Subjective well-being (SWB) is the scientific term for happiness and life satisfaction—thinking and feeling that your life is going well, not badly. Scientists rely primarily on self-report surveys to assess the happiness of individuals, but they have validated these scales with other types of measures. People's levels of subjective well-being are influenced by both internal factors, such as personality and outlook, and external factors, such as the society in which they live. Some of the major determinants of subjective well-being are a person's inborn temperament, the quality of their social relationships, the societies they live in, and their ability to meet their basic needs. To some degree people adapt to conditions so that over time our circumstances may not influence our happiness as much as one might predict they would. Importantly, researchers have also studied the outcomes of subjective well-being and have found that “happy” people are more likely to be healthier and live longer, to have better social relationships, and to be more productive at work. In other words, people high in subjective well-being seem to be healthier and function more effectively compared to people who are chronically stressed, depressed, or angry. Thus, happiness does not just feel good, but it is good for people and for those around them.

learning objectives

- Describe three major forms of happiness and a cause of each of them.
- Be able to list two internal causes of subjective well-being and two external causes of subjective well-being.
- Describe the types of societies that experience the most and least happiness, and why they do.
- Describe the typical course of adaptation to events in terms of the time course of SWB.
- Describe several of the beneficial outcomes of being a happy person.
Introduction

If you had only one gift to give your child, what would it be? Happiness? [Image: mynameisharsha, https://goo.gl/216PFr, CC BY-SA 3.0, goo.gl/eLCn2O]

When people describe what they most want out of life, happiness is almost always on the list, and very frequently it is at the top of the list. When people describe what they want in life for their children, they frequently mention health and wealth, occasionally they mention fame or success—but they almost always mention happiness. People will claim that whether their kids are wealthy and work in some prestigious occupation or not, “I just want my kids to be happy.” Happiness appears to be one of the most important goals for people, if not the most important. But what is it, and how do people get it?

In this module I describe “happiness” or subjective well-being (SWB) as a process—it results from certain internal and external causes, and in turn it influences the way people behave, as well as their physiological states. Thus, high SWB is not just a pleasant outcome but is an important factor in our future success. Because scientists have developed valid ways of measuring “happiness,” they have come in the past decades to know much about its causes and consequences.

Types of Happiness

Philosophers debated the nature of happiness for thousands of years, but scientists have recently discovered that happiness means different things. Three major types of happiness are high life satisfaction, frequent positive feelings, and infrequent negative feelings (Diener, 1984). “Subjective well-being” is the label given by scientists to the various forms of happiness taken together. Although there are additional forms of SWB, the three in the table below...
have been studied extensively. The table also shows that the causes of the different types of happiness can be somewhat different.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three Types of Happiness</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Causes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>• I think my life is great</td>
<td>• A good income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I am satisfied with my job</td>
<td>• Achieving one's goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• High self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Feelings</td>
<td>• Enjoying life</td>
<td>• Supportive friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Loving others</td>
<td>• Interesting work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Introverted personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Negative Feelings</td>
<td>• Few chronic worries</td>
<td>• Low neuroticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rarely sad or angry</td>
<td>• One's goals are in harmony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• A positive outlook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Three Types of Subjective Well-Being

You can see in the table that there are different causes of happiness, and that these causes are not identical for the various types of SWB. Therefore, there is no single key, no magic wand—high SWB is achieved by combining several different important elements (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008). Thus, people who promise to know the key to happiness are oversimplifying.

Some people experience all three elements of happiness—they are very satisfied, enjoy life, and have only a few worries or other unpleasant emotions. Other unfortunate people are missing all three. Most of us also know individuals who have one type of happiness but not another. For example, imagine an elderly person who is completely satisfied with her life—she has done most everything she ever wanted—but is not currently enjoying life that much because of the infirmities of age. There are others who show a different pattern, for example, who really enjoy life but also experience a lot of stress, anger, and worry. And there are those who are having fun, but who are dissatisfied and believe they are wasting their lives. Because there are several components to happiness, each with somewhat different causes, there is no magic single cure-all that creates all forms of SWB. This means that to be happy, individuals must acquire each of the different elements that cause it.

