

2023



World Happiness Report

John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey D. Sachs,
Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Lara B. Aknin, and Shun Wang

The World Happiness Report was written by a group of independent experts acting in their personal capacities. Any views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization, agency or programme of the United Nations.

Table of Contents

World Happiness Report 2023

Executive Summary	2
1 The Happiness Agenda: The Next 10 Years	15
Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs	
2 World Happiness, Trust, and Social Connections in Times of Crisis	29
Helliwell, Huang, Norton, Goff, and Wang	
3 Well-being and State Effectiveness	77
Besley, Marshall, and Persson	
4 Doing Good and Feeling Good: Relationships between Altruism and Well-being for Altruists, Beneficiaries, and Observers	103
Rhoads and Marsh	
5 Towards Well-being Measurement with Social Media Across Space, Time and Cultures: Three Generations of Progress	131
Oscar, Giorgi, Schwartz, and Eichstaedt	

The World Happiness Report was written by a group of independent experts acting in their personal capacities. Any views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization, agency, or program of the United Nations.

Executive Summary

It has been over ten years since the first World Happiness Report was published. And it is exactly ten years since the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 66/281, proclaiming 20 March to be observed annually as International Day of Happiness. Since then, more and more people have come to believe that our success as countries should be judged by the happiness of our people. There is also a growing consensus about how happiness should be measured. This consensus means that national happiness can now become an operational objective for governments.

So in this year's report, we ask the following questions:

1. What is the consensus view about measuring national happiness, and what kinds of behaviour does it require of individuals and institutions? (Chapter 1)
2. How have trust and benevolence saved lives and supported happiness over the past three years of COVID-19 and other crises? (Chapter 2)
3. What is state effectiveness and how does it affect human happiness? (Chapter 3)
4. How does altruistic behaviour by individuals affect their own happiness, that of the recipient, and the overall happiness of society? (Chapter 4)
5. How well does social media data enable us to measure the prevailing levels of happiness and distress? (Chapter 5)

In short, our answers are these.

Chapter 1. The happiness agenda. The next 10 years.

- The natural way to measure a nation's happiness is to ask a nationally-representative sample of people how satisfied they are with their lives these days.
- A population will only experience high levels of overall life satisfaction if its people are also pro-social, healthy, and prosperous. In other words, its people must have high levels of what Aristotle called 'eudaimonia'. So at the level of society, life satisfaction and eudaimonia go hand-in-hand.
- At the individual level, however, they can diverge. As the evidence shows, virtuous behaviour generally raises the happiness of the virtuous actor (as well as the beneficiary). But there are substantial numbers of virtuous people, including some carers, who are not that satisfied with their lives.
- When we assess a society, a situation, or a policy, we should not look only at the average happiness it brings (including for future generations). We should look especially at the scale of misery (i.e., low life satisfaction) that results. To prevent misery, governments and international organisations should establish rights such as those in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). They should also broaden the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to consider well-being and environmental policy dimensions jointly in order to ensure the happiness of future generations. These rights and goals are essential tools for increasing human happiness and reducing misery now and into the future.
- Once happiness is accepted as the goal of government, this has other profound effects on institutional practices. Health, especially mental health, assumes even more priority, as does the quality of work, family life, and community.
- For researchers, too, there are major challenges. All government policies should be evaluated against the touchstone of well-being (per dollar spent). And how to promote virtue needs to become a major subject of study.

Chapter 2. World Happiness, Trust, and Social Connections in Times of Crisis

- **Life evaluations** have continued to be remarkably resilient, with global averages in the COVID-19 years 2020-2022 just as high as those in the pre-pandemic years 2017-2019. Finland remains in the top position for the sixth year in a row. War-torn Afghanistan and Lebanon remain the two unhappiest countries in the survey, with average life evaluations more than five points lower (on a scale running from 0 to 10) than in the ten happiest countries.
- To study the **inequality** of happiness, we first focus on the happiness gap between the top and the bottom halves of the population. This gap is small in countries where most people are happy but also in those countries where almost no one is happy. However, more generally, people are happier living in countries where the happiness gap is smaller. Happiness gaps globally have been fairly stable over time, although there are growing gaps in many African countries.
- We also track two measures of misery - the share of the population having life evaluations of 4 and below and the share rating the lives at 3 and below. Globally, both of these measures of misery fell slightly during the three COVID-19 years.
- To help to explain this continuing resilience, we document four cases that suggest how trust and social support can support happiness during crises.
- **COVID-19 deaths.** In 2020 and 2021, countries attempting to suppress community transmission had lower death rates and better well-being overall. Not enough countries followed suit, thus enabling new variants to emerge, such that in 2022, Omicron made elimination infeasible. Although trust continues to be correlated with lower death rates in 2022, policy strategies, infections, and death rates are now very similar in all countries, but with total deaths over all three years being much lower in the **eliminator** countries.

- **Benevolence.** There was a globe-spanning **surge of benevolence** in 2020 and especially in 2021. Data for 2022 show that prosocial acts remain about one-quarter more common than before the pandemic.
- **Ukraine and Russia.** Both countries shared the global **increases in benevolence** during 2020 and 2021. During 2022, benevolence grew sharply in Ukraine but fell in Russia. Despite the magnitude of suffering and damage in Ukraine, life evaluations in September 2022 remained higher than in the aftermath of the 2014 annexation, supported now by a stronger sense of common purpose, benevolence, and trust in Ukrainian leadership. Confidence in their national governments grew in 2022 in both countries, but much more in Ukraine than in Russia. Ukrainian support for Russian leadership fell to zero in all parts of Ukraine in 2022.
- **Social support.** New data show that **positive social connections** and support in 2022 were twice as prevalent as loneliness in seven key countries spanning six global regions. They were also strongly tied to overall ratings of how satisfied people are with their relationships with other people. The importance of these positive social relations helps further to explain the resilience of life evaluations during times of crisis.

