

The pursuit of happiness

March 20 2015, by Dr Marc Wilson



You probably already have it in your diaries, but just in case you don't, 20 March is the International Day of Happiness. You know it's real because there's an official website and everything (www.dayofhappiness.net/about/).

Of course, there are numerous dodgy identity theft operations that have websites too, so it might pay to delve a little deeper. After all, if 'International Day of Happiness' doesn't sound suspicious, what does?

Happiness has become something of an 'in' thing in recent years. In

1972, the Bhutanese suggested that nations should focus on 'Gross National Happiness' and not just the usual Gross National Product. Even British conservatives the Tories jumped on the bandwagon in 2011, proposing to measure the impact of political policy on the happiness of Britons. The moment governments get involved you know there's something funny going on.

But this is just the latest reflection of psychological researchers' (some at least) turning away from the traditional territory of understanding misery and worry, to the warmer and huggier intellectual climes of '[positive psychology](#)'.

The term may originally derive from the humanist movement, but positive psychology as an intellectual and applied pursuit is most closely identified with Professor Martin Seligman, Director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

Though Professor Seligman has written prolifically on the subject, his inspiration for positive psychology came, of all places, from looking at the behaviour of dogs. Specifically, he noted that some dogs in his research studies simply refused to give up: they did not become "learned helpless" when placed in a situation in which nothing they did changed what happened. Similarly, he says, some people refuse to become helpless and depressed even in situations of extreme adversity. If only we could work out why that is and bottle it.

Right now, we know quite a bit about what that something is. Or rather the set of something's that make it up. The International Day of Happiness website identifies 10 'keys' to happier living and though these might be accompanied by rather-too-chirpy icons, every single one has the weight of research by it.

Let's take number two 'connect with people'. A hot-off-the-press study

by Victoria University researchers Melissa Grouden and Dr Paul Jose looks at the relationship between happiness and the different sources of meaning that people can find in their lives. Unsurprisingly, people who reported finding meaning specifically in their family relationships—but also interpersonal relationships in general—reported more happiness than did people who sought meaning in pursuit of a particular standard of living or leisure activities.

That's not to say that work or money aren't important in the pursuit of happiness. Money is important but, as with many things, it's complicated. Thousands of people participating in a 2012 study led by Auckland University PhD student Nikhil Sengupta and with a large team of collaborators showed that the more you earn the happier you are.

But the money-to-happiness gain is greater the poorer your pay packet. That's to say, people in the bottom quartile of the income pile report more happiness per \$1,000 earned than their affluent counterparts in the \$200k plus bracket. The increase in happiness also mirrors a decrease in reported life stress and difficulty meeting everyday needs. Money doesn't make you happy for its own sake, but it does take away some of the worries that not having money make a staple.

Take a look at the website and see what you might apply to your life. Until the Government follows a happiness index with a happiness tax, or a [happiness](#) phishing scam, some things in life will remain free.

More information: *The following commentary is provided by Dr Marc Wilson, an associate professor of psychology at Victoria University of Wellington.*

Provided by Victoria University of Wellington

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