

# Happiness Spreads



We know that happy people are healthier, that happiness spreads, and that happy people make healthier choices that produce a healthier, happier society. We know this because it is quantifiable and testable. The data also show why a choice that is compassionate and life-affirming is so powerfully transformative.

Share  
your  
Happy

# Like a Healthful Virus—

# Become a Carrier

BY STEPHAN A. SCHWARTZ



**P**ART OF THE REWARD of becoming an agent of compassionate, life-affirming change, whether or not you get public acknowledgment, is the knowledge you are doing measurable good. There is nothing theoretical about your gift as an agent of change. It may usually be anonymous, but the contribution is quite real.

Research shows that the spread of happiness can be objectively measured and quantified. This work also begins to explain exactly what one needs to do to cause happiness to spread and what the social outcomes are of doing so. The steps that have to be taken are completely...based in individual choice.

There actually is a database of international research on happiness: the *World Happiness Report*. Published by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), it is edited by Professor John F. Helliwell of the University of British Columbia and the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research; Lord Richard Layard, Director of the Well-Being Programme at LSE's Centre for Economic Performance; and Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, director of the SDSN, and special advisor to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The first *World Happiness Report* was published in April 2012. Another came out in 2013. The latest was released April 23, 2015. And with each the researchers have increased the depth and detail of their analysis.

To create the survey, teams of researchers review country by country survey data on well-being, including a ranking of national average life evaluations, based on Gallup World Poll data. But they place particular emphasis on each individual's personal subjective evaluation of a series of questions



rising from how much freedom a person feels they have to choose their own path, to how they donated to charity. They ask: "Taking all things together, would you say you are: very happy, quite happy, not very happy, or not at all happy?" They seek this subjective data because they "attach fundamental importance to the evaluations that people make of their own lives. This gives them a reality and power that no expert-constructed index could ever have."

The "Happiness" statistic is obtained using a formula: the percentage of people who rated themselves as either "quite happy" or "very happy" minus the percentage of people who rated themselves as either "not very happy" or "not at all happy."

The research not only measures happiness, it also studies what makes people happy. As the Harvard Medical School's *HEALTHbeat* explained it, "People tend to be poor judges of what will make them happy. While most people say they want to be happy, they often believe in myths or carry assumptions that actually get in the way."

Factors that, it may surprise you, *don't* produce happiness are money and material things (your mother was right), youth and physical attractiveness, and children.

The Harvard group explains:

The question of whether money can buy happiness has, for more than 30 years, been addressed by the "Easterlin paradox," a concept developed by economist Richard Easterlin. His research showed that people

in poor countries are happier when their basic necessities are covered. But any money beyond that doesn't make much difference in happiness level.

The Harvard team does, however, list five things that contribute to happiness:

(1) when you do something, commit yourself fully and "lose awareness of time";

(2) whatever you do, give yourself over to it so that "you aren't thinking of yourself";

(3) as you are doing whatever it is you do that makes you feel happy, do it in a manner so you "aren't interrupted by extraneous thoughts while you are doing it";

(4) be proactive in your life, not passive; and

(5) although the work may be hard and demanding, work at it effortlessly because you believe in what you are doing.

If you can do that, you are "in the flow," and that will lead to happiness. At this point it probably isn't a surprise that compassionate, life-affirming choices create happiness and that happiness is contagious.

The *World Happiness Report 2015* puts it this way:

Three-quarters of the differences among countries, and also among regions, are accounted for by differences in six key variables, each of which digs into a different aspect of life. The six factors are GDP per capita, healthy years of life expectancy, social support (as measured by having someone to count on in times of trouble), trust (as measured by a perceived absence of corruption in government and business), perceived freedom to make life decisions, and generosity (as measured by recent donations, adjusted for differences in income). Differences in social support, incomes, and healthy life expectancy are the three most important factors.

Nicholas A. Christakis, a medical sociologist at Harvard University who has been a leader in this research area, says:

One determinant of our own happiness that has not received the attention it deserves is the happiness of others. Yet we know that emotions can spread over short periods of time from person to person, in a process known as “emotional contagion.” If someone smiles at you, it is instinctive to smile back. If your partner or roommate is depressed, it is common for you to become depressed.

Although we may believe that our emotional state is the result of our choices and actions and experiences, researchers have found it also depends on the choices and actions and experiences of other people, including people to whom you are not directly connected. Christakis and his research partner James Fowler say it explicitly: “Happiness is contagious.”

In their study, 4,739 people were followed over two decades. Like all good longitudinal studies, those years mellowed the research data like a good wine, giving it gravitas. Christakis and his colleagues discovered that if you are happy or become happy, you increase the probability that someone you know will be happy just through a casual interaction with you.

Even more surprising, the Harvard researchers found that this capacity to

create happiness could extend to the third degree of separation. And it can even be translated into real-world economics. “Our work shows that whether a friend’s friend is happy has more influence than a \$5,000 raise,” says Christakis.

Christakis and Fowler report:

Clusters of happy and unhappy people are visible in the network, and the relationship between people’s happiness extends up to three degrees of separation (for example, to the friends of one’s friends’ friends). People who are surrounded by many happy people and those who are central in the network are more likely to become happy in the future. Longitudinal statistical models suggest that clusters of happiness result from the spread of happiness and not just a tendency for people to associate with similar individuals. A friend who lives within a mile (about 1.6 km) and who becomes happy increases the probability that a person is happy by 25 percent (95 percent confidence interval 1 percent to 57 percent). Similar effects are seen in co-resident spouses (8 percent, 0.2 percent to 16 percent), siblings who live within a mile (14 percent, 1 percent to 28 percent), and next-door neighbors (34 percent, 7 percent to 70 percent). Effects are not seen between coworkers. The effect decays with time and with geographical separation.

