

What makes us truly happy and healthy?

April 3 2018

What does it mean to be well? Not just "not ill," but really thriving?

Researchers at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and at Aetna are embarking on a collaborative, multi-year study of well-being intended both to advance scientific understanding of what it means to be truly healthy across numerous dimensions and to translate that knowledge into practice.

The principal investigators at Harvard Chan School plan to develop a comprehensive assessment that considers physical health, emotional health, purpose, character strengths, social connectedness, and financial security. Implementing this assessment in a large cohort of participants across a multi-year timeline could, they say, transform the field of well-being research. It will also inform how institutions and companies can best help their employees to thrive.

"The vast majority of the existing data on happiness is cross-sectional, with all data collected at one time, making it difficult to draw conclusions about causality," explained Tyler J. VanderWeele, PhD, the John L. Loeb and Frances Lehman Loeb Professor of Epidemiology at Harvard Chan School and director of Harvard's Program on Integrative Knowledge and Human Flourishing.

That's about to change. Through the participation of thousands of Aetna employees and members and the sharing of de-identified data with Harvard, the study is expected over time to generate a unique and valuable trove of longitudinal data.

"Within a couple of years it will be one of the most important well-being data resources in the world," said Eileen McNeely, PhD, founder and co-director of the Harvard Chan School's Sustainability and Health Initiative for NetPositive Enterprise (SHINE) and instructor in the Department of Environmental Health. "Our collaboration with Aetna will powerfully advance our understanding of, and capacity for, workplace promotion of employee well-being."

The well-being assessment will be closely related to a conceptualization of flourishing put forward in a 2017 paper by Prof. VanderWeele in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. In that review, VanderWeele pressed the need for further study into the causes, outcomes, and interventions that affect well-being. Such new knowledge, he asserted, would not only improve individuals' health; it could compound to produce a better functioning society.

"We're excited by the unprecedented opportunities to measure and improve the well-being of those we serve, in line with our mission of building a healthier world," said Kay Mooney, Vice President of Employee Benefits & Well-being at Aetna. "We're changing the conversation around [health](#) to focus on holistic well-being, and this groundbreaking collaboration with the Harvard Chan School will help accelerate this strategy."

The agreement with Aetna, spearheaded by Harvard's Office of Technology Development, provides significant support to Harvard Chan School to enable the study, in a field of research where smaller commitments have been more typical.

"Until now, relatively little funding has been available for well-being research," VanderWeele said. "The ambitious and well-funded collaboration with Aetna will propel forward our understanding of the determinants of well-being."

More information: Tyler J. VanderWeele. On the promotion of human flourishing, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2017). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1702996114](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1702996114)

Provided by Harvard University

Citation: What makes us truly happy and healthy? (2018, April 3) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-04-happy-healthy.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.