

# Are we happy?

## Looking at the research into the quest for meaning and contentment

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, POSTMEDIA NEWS MAY 8, 2013



Elizabeth Dunn explores the connection between money and happiness in Vancouver on December 13, 2011.

**Photograph by:** Wayne Leidenfrost, Vancouver Sun

VANCOUVER — We live in what's now called the Anthropocene epoch, a geological period when, for the first time, humans are driving the changes to the Earth's physical systems.

It's a term laden with hubris. People are so plentiful, so wealthy and so demanding that we are living better than humans at any time in history even as we destroy the very place that sustains us.

Not only that, an increasing number of people in the wealthiest countries are past the point where the wealth and material goods they clamour for make them happy.

In short, rich people and even moderately wealthy people have lost sight of happiness.

"The sages taught humanity, time and again, that material gain alone will not fulfil our deepest needs," Jeffrey Sachs wrote in the introduction to the United Nations' World Happiness Report, released less than a year ago.

Some of the world's richest and most powerful people — such as Bill Clinton, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and most recently South Africa's first black billionaire, Patrice Motsepe — have all come to that conclusion. They've committed to giving half their fortunes away and are encouraging others in their elite club to do the same.

But it's not just the super rich who are searching for happiness and meaning, as you'll read in the coming days. It seems we are on the cusp of a dramatic and necessary shift in our thinking about what "the good life" means.

Beyond the basic necessities of life — food, clothing, shelter, safety and at least some measure of personal freedom — happiness is the new Holy Grail and it's spawned a whole academic industry to find it, define and quantify it.

And when it comes to happiness, Canada is a world leader. Recent research indicates that since the World Happiness Report was published last April, Canadians jumped to second happiest in the world behind the Danes, from fifth.

So it shouldn't be a surprise that some of the best happiness researchers are also here, including University of British Columbia economist John Helliwell, who was co-author of the World Happiness Report and its update, which will be published this fall.

It's worth noting what academics have found about the tens of thousands of people who have been surveyed and studied.

Among UBC psychologist Elizabeth Dunn's findings is that like people in all other countries, as Canadians' and Americans' incomes rise, they do get happier ... but only to a point.

That point is about \$75,000. Beyond that, any extra money doesn't add extra happiness. In economics-speak it's the "diminishing marginal utility of income" and what it means is that if a household with \$1,000 of income needs an extra \$100 to raise life satisfaction by one notch, a household with \$1

million income needs \$100,000 to get the same happiness bounce.

But, there's a catch. Dunn along with Harvard business professor Michael Norton did experiments in both Vancouver and Uganda and found that money can buy happiness, if you spend it on others.

Why? Because along with having our basic material needs met, we need to feel loved, valued and connected to others.

And these days, that's harder than ever. Never in history have so many people been on the move, leaving home at unprecedented rates. More than half the world's people now live in cities and, in 2005, 191 million people — three per cent of the world's population — lived outside their country of origin.

With so much uprooting and movement, friendships and close personal relationships are often also torn apart. Yet, these are key to happiness, according to Helliwell.

Because he's an economist, Helliwell and University of Alberta's Haifang Huang have quantified those connections and concluded that having people to call on in times of trouble "is more than the equivalent of increasing household incomes by 150 per cent," and doubling your number of friends equates to a 50-per-cent increase in income.

On the micro-level, Brene Brown from the University of Houston has concluded that to be happy, people must embrace their own vulnerability, admit to their weaknesses and mistakes and learn to listen to others.

Brown describes the happy people she studies as being "wholehearted," which among other things meant they "were willing to let go of who they should be to be who they were."

Other studies have found that happiness is influenced by our environment. Even leaving aside the big issues of climate change, pollution, and degradation, this has policy implications when you consider that students who see greenery outside their classrooms do better than those who don't and hospital patients recover more quickly when they can see green outside their windows.

As a side issue, another Canadian study found that watching TV makes us unhappy because it results in a relative decline in social life and increased aggression.

American researcher Matt Killingsworth developed a smartphone app ([trackyourhappiness.org](http://trackyourhappiness.org)) while he was a student at Harvard. He's collected more than 650,000 real-time reports from 15,000 people in 80 different countries, aged 18 to 80, who log in and self-report their states of mind.

Among the rather surprising things he's found is that people daydream about 30 per cent of the time and it makes them unhappy. Too many negative thoughts crowd in. People are happier focused, even if it's on something they hate, like driving in rush-hour traffic.

So what does it take to be happy?

Psychologist Ryan Howell from San Francisco State University's Personality and Well-Being Lab has come up with a list of five characteristics. Happy people manage their money well; spend money on life experiences rather than things; retain good memories of the past, skipping over the bad bits; they are empathetic and they live in communities where they feel they belong and are valued.

And how happy are you? If you want to know, all kinds of online sites offer almost instant analysis if you take the internationally recognized Oxford Happiness Inventory.

I scored an above average 4.9 out of six. And I'd like to think that it wasn't only because I'd just come back from hiking with dog walker Patricia Marshall.

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