This is why compassionate, life-affirming choices cumulatively create wellness and why wellness and happiness are linked, both being collective phenomena. And it’s why agents of change, like Douglas Dean, the unknown Nobel Peace Prize recipient, could quite sincerely report feeling a sense of reward even though he received little public acknowledgment of what he had

done. ... The individuals in the group must accept that their goals may not be reached in their lifetimes and be okay with this; and the...individuals in the group must accept that they may not get either credit or acknowledgment for what they have done and be authentically okay with this.


Psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, commenting on Christakis and Fowler’s work, made as clear a statement of the nonlocal linkage process in the social context as any I could make—although he may not see it that way—saying, “Laughter and singing and smiling tune the group emotionally. They get them on the same wavelength so they can work together more effectively as a group.”

I would only add that ritual ceremony using music or dance is the technique of choice the world over for creating nonlocal, linked, shared intention. It matters that we understand, far better than we do, how these linkages occur and how to neutralize or enhance them.

And finally, we are beginning to see actual research showing that making choices that create happiness makes you healthier. One aspect of the individual mind-body linkage is that “a happy heart just might be a healthier one.”

Between 2002 and 2004, Andrew Steptoe, a physician at University College London, led a team that studied whether “positive affective states are associated with favorable health outcomes.” A population of 2,873 healthy British men and women between the ages of fifty and seventy-four participated.

During the course of a single day, six samples of saliva were collected from each



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of these individuals and analyzed for their cortisol levels and the inflammatory markers C-reactive protein and interleukin-6. After each collection, the men and women were asked to record their emotional state at that time—the extent to which they felt “happy, excited, or content.” Cortisol is a “stress” hormone. When it is chronically over the normal level it contributes to the degradation of immune function, high blood pressure, and the abdominal obesity that is particularly worrisome as a predictor of health problems, from cardiovascular disease to cancer.

The Steptoe team concluded:

Salivary cortisol averaged over the day was inversely associated with positive affect after controlling for age, gender, income, ethnicity, body mass index, waist/hip ratio, smoking, paid employment, time of waking in the morning, and depression. There was no association with cortisol responses to waking. . . . These results confirm findings from smaller studies relating cortisol with positive affect while suggesting that in women, positive affect is associated with reduced levels of inflammatory markers.

Reporter Amy Norton of *Reuters* asked Steptoe what his findings suggested. He replied, “These findings suggest another biological process linking happiness with reduced biological vulnerability.”

When he was asked, “But if happier people are healthier people, the more difficult question remains: How do you become happier?” he answered, “What we do know is that people’s mood states are not just a matter of heredity, but depend on our social relationships and fulfillment in life. We need to help people to recognize the things that make them feel good and truly satisfied with their lives, so that they spend more time doing these things.”

In Buddhism, there are four “immeasurables” that must be understood and integrated into one’s being for true happiness and spiritual growth to occur: love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. To a sincere Buddhist, the definition of *love* is “wanting others to be happy.”

In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus makes essentially the same statement.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as



## In 2015, of 158 nations examined, the top 10 and bottom 10 nations are:

### Happiest

- 1 Switzerland
- 2 Iceland
- 3 Denmark
- 4 Norway
- 5 Canada
- 6 Finland
- 7 Netherlands
- 8 Sweden
- 9 New Zealand
- 10 Australia

### Least Happy

- 149 Chad
- 150 Guinea
- 151 Ivory Coast
- 152 Burkina Faso
- 153 Afghanistan
- 154 Rwanda
- 155 Benin
- 156 Syria
- 157 Burundi
- 158 Togo

*World Happiness Report 2015*



yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.

These sentiments are echoed in most of the other great spiritual traditions. The ethno-historical record is very clear about linking happiness, well-being, and love; and all these paths to self-awareness—enlightenment, if you will—acknowledge both the local and nonlocal aspects of these processes.

The founding fathers understood the importance of happiness and wrote it into the Declaration of Independence, “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” by which they did not mean frivolity and self-indulgence. They meant much more what Franklin meant when he used the term *virtuous citizen*. And the founders were right to place such importance on happiness. Perhaps it is a measure of how far we have strayed from what they had hoped, for in the United States we are not very happy.

The bottom ranks are not surprising. They are made up of failed or failing states riven by war and corruption, hunger, and disease.

But why are certain countries at the top of the list, year after year? That seems to me the important question. It certainly isn’t just wealth or power. Neither the United States (15th), nor the U.K. (21st), comes out as very happy, although very rich and militarily powerful. The really

important insight to be derived from this survey, in my view, is that the Scandinavian countries are overwhelming at the pinnacle of the happiness list, year after year. It is a distinction that should give one pause to ask: What do these countries have in common? The answer is that of the options available these countries as societies most consistently choose the one that is the most compassionate and life-affirming, the one with wellness as a first priority. And they score at the top of the list year after year as a result. People who live there feel happy. They can live without fear, give their children a decent start, provide them with a good education, and live without fear about health care or its cost. They know that they will be okay in their old age. Imagine living like that. 🌍

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