11.9: Relationships and Well-being

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The relationships we cultivate in our lives are essential to our well-being—namely, happiness and health. Why is that so? We begin to answer this question by exploring the types of relationships—family, friends, colleagues, and lovers—we have in our lives and how they are measured. We also explore the different aspects of happiness and health, and show how the quantity and quality of relationships can affect our happiness and health.

learning objectives

• Understand why relationships are key to happiness and health.
• Define and list different forms of relationships.
• List different aspects of well-being.
• Explain how relationships can enhance well-being.
• Explain how relationships might not enhance well-being.
Introduction

One of the most basic human needs is the need to belong. [Image: CC0 Public Domain, https://goo.gl/m25gce]

In Daniel Defoe’s classic novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the main character is shipwrecked. For years he lives alone, creating a shelter for himself and marking the passage of time on a wooden calendar. It is a lonely existence, and Crusoe describes climbing a hilltop in the hopes of seeing a passing ship and possible rescue. He scans the horizon until, in his own words, he is “almost blind.” Then, without hope, he sits and weeps.

Although it is a work of fiction, *Robinson Crusoe* contains themes we can all relate to. One of these is the idea of loneliness. Humans are social animals and we prefer living together in groups. We cluster in families, in cities, and in groups of friends. In fact, most people spend relatively few of their waking hours alone. Even introverts report feeling happier when they are with others! Yes, being surrounded by people and feeling connected to others appears to be a natural impulse.

In this module we will discuss relationships in the context of well-being. We will begin by defining well-being and then presenting research about different types of relationships. We will explore how both the quantity and quality of our relationships affect us, as well as take a look at a few popular conceptions (or misconceptions) about relationships and happiness.

The Importance of Relationships

If you were to reflect on the best moments of your life, chances are they involved other people. We feel good sharing our experiences with others, and our desire for high quality relationships may be connected to a deep-seated psychological impulse: the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Aristotle commented that humans are fundamentally social in nature. Modern society is full of evidence that Aristotle was right. For instance, people often hold strong opinions about single child families—usually concerning what are often viewed as problematic “only child” characteristics—and most parents choose to have multiple kids. People join book clubs to make a solitary activity—reading—into a social activity.
Prisons often punish offenders by putting them in solitary confinement, depriving them of the company of others. Perhaps the most obvious expression of the need to belong in contemporary life is the prevalence of social media. We live in an era when, for the first time in history, people effectively have two overlapping sets of social relationships: those in the real world and those in the virtual world.

It may seem intuitive that our strong urge to connect with others has to do with the boost we receive to our own well-being from relationships. After all, we derive considerable meaning from our relational bonds—as seen in the joy a newborn brings to its parents, the happiness of a wedding, and the good feelings of having reliable, supportive friendships. In fact, this intuition is borne out by research suggesting that relationships can be sources of intimacy and closeness (Reis, Clark & Holmes, 2004), comfort and relief from stress (Collins & Feeney, 2000), and accountability—all of which help toward achieving better health outcomes (Tay, Tan, Diener, & Gonzalez, 2013; Taylor, 2010). Indeed, scholars have long considered social relationships to be fundamental to happiness and well-being (Argyle, 2001; Myers, 2000). If the people in our lives are as important to our happiness as the research suggests, it only makes sense to investigate how relationships affect us.

### The Question of Measurement

Despite the intuitive appeal of the idea that good relationships translate to more happiness, researchers must collect and analyze data to arrive at reliable conclusions. This is particularly difficult with the concepts of relationships and happiness, because both can be difficult to define. What counts as a relationship? A pet? An old friend from childhood you haven’t seen in ten years? Similarly, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what qualifies as happiness. It is vital to define these terms, because their definitions serve as the guidelines by which they can be measured, a process called **operationalization**. Scientifically speaking, the two major questions any researcher needs to answer before he or she can begin to understand how relationships and well-being interact are, "How do I best measure relationships?" and "How do I best measure well-being?"
Let's begin with relationships. There are both objective and subjective ways to measure social relationships. **Objective social variables** are factors that are based on evidence rather than opinions. They focus on the presence and frequency of different types of relationships, and the degree of contact and amount of shared activities between people. Examples of these measures include participants' marital status, their number of friends and work colleagues, and the size of their social networks. Each of these variables is factually based (e.g., you have x number of coworkers, etc.). Another objective social variable is social integration, or one's degree of integration into social networks. This can be measured by looking at the frequency and amount of social activity or contact one has with others (see Okun, Stock, Haring, & Witter, 1984; Pinquart & Sorensen, 2000). The strength of objective measures is that they generally have a single correct answer. For example, a person is either married or not; there is no in-between.

