

Researchers aim to uncover the secrets to happiness with new app

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Anyone worldwide can now help Yale researchers uncover the secrets to happiness from their smartphones, without ever stepping foot into a lab.

[The Happiness Project](#) is a new mobile app developed by the lab of Robb Rutledge, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychology, in which [users](#) can play games to test their decision making and learn about the science of [happiness](#).

Happiness is not usually studied with mathematical equations, Rutledge said. The goal of The Happiness Project is to advance research to understand what determines how someone feels from minute to minute.

"We think that how people feel minute to minute is really important for understanding their mental health," Rutledge said. "Very little is known about what determines this and it's such an important part of our everyday experience. My lab is trying to figure out the mathematical equations for what determines happiness."

The app's development was made more complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lab members dispersed to locations all around the world, and the Rutledge Lab relocated from University College London to Yale over the summer.

The team designed the tasks themselves, paying extra attention to creating engaging games that people find fun and would want to play.

"We're taking a fairly dry lab experiment where we control everything and turning it into something a bit more fun," Rutledge said.

"At the same time, we're not trying to make a [video game](#)," Rutledge explained. "We don't want a game that a few people love and most people don't really want to play. What we really need is something that if you had 100 people, 99 of them would say, 'I'll play these games for 10 minutes.'" We're trying to build something for everyone because that's what we need if we want to understand how happiness works."

When a user downloads the game, they'll learn about the team's mission to understand happiness and figure out the equations for happiness. Users are presented with a variety of [game](#) options to choose from. Users might be asked to make risky decisions or make some kind of effort to earn more points. As a user completes games, they unlock more games.

"Every time people play the games and answer the surveys, they're helping our research," Rutledge said.

"The games are looking at different aspects of human behavior and emotions. The data from their play is sent to our servers anonymously, and then we look at it to see what that person does and what makes them feel different things."

For Rutledge, the pandemic underlined the importance of better understanding mental health. And while it's been difficult for research in a more traditional laboratory setting to continue with physical distancing recommendations in place, The Happiness Project app allows people to participate in research from the safety and comfort of their own home, creating a large pool of diverse participants of all ages and backgrounds.

"We want to provide an option for people who want to contribute to mental health research. They can participate at home in just a few minutes, and ultimately it will help us understand happiness better," Rutledge said.

More information: For more information about The Happiness Project app, visit the website. The app is available for download in the Apple App Store and on Google Play.

Provided by Yale University

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