Causes of Subjective Well-Being

There are external influences on people’s happiness—the circumstances in which they live. It is possible for some to be happy living in poverty with ill health, or with a child who has a serious disease, but this is difficult. In contrast, it is easier to be happy if one has supportive family and friends, ample resources to meet one’s needs, and good health. But even here there are exceptions—people who are depressed and unhappy while living in excellent circumstances. Thus, people can be happy or unhappy because of their personalities and the way they think about the world or because of the external circumstances in which they live. People vary in their propensity to happiness—in their personalities and outlook—and this means that knowing their living conditions is not enough to predict happiness.

In the table below are shown internal and external circumstances that influence happiness. There are individual differences in what makes people happy, but the causes in the table are important for most people (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Lyubomirsky, 2013; Myers, 1992).
Table 2: Internal and External Causes of Subjective Well-Being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal Causes (Top-down influences)</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inborn temperament</td>
<td>Studies of monozygotic (identical) twins raised apart indicate that our genes influence our happiness. Even when raised apart, identical twins tend to be similar in their levels of subjective well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality and temperament</td>
<td>Personality is partly inborn and partly learned, and it influences our happiness. For example: Extroverts tend to have more positive feelings. Neurotics tend to have more negative feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlook</td>
<td>People can develop habits of noticing the good things in life and interpreting ambiguous events in positive ways. Other people develop negative mental habits, leading to more unhappiness. One's culture also can influence whether we take an optimistic or pessimistic view of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>Happy individuals tend to bounce back more quickly after losses and negative events.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Causes (Bottom-up influences)</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient material resources</td>
<td>People have enough money to meet their basic needs and fulfill their major goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient social resources</td>
<td>People differ in their need for social contact, but everyone needs some supportive and trusted others: family, a friend, or a partner, or sometimes all three. We need other people to lead a fulfilled life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desirable society</td>
<td>Our own efforts and circumstances influence our happiness, but so does the society in which we live. A society of hunger, war, conflict, and corruption is much less happy than one with material resources, high levels of trust and cooperation, and people who want to help each other.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Societal Influences on Happiness

When people consider their own happiness, they tend to think of their relationships, successes and failures, and other personal factors. But a very important influence on how happy people are is the society in which they live. It is easy to forget how important societies and neighborhoods are to people's happiness or unhappiness. In Figure 10.2.1, I present life satisfaction around the world. You can see that some nations, those with the darkest shading on the map, are high in life satisfaction. Others, the lightest shaded areas, are very low. The grey areas in the map are places we could not collect happiness data—they were just too dangerous or inaccessible.
Can you guess what might make some societies happier than others? Much of North America and Europe have relatively high life satisfaction, and much of Africa is low in life satisfaction. For life satisfaction living in an economically developed nation is helpful because when people must struggle to obtain food, shelter, and other basic necessities, they tend to be dissatisfied with lives. However, other factors, such as trusting and being able to count on others, are also crucial to the happiness within nations. Indeed, for enjoying life our relationships with others seem more important than living in a wealthy society. One factor that predicts unhappiness is conflict—individuals in nations with high internal conflict or conflict with neighboring nations tend to experience low SWB.

Money and Happiness

Will money make you happy? A certain level of income is needed to meet our needs, and very poor people are frequently dissatisfied with life (Diener & Seligman, 2004). However, having more and more money has diminishing returns—higher and higher incomes make less and less difference to happiness. Wealthy nations tend to have higher average life satisfaction than poor nations, but the United States has not experienced a rise in life satisfaction over the past decades, even as income has doubled. The goal is to find a level of income that you can live with and earn. Don’t let your aspirations continue to rise so that you always feel poor, no matter how much money you have. Research shows that materialistic people often tend to be less happy, and putting your emphasis on relationships and other areas of life besides just money is a wise strategy. Money can help life satisfaction, but when too many other valuable things are sacrificed to earn a lot of money—such as relationships or taking a less enjoyable job—the pursuit of money can harm happiness.

