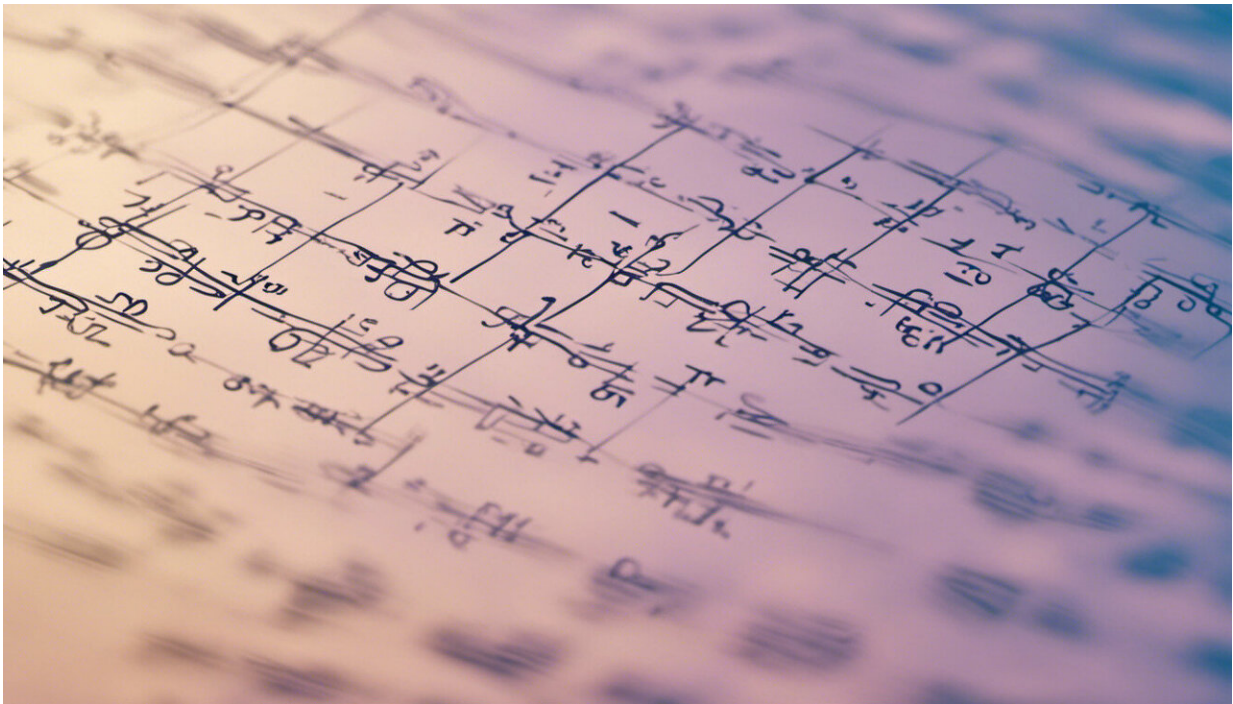


Is there a happiness equation? Here's how we're trying to find out

May 20 2021, by Robb Rutledge



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Most people would like to be happier. But it isn't always easy to know how to achieve that goal. Is there an equation for happiness? Many formulas have been suggested. Get enough sleep. Exercise. Meditate. Help others. Spend time with friends and family. On average, all of these things [are linked to happiness](#). But they don't work for everyone.

Happiness is really complicated. It can change quickly and it's different for everyone in ways that scientists don't understand. In our ongoing research, we are trying to capture this subjectivity and get a more complete view of what happiness is.

Happiness surveys can only tell us so much, summarizing with a few questions how people feel in general. We also don't know what they were doing a few minutes earlier, even though we know it might be important for understanding their responses.

So we turned to smartphones, which [billions of people are using almost constantly](#). People often believe that smartphones are bad for happiness, but many of us enjoy popular games including Candy Crush Saga, Fortnite and Among Us on our devices. How we feel can change quickly while we play games, providing an opportunity to gather detailed information about the complexities of happiness.