**Subjective social variables**, as the name suggests, are those that focus on the subjective qualities of social relationships. These are the products of personal opinions and feelings rather than facts. A key subjective variable is social support—the extent to which individuals feel cared for, can receive help from others, and are part of a supportive network. Measures of social support ask people to report on their perceived levels of support as well as their satisfaction with the support they receive (see Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000). Other subjective social variables assess the nature and quality of social relationships themselves—that is, what types of relationships people have, and whether these social relationships are good or bad. These can include measures that ask about the quality of a marriage (e.g., Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Spanier, 1976), the amount of conflict in a relationship (e.g., Conflict Tactics Scale; Straus, 1979), or the quality of each relationship in one’s social network (e.g., Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI); Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). The strength of subjective measures is that they provide insight into people’s personal experience. A married person, for example, might love or hate his/her marriage; subjective measures tell us which of these is the case.

Objective and subjective measures are often administered in a way that asks individuals to make a global assessment of their relationships (i.e., "How much social support do you receive?"). However, scientists have more recently begun to study social relationships and activity using methods such as daily diary methodology (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003), whereby individuals report on their relationships on a regular basis (e.g., three times a day). This allows researchers to examine in-the-moment instances and/or day-to-day trends of how social relationships affect happiness and well-being compared to more global measures. Many researchers try to include multiple types of measurement—objective, subjective, and daily diaries—to overcome the weaknesses associated with any one measurement technique.

Just as researchers must consider how to best measure relationships, they must also face the issue of measuring well-being. Well-being is a topic many people have an opinion about. If you and nine other people were to write down your own definitions of happiness, or of well-being, there’s a good chance you’d end up with ten unique answers. Some folks define happiness as a sense of peace, while others think of it as being healthy. Some people equate happiness with a sense of purpose, while others think of it as just another word for joy. Modern researchers have wrestled with this topic for decades. They acknowledge that both psychological and physical approaches are relevant to defining well-being, and that many dimensions—satisfaction, joy, meaning—are all important.

One prominent psychological dimension of well-being is happiness. In psychology, the scientific term for happiness is **subjective well-being**, which is defined by three different components: high life satisfaction, which refers to positive evaluations of one’s life in general (e.g., “Overall, I am satisfied with my life”); positive feelings, which refers to the amount of positive emotions one experiences in life (e.g., peace, joy); and low negative feelings, which refers to the amount of negative emotions one experiences in life (e.g., sadness, anger) (Diener, 1984). These components are
commonly measured using subjective self-report scales.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale is one of the most widely used measures of well-being in the world. The physical dimension of well-being is best thought of as one’s health. Health is a broad concept and includes, at least in part, being free of illness or infirmity. There are several aspects of physical health that researchers commonly consider when thinking about well-being and relationships. For example, health can be defined in terms of (A) injury, (B) disease, and (C) mortality. Health can also include physiological indicators, such as blood pressure or the strength of a person’s immune system. Finally, there are health behaviors to be considered, such as dietary consumption, exercise, and smoking. Researchers often examine a variety of health variables in order to better understand the possible benefits of good relationships.

Presence and Quality of Relationships and Well-Being

If you wanted to investigate the connection between social relationships and well-being, where would you start? Would you focus on teenagers? Married couples? Would you interview religious people who have taken a vow of silence? These are the types of considerations well-being researchers face. It is impossible for a single study to look at all types of relationships across all age groups and cultures. Instead, researchers narrow their focus to specific variables. They tend to consider two major elements: the presence of relationships, and the quality of relationships.
Presence of relationships

The first consideration when trying to understand how relationships influence well-being is the presence of relationships. Simply put, researchers need to know whether or not people have relationships. Are they married? Do they have many friends? Are they a member of a club? Finding this out can be accomplished by looking at objective social variables, such as the size of a person’s social network, or the number of friends they have. Researchers have discovered that the more social relationships people have, in general, the more positively their sense of well-being is impacted (Lucas, Dyrenforth, & Diener 2008). In one study of more than 200 undergraduate students, psychologists Ed Diener and Martin Seligman (2002) compared the happiest 10% to the unhappiest 10%. The researchers were curious to see what differentiated these two groups. Was it gender? Exercise habits? Religion? The answer turned out to be relationships! The happiest students were much more satisfied with their relationships, including with close friends, family, and romantic partnerships, than the unhappiest. They also spent less time alone.