There are stories of wealthy people who are unhappy and of janitors who are very happy. For instance, a number of extremely wealthy people in South Korea have committed suicide recently, apparently brought down by stress and other negative feelings. On the other hand, there is the hospital janitor who loved her life because she felt that her work in keeping the hospital clean was so important for the patients and nurses. Some millionaires are dissatisfied because they want to be billionaires. Conversely, some people with ordinary incomes are quite happy because they have learned to live within their means and enjoy the less expensive things in life.

It is important to always keep in mind that high materialism seems to lower life satisfaction—valuing money over other things such as relationships can make us dissatisfied. When people think money is more important than everything else, they seem to have a harder time being happy. And unless they make a great deal of money, they are not on average as happy as others. Perhaps in seeking money they sacrifice other important things too much, such as relationships, spirituality, or following their interests. Or it may be that materialists just can never get enough money to fulfill their dreams—they always want more.

To sum up what makes for a happy life, let’s take the example of Monoj, a rickshaw driver in Calcutta. He enjoys life, despite the hardships, and is reasonably satisfied with life. How could he be relatively happy despite his very low income, sometimes even insufficient to buy enough food for his family? The things that make Monoj happy are his family and friends, his religion, and his work, which he finds meaningful. His low income does lower his life satisfaction to some degree, but he finds his children to be very rewarding, and he gets along well with his neighbors. I also suspect that Monoj’s positive temperament and his enjoyment of social relationships help to some degree to overcome his poverty and earn him a place among the happy. However, Monoj would also likely be even more satisfied with life if he had a
higher income that allowed more food, better housing, and better medical care for his family.

Manoj, a happy rickshaw driver in Calcutta.

Besides the internal and external factors that influence happiness, there are psychological influences as well—such as our aspirations, social comparisons, and adaptation. People’s aspirations are what they want in life, including income, occupation, marriage, and so forth. If people’s aspirations are high, they will often strive harder, but there is also a risk of them falling short of their aspirations and being dissatisfied. The goal is to have challenging aspirations but also to be able to adapt to what actually happens in life.

One’s outlook and resilience are also always very important to happiness. Every person will have disappointments in life, fail at times, and have problems. Thus, happiness comes not to people who never have problems—there are no such individuals—but to people who are able to bounce back from failures and adapt to disappointments. This is why happiness is never caused just by what happens to us but always includes our outlook on life.

Adaptation to Circumstances

The process of adaptation is important in understanding happiness. When good and bad events occur, people often react strongly at first, but then their reactions adapt over time and they return to their former levels of happiness. For instance, many people are euphoric when they first marry, but over time they grow accustomed to the marriage and are no longer ecstatic. The marriage becomes commonplace and they return to their former level of happiness. Few of us think this will happen to us, but the truth is that it usually does. Some people will be a bit happier even years after marriage, but nobody carries that initial “high” through the years.

People also adapt over time to bad events. However, people take a long time to adapt to certain negative events such as unemployment. People become unhappy when they lose their work, but over time they recover to some extent. But even after a number of years, unemployed individuals sometimes have lower life satisfaction, indicating that they have
not completely habituated to the experience. However, there are strong individual differences in adaptation, too. Some people are resilient and bounce back quickly after a bad event, and others are fragile and do not ever fully adapt to the bad event. Do you adapt quickly to bad events and bounce back, or do you continue to dwell on a bad event and let it keep you down?

An example of adaptation to circumstances is shown in Figure 10.2.2, which shows the daily moods of “Harry,” a college student who had Hodgkin’s lymphoma (a form of cancer). As can be seen, over the 6-week period when I studied Harry’s moods, they went up and down. A few times his moods dropped into the negative zone below the horizontal blue line. Most of the time Harry’s moods were in the positive zone above the line. But about halfway through the study Harry was told that his cancer was in remission—effectively cured—and his moods on that day spiked way up. But notice that he quickly adapted—the effects of the good news wore off, and Harry adapted back toward where he was before. So even the very best news one can imagine—recovering from cancer—was not enough to give Harry a permanent “high.” Notice too, however, that Harry’s moods averaged a bit higher after cancer remission. Thus, the typical pattern is a strong response to the event, and then a dampening of this joy over time. However, even in the long run, the person might be a bit happier or unhappier than before.