Chapter 3. Well-being and State Effectiveness

- The effectiveness of the government has a major influence on human happiness of the people.
- The capacity of a state can be well-measured by
 - its fiscal capacity (ability to raise money)
 - its collective capacity (ability to deliver services)
 - its legal capacity (rule of law)
 Also crucial are
 - the avoidance of civil war, and
 - the avoidance of repression.
- Across countries, all these five measures are well correlated with the average life satisfaction of the people.

- Using the five characteristics (and income), it is possible to classify states into 3 clusters: common-interest states, special-interest states and weak states. In common-interest states, average life satisfaction is 2 points (out of 10) higher than in weak states and in special-interest states it is 1 point higher than in weak states.
- In those countries where average life satisfaction is highest, it is also more equally distributed – with fewer citizens having relatively low life satisfaction.

Chapter 4. Doing Good and Feeling Good: Relationships between Altruism and Well-being for Altruists, Beneficiaries, and Observers

- A person is being altruistic when they help another person without expecting anything in return. Altruistic behaviours like helping strangers, donating money, giving blood, and volunteering are common, while others (like donating a kidney) are less so.
- There is a positive relationship between happiness and all of these altruistic behaviours. This is true when we compare across countries, and when we compare across individuals. But why?
- Normally, people who receive altruistic help will experience improved well-being, which helps explain the correlation across countries. But in addition, there is much evidence (experimental and others) that helping behaviour increases the well-being of the individual helper. This is especially true when the helping behaviour is voluntary and mainly motivated by concern for the person being helped.
- The causal arrow also runs in the opposite direction. Experimental and other evidence shows that when people's well-being increases, they can become more altruistic. In particular, when people's well-being rises through experiencing altruistic help, they become more likely to help others, creating a virtuous spiral.

Chapter 5. Towards Reliably Forecasting the Well-being of Populations Using Social Media: Three Generations of Progress

- Assessments using social media can provide timely and spatially detailed well-being measurement to track changes, evaluate policy, and provide accountability.
- Since 2010, the methods using social media data for assessing well-being have increased in sophistication. The two main sources of development have been data collection/aggregation strategies and better natural language processing (i.e., sentiment models).
- Data collection/aggregation strategies have evolved from the analysis of random feeds (Generation 1) to the analyses of demographically-characterized samples of users (Generation 2) to an emerging new generation of digital cohort design studies in which users are followed over time (Generation 3).
- Natural Language Processing models have improved mapping language use to well-being estimates – progressing from counting dictionaries of keywords (Level 1) to relying on robust machine-learning estimates (Level 2) to using large language models that consider words within contexts (Level 3).
- The improvement in methods addresses various biases that affect social media data, including selection, sampling, and presentation biases, as well as the impact of bots.
- The current generation of digital cohort designs gives social media-based well-being assessment the potential for unparalleled measurement in space and time (e.g., monthly subregional estimation). Such estimates can be used to test scientific hypotheses about well-being, policy, and population health using quasi-experimental designs (e.g., by comparing trajectories across matched counties).

Acknowledgments

We have had a remarkable range of expert contributing authors and expert reviewers to whom we are deeply grateful for their willingness to share their knowledge with our readers.

Although the editors and authors of the World Happiness Report are volunteers, there are administrative and research support costs covered by our partners: Fondazione Ernesto Illy; illycaffè; Davines Group; Unilever's largest ice cream brand Wall's; The Blue Chip Foundation; The William, Jeff, and Jennifer Gross Family Foundation; The Happier Way Foundation; and The Regeneration Society Foundation. We value our data partnership with Gallup, providing World Poll data.

We appreciate the continued work by Ryan Swaney, Kyu Lee, and Stislow Design for their skills in design and web development, and media engagement. New this year, we thank Marwan Hazem Mostafa Badr Saleh for his assistance with reference preparation.

Whether in terms of research, data, or grants, we are enormously grateful for all of these contributions.

John Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey D. Sachs, Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Lara Aknin, Shun Wang; and Sharon Paculor, Production Editor

Six Factors Explained

Income, health, having someone to count on, having a sense of freedom to make key life decisions, generosity, and the absence of corruption all play strong roles in supporting life evaluations.

GDP per capita



Gross Domestic Product, or how much each country produces, divided by the number of people in the country.

GDP per capita gives information about the size of the economy and how the economy is performing.

Social Support



Social support, or having someone to count on in times of trouble.

“If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?”

Healthy Life Expectancy



More than life expectancy, how is your physical and mental health?

Mental health is a key component of subjective well-being and is also a risk factor for future physical health and longevity. Mental health influences and drives a number of individual choices, behaviours, and outcomes.

Freedom to make Life Choices



“Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?”

This also includes Human Rights. Inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights without discrimination.

Generosity



“Have you donated money to a charity in the past month?”

A clear marker for a sense of positive community engagement and a central way that humans connect with each other.

Research shows that in all cultures, starting in early childhood, people are drawn to behaviours which benefit other people.

Perception of Corruption



“Is corruption widespread throughout the government or not” and
“Is corruption widespread within businesses or not?”

Do people trust their governments and have trust in the benevolence
of others?

Dystopia



Dystopia is an imaginary country that has the world's least-happy people. The purpose of establishing Dystopia is to have a benchmark against which all countries can be favorably compared (no country performs more poorly than Dystopia) in terms of each of the six key variables. The lowest scores observed for the six key variables, therefore, characterize Dystopia. Since life would be very unpleasant in a country with the world's lowest incomes, lowest life expectancy, lowest generosity, most corruption, least freedom, and least social support, it is referred to as "Dystopia," in contrast to Utopia.