Some people might be inclined to dismiss the research findings above because they focused primarily on college students. However, in a worldwide study of people of all ages from 123 nations, results showed that having even a few high quality social relationships was consistently linked with subjective well-being (Tay & Diener, 2011). This is an important finding because it means that a person doesn’t have to be a social butterfly in order to be happy. Happiness doesn’t depend necessarily on having dozens of friends, but rather on having at least a few close connections.

Another way of gaining an understanding of the presence of relationships is by looking at the absence of relationships. A lack of social connections can lead to loneliness and depression. People lose well-being when social relationships are denied—as in cases of ostracism. In many societies, withholding social relationships is used as a form of punishment. For example, in some Western high schools, people form social groups known as “cliques,” in which people share interests and a sense of identity. Unlike clubs, cliques do not have explicit rules for membership but tend to form organically, as exclusive group friendships. When one member of a clique conflicts with the others, the offending member may be socially rejected.
Ostracism is a form of social rejection and isolation that has a negative impact on well-being. [Image: CC0 Public Domain, https://goo.gl/m25gce]

Similarly, some small societies practice shunning, a temporary period during which members withhold emotion, communication, and other forms of social contact as a form of punishment for wrongdoing. The Amish—a group of traditional Christian communities in North America who reject modern conveniences such as electricity—occasionally practice shunning (Hostetler, 1993). Members who break important social rules, for example, are made to eat alone rather than with their family. This typically lasts for one to two weeks. Individuals’ well-being has been shown to dramatically suffer when they are ostracized in such a way (Williams, 2009). Research has even shown that the areas of the brain that process physical pain when we are injured are the same areas that process emotional pain when we are ostracized (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003).

### Quality of relationships

Simply having a relationship is not, in itself, sufficient to produce well-being. We’re all familiar with instances of awful relationships: Cinderella and her step-sisters, loveless marriages, friends who have frequent falling-outs (giving birth to the word “frenemy”). In order for a relationship to improve well-being it has to be a good one. Researchers have found that higher friendship quality is associated with increased happiness (Demir & Weitekamp, 2007). Friendships aren’t the only relationships that help, though. Researchers have found that high quality relationships between parents and children are associated with increased happiness, both for teenagers (Gohm, Oishi, Darlington, & Diener, 1998) and adults (Amato & Affi, 2006).

Finally, an argument can be made for looking at relationships’ effects on each of the distinct components of subjective well-being. Walen and Luchman (2000) investigated a mix of relationships, including family, friends, and romantic partners. They found that social support and conflict were associated with all three aspects of subjective well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect). Similarly, in a cross-cultural study comparing college students in Iran, Jordan, and the United States, researchers found that social support was linked to higher life satisfaction, higher positive affect, and lower negative affect (Brannan, Biswas-Diener, Mohr, Mortazavi, & Stein, 2012).

It may seem like common sense that good relationships translate to more happiness. You may be surprised to learn, however, that good relationships also translate to better health. Interestingly, both the quality and quantity of social relationships can affect a person’s health (Cohen 1988; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Research has shown that having a larger social network and high quality relationships can be beneficial for health, whereas having a small social network and poor quality relationships can actually be detrimental to health (Uchino, 2006). Why might it be the case that good relationships are linked to health? One reason is that friends and romantic partners might share health behaviors, such as wearing seat belts, exercising, or abstaining from heavy alcohol consumption. Another reason is that people who experience social support might feel less stress. Stress, it turns out, is associated with a variety of health problems. Other discussions on social relationships and health can also be found in Noba (http://noba.to/4tm85z2x).