![Figure 10.2.2: Harry’s Daily Moods](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Psychology/Map%3A_Discover_Psychology_-_A_Brief_Introductory_Text_(Noba)/...)

Outcomes of High Subjective Well-Being

Is the state of happiness truly a good thing? Is happiness simply a feel-good state that leaves us unmotivated and ignorant of the world’s problems? Should people strive to be happy, or are they better off to be grumpy but “realistic”? Some have argued that happiness is actually a bad thing, leaving us superficial and uncaring. Most of the evidence so far suggests that happy people are healthier, more sociable, more productive, and better citizens (Diener & Tay, 2012; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Research shows that the happiest individuals are usually very sociable. The table below summarizes some of the major findings.
Table 3: Benefits of Happiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Outcomes</th>
<th>Description of Some of the Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health and Longevity</td>
<td>Happy and optimistic people have stronger immune systems and fewer cardiovascular diseases. Happy people are more likely to perform healthy behaviors, such as wearing seat belts and adhere to medical regimens. They also seem on average to live longer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Relationships</td>
<td>Happy people are more popular, and their relationships are more stable and rewarding. For example, they get divorced less and are fired from work less. They support others more, and receive more support from others in return.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity</td>
<td>Organisations in which people are positive and satisfied seem to be more successful. Work units with greater subjective well-being are more productive, and companies with happy workers tend to earn more money and develop higher stock prices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>Happy people are more likely to donate their time and money to charitable causes and to help others at work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although it is beneficial generally to be happy, this does not mean that people should be constantly euphoric. In fact, it is appropriate and helpful sometimes to be sad or to worry. At times a bit of worry mixed with positive feelings makes people more creative. Most successful people in the workplace seem to be those who are mostly positive but sometimes a bit negative. Thus, people need not be a superstar in happiness to be a superstar in life. What is not helpful is to be chronically unhappy. The important question is whether people are satisfied with how happy they are. If you feel mostly positive and satisfied, and yet occasionally worry and feel stressed, this is probably fine as long as you feel comfortable with this level of happiness. If you are a person who is chronically unhappy much of the time, changes are needed, and perhaps professional intervention would help as well.

Measuring Happiness

SWB researchers have relied primarily on self-report scales to assess happiness—how people rate their own happiness levels on self-report surveys. People respond to numbered scales to indicate their levels of satisfaction, positive feelings, and lack of negative feelings. You can see where you stand on these scales by going to internal.psychology.illinois....er/scales.html or by filling out the Flourishing Scale below. These measures will give you an idea of what popular scales of happiness are like.
The Flourishing Scale

The self-report scales have proved to be relatively valid (Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, 2012), although people can lie, or fool themselves, or be influenced by their current moods or situational factors. Because the scales are imperfect, well-being scientists also sometimes use biological measures of happiness (e.g., the strength of a person’s immune system, or measuring various brain areas that are associated with greater happiness). Scientists also use reports by family, coworkers, and friends—these people reporting how happy they believe the target person is. Other measures are used as well to help overcome some of the shortcomings of the self-report scales, but most of the field is based on people telling us how happy they are using numbered scales.

There are scales to measure life satisfaction (Pavot & Diener, 2008), positive and negative feelings, and whether a person is psychologically flourishing (Diener et al., 2009). Flourishing has to do with whether a person feels meaning in life, has close relationships, and feels a sense of mastery over important life activities. You can take the well-being scales created in the Diener laboratory, and let others take them too, because they are free and open for use.

