Two case studies of tweets on Twitter examined the daily and weekly movements of positive and negative emotions, including sadness and anxiety, before and during COVID-19 in the U.K. and Austria. These were then compared with the measurements of these emotions as recorded in standard social surveys of the population. The two measures of emotion (social-media-based and survey-based) tracked each other extraordinarily well, although clear differences between text analysis methods and emotions exist. The Twitter measures of emotion were less closely related to survey-based questions on life satisfaction.

• As regards the impact of COVID-19, Twitter data in 18 countries showed strong increases in anxiety and sadness during COVID-19 (together with decreases in anger). These changes in anxiety and sadness were positively related to the incidence of COVID-19 itself and the stringency of anti-COVID measures.

• How to best analyze social media data to achieve valid measures of emotions of the population is still an important research topic. Nonetheless, it is becoming increasingly clear that measures of emotion from social media can effectively complement measures based on social surveys when robust methods are applied — a big step forward for happiness research.

Exploring the biological basis for happiness (Chapter 5)

• Genetic studies involving twin or family designs reveal that about 30-40% of the differences in happiness between people within a country are accounted for by genetic differences among individuals. The other 60-70% of differences between people result from the effect of environmental influences that are independent of the genes.

• Genome-Wide Association Studies show that the genetic influence comes from the cumulative effects of numerous genetic variants, each with small effects. The next step is to use the outcome of these large-scale studies to create a so-called Polygenic Score; a number that summarises the estimated effect of the many genetic variants on an individual’s phenotype. It reflects an individual’s estimated genetic predisposition for a given trait and can be used as a predictor for that trait.

• Some people are born with a set of genetic variants that makes it easier to feel happy, while others are less fortunate. But genes and environment are generally correlated: genes can affect people’s choice of environment and how others react to them. At the same time, genes can influence how people are affected by the world around them — there is ‘gene-environment interaction’.

• The most consistent finding with respect to the brain areas involved in well-being is that a more active default mode network (DMN) is related to lower well-being. (The DMN is a large brain network primarily composed of the medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex/praecuneus, and angular gyrus). This network is most active when a person is not focused on the outside world, and the brain is at wakeful rest, such as during daydreaming and mind-wandering.

• Many other processes in the human body are important for explaining individual differences in happiness and well-being among individuals. For example, based on the limited number of available studies, higher positive emotion is probably associated with higher levels of serotonin and lower levels of cortisol, whereas chronic activity of the immune system is linked to lower well-being.

• We should use findings from genetically informative research to create happiness-enhancing interventions, social policies, activities, and environments that make possible the flourishing of genetic potential and simultaneously offset vulnerability and risk.
Among positive experiences, Eastern culture gives special value to experiences of balance and harmony. These are important, low-arousal positive emotions, but they have been relatively neglected in happiness research, which has stronger roots in Western cultures.

In 2020 for the first time, the Gallup World Poll asked questions on the experience of

- Your life being in balance
- Feeling at peace with your life
- Experiencing calm for a lot of the day
- Preferring a calm life to an exciting life
- Focus on caring for others or self.

The experiences of balance, peace, and calm are more prevalent in Western countries, which also experience the highest levels of satisfaction — and they are less prevalent in poorer countries, including those in East Asia.

The majority of people in almost every country prefer a calmer life to an exciting one. But that preference is no higher in Eastern countries than elsewhere. However, it is particularly high in the poorer countries, especially in Africa, where actual calm is low.

Both balance and peace contribute strongly to a satisfying life in all regions of the world.