### Types of Relationships

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Psychology/Book%3A_Psychology_(Noba)/Chapter_11%3A_Social_Part_I/11.09…

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Intimate relationships

Intimate Relationships have been shown to have a strong positive impact on individuals’ well-being. [Image: CC0 Public Domain, https://goo.gl/m25gce]

It makes sense to consider the various types of relationships in our lives when trying to determine just how relationships impact our well-being. For example, would you expect a person to derive the exact same happiness from an ex-spouse as from a child or coworker? Among the most important relationships for most people is their long-time romantic partner. Most researchers begin their investigation of this topic by focusing on intimate relationships because they are the closest form of social bond. Intimacy is more than just physical in nature; it also entails psychological closeness. Research findings suggest that having a single confidante—a person with whom you can be authentic and trust not to exploit your secrets and vulnerabilities—is more important to happiness than having a large social network (see Taylor, 2010 for a review).

Another important aspect of relationships is the distinction between formal and informal. Formal relationships are those that are bound by the rules of politeness. In most cultures, for instance, young people treat older people with formal respect, avoiding profanity and slang when interacting with them. Similarly, workplace relationships tend to be more formal, as do relationships with new acquaintances. Formal connections are generally less relaxed because they require a bit more work, demanding that we exert more self-control. Contrast these connections with informal relationships—friends, lovers, siblings, or others with whom you can relax. We can express our true feelings and opinions in these informal relationships, using the language that comes most naturally to us, and generally being more authentic. Because of this, it makes sense that more intimate relationships—those that are more comfortable and in which you can be more vulnerable—might be the most likely to translate to happiness.

The most common way researchers investigate intimacy is by examining marital status. Although marriage is just one type of intimate relationship, it is by far the most common type. In some research, the well-being of married people is compared to that of people who are single or have never been married, and in other research, married people are
compared to people who are divorced or widowed (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2005). Researchers have found that the transition from singlehood to marriage brings about an increase in subjective well-being (Haring-Hidore, Stock, Okun, & Witter, 1985; Lucas, 2005; Williams, 2003). Research has also shown that progress through the stages of relationship commitment (i.e., from singlehood to dating to marriage) is also associated with an increase in happiness (Dush & Amato, 2005). On the other hand, experiencing divorce, or the death of a spouse, leads to adverse effects on subjective well-being and happiness, and these effects are stronger than the positive effects of being married (Lucas, 2005).

Although research frequently points to marriage being associated with higher rates of happiness, this does not guarantee that getting married will make you happy! The quality of one’s marriage matters greatly. When a person remains in a problematic marriage, it takes an emotional toll. Indeed, a large body of research shows that people’s overall life satisfaction is affected by their satisfaction with their marriage (Carr, Freedman, Cornman, Schwarz, 2014; Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008; Karney, 2001; Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007). The lower a person’s self-reported level of marital quality, the more likely he or she is to report depression (Bookwala, 2012). In fact, longitudinal studies—those that follow the same people over a period of time—show that as marital quality declines, depressive symptoms increase (Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997; Karney, 2001). Proulx and colleagues (2007) arrived at this same conclusion after a systematic review of 66 cross-sectional and 27 longitudinal studies.

What is it about bad marriages, or bad relationships in general, that takes such a toll on well-being? Research has pointed to conflict between partners as a major factor leading to lower subjective well-being (Gere & Schimmack, 2011). This makes sense. Negative relationships are linked to ineffective social support (Reblin, Uchino, & Smith, 2010) and are a source of stress (Holt-Lunstad, Uchino, Smith, & Hicks, 2007). In more extreme cases, physical and psychological abuse can be detrimental to well-being (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990). Victims of abuse sometimes feel shame, lose their sense of self, and become less happy and prone to depression and anxiety (Arias & Pape, 1999). However, the unhappiness and dissatisfaction that occur in abusive relationships tend to dissipate once the relationships end. (Arriaga, Capezza, Goodfriend, Rayl & Sands, 2013).
Work Relationships and Well-Being

Since we spend so much of our time at work it’s essential to our well-being that we get along with our coworkers!