Some Ways to Be Happier

Most people are fairly happy, but many of them also wish they could be a bit more satisfied and enjoy life more. Prescriptions about how to achieve more happiness are often oversimplified because happiness has different components and prescriptions need to be aimed at where each individual needs improvement—one size does not fit all.
A person might be strong in one area and deficient in other areas. People with prolonged serious unhappiness might need help from a professional. Thus, recommendations for how to achieve happiness are often appropriate for one person but not for others. With this in mind, I list in Table 4 below some general recommendations for you to be happier (see also Lyubomirsky, 2013):

### Table 4: Self-Examination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Questions for Becoming Happier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are there controllable things in your life that could be changed to make your life more meaningful and happy? What are the avenues to change and why haven't you taken them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you generally see the bright side of things - the part of the glass that is half full, or do you always see the dark side of things? Can you change this outlook on life by working to break the empty-glass view of life? Can you develop more positive mental habits, such as being grateful to others for all of the things they do for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there people around you who make you feel good about yourself and who make your life more enjoyable? How can you reduce the number of &quot;downers&quot; who might surround you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your relationships, seek to make others happy and help others, not just receive support from others. The happiest and healthiest people are often those who help others and the world. Beyond actually helping others, express gratefulness to them and be a person who gives lots of compliments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find work that you will love and be good at, while being realistic about your chances of finding certain jobs. Don't over-weigh the importance of money or status in selecting an occupation. Find a job that interests you and plays to your strengths. If you find a job you love, this can be a big boost to happiness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Outside Resources

- **Web: Barbara Fredrickson's website on positive emotions**
  www.unc.edu/peplab/news.html
- **Web: Ed Diener's website**
  internal.psychology.illinois.edu/~ediener/
- **Web: International Positive Psychology Association**
  http://www.ippanetwork.org/
- **Web: Positive Acorn Positive Psychology website**
  http://positiveacorn.com/
- **Web: Sonja Lyubomirsky's website on happiness**
  http://sonjalyubomirsky.com/
- **Web: University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center website**
  http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/
- **Web: World Database on Happiness**
  www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/
Discussion Questions

1. Which do you think is more important, the “top-down” personality influences on happiness or the “bottom-up” situational circumstances that influence it? In other words, discuss whether internal sources such as personality and outlook or external factors such situations, circumstances, and events are more important to happiness. Can you make an argument that both are very important?

2. Do you know people who are happy in one way but not in others? People who are high in life satisfaction, for example, but low in enjoying life or high in negative feelings? What should they do to increase their happiness across all three types of subjective well-being?

3. Certain sources of happiness have been emphasized in this book, but there are others. Can you think of other important sources of happiness and unhappiness? Do you think religion, for example, is a positive source of happiness for most people? What about age or ethnicity? What about health and physical handicaps? If you were a researcher, what question might you tackle on the influences on happiness?

4. Are you satisfied with your level of happiness? If not, are there things you might do to change it? Would you function better if you were happier?

5. How much happiness is helpful to make a society thrive? Do people need some worry and sadness in life to help us avoid bad things? When is satisfaction a good thing, and when is some dissatisfaction a good thing?

6. How do you think money can help happiness? Interfere with happiness? What level of income will you need to be satisfied?

Vocabulary

Adaptation
The fact that after people first react to good or bad events, sometimes in a strong way, their feelings and reactions tend to dampen down over time and they return toward their original level of subjective well-being.

“Bottom-up” or external causes of happiness
Situational factors outside the person that influence his or her subjective well-being, such as good and bad events and circumstances such as health and wealth.

Happiness
The popular word for subjective well-being. Scientists sometimes avoid using this term because it can refer to different things, such as feeling good, being satisfied, or even the causes of high subjective well-being.

Life satisfaction
A person reflects on their life and judges to what degree it is going well, by whatever standards that person thinks are most important for a good life.

Negative feelings
Undesirable and unpleasant feelings that people tend to avoid if they can. Moods and emotions such as depression, anger, and worry are examples.

Positive feelings
Desirable and pleasant feelings. Moods and emotions such as enjoyment and love are examples.

Subjective well-being
The name that scientists give to happiness—thinking and feeling that our lives are going very well.
Subjective well-being scales
Self-report surveys or questionnaires in which participants indicate their levels of subjective well-being, by responding to items with a number that indicates how well off they feel.

“Top-down” or internal causes of happiness
The person’s outlook and habitual response tendencies that influence their happiness—for example, their temperament or optimistic outlook on life.

References