Working adults spend a large part of their waking hours in relationships with coworkers and supervisors. Because these relationships are forced upon us by work, researchers focus less on their presence or absence and instead focus on their quality. High quality work relationships can make jobs enjoyable and less stressful. This is because workers experience mutual trust and support in the workplace to overcome work challenges. Liking the people we work with can also translate to more humor and fun on the job. Research has shown that supervisors who are more supportive have employees who are more likely to thrive at work (Paterson, Luthans, & Jeung, 2014; Monnot & Beehr, 2014; Winkler, Busch, Clasen, & Vowinkel, 2015). On the other hand, poor quality work relationships can make a job feel like drudgery. Everyone knows that horrible bosses can make the workday unpleasant. Supervisors that are sources of stress have a negative impact on the subjective well-being of their employees (Monnot & Beehr, 2014). Specifically, research has shown that employees who rate their supervisors high on the so-called “dark triad”—psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism—reported greater psychological distress at work, as well as less job satisfaction (Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, & Babiak, 2014).

In addition to the direct benefits or costs of work relationships on our well-being, we should also consider how these relationships can impact our job performance. Research has shown that feeling engaged in our work and having a high job performance predicts better health and greater life satisfaction (Shimazu, Schaufeli, Kamiyama, & Kawakami, 2015). Given that so many of our waking hours are spent on the job—about ninety thousand hours across a lifetime—it makes sense that we should seek out and invest in positive relationships at work.
Fact or Myth: Are Social Relationships the Secret to Happiness?

If you read pop culture magazines or blogs, you’ve likely come across many supposed “secrets” to happiness. Some articles point to exercise as a sure route to happiness, while others point to gratitude as a crucial piece of the puzzle. Perhaps the most written about “secret” to happiness is having high quality social relationships. Some researchers argue that social relationships are central to subjective well-being (Argyle, 2001), but others contend that social relationships’ effects on happiness have been exaggerated. This is because, when looking at the correlations—the size of the associations—between social relationships and well-being, they are typically small (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Lucas et al., 2008). Does this mean that social relationships are not actually important for well-being? It would be premature to draw such conclusions, because even though the effects are small, they are robust and reliable across different studies, as well as other domains of well-being. There may be no single secret to happiness but there may be a recipe, and, if so, good social relationships would be one ingredient.

Outside Resources

Article: The New Yorker Magazine—“Hellhole” article on solitary confinement  
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/30/hellhole

Blog: The Gottman Relationship Blog  
https://www.gottman.com/blog/

Helen Fisher on Millennials' Dating Trends  

Web: Science of Relationship’s website on social relationships and health  
http://www.scienceofrelationships.co...rceived-p.html

Web: Science of Relationship’s website on social relationships and well-being  
http://www.scienceofrelationships.co...ell-being.html

Discussion Questions

1. What is more important to happiness: the quality or quantity of your social relationships?
2. What do you think has more influence on happiness: friends or family relationships? Do you think that the effect of friends and family on happiness will change with age? What about relationship duration?
3. Do you think that single people are likely to be unhappy?
4. Do you think that same-sex couples who get married will have the same benefits, in terms of happiness and well-being, compared to heterosexual couples?
5. What elements of subjective well-being do you think social relationships have the largest impact on: life satisfaction, positive affect, or negative affect?
6. Do you think that if you are unhappy you can have good quality relationships?
7. Do you think that social relationships are important for happiness more so for women compared to men?
Vocabulary

Confidante
A trusted person with whom secrets and vulnerabilities can be shared.

Correlation
A measure of the association between two variables, or how they go together.

Health
The complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being—not just the absence of disease or infirmity.

Health behaviors
Behaviors that are associated with better health. Examples include exercising, not smoking, and wearing a seat belt while in a vehicle.

Machiavellianism

Narcissism
A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), a need for admiration, and lack of empathy.

Objective social variables
Targets of research interest that are factual and not subject to personal opinions or feelings.

Operationalization
The process of defining a concept so that it can be measured. In psychology, this often happens by identifying related concepts or behaviors that can be more easily measured.

Ostracism
Being excluded and ignored by others.

Psychopathy
A pattern of antisocial behavior characterized by an inability to empathize, egocentricity, and a desire to use relationships as tools for personal gain.

Shunning
The act of avoiding or ignoring a person, and withholding all social interaction for a period of time. Shunning generally occurs as a punishment and is temporary.

Social integration
Active engagement and participation in a broad range of social relationships.

Social support
A social network’s provision of psychological and material resources that benefit an individual.

Subjective social variables
Targets of research interest that are not necessarily factual but are related to personal opinions or feelings.

Subjective well-being
The scientific term used to describe how people experience the quality of their lives in terms of life satisfaction and emotional judgments of positive and negative affect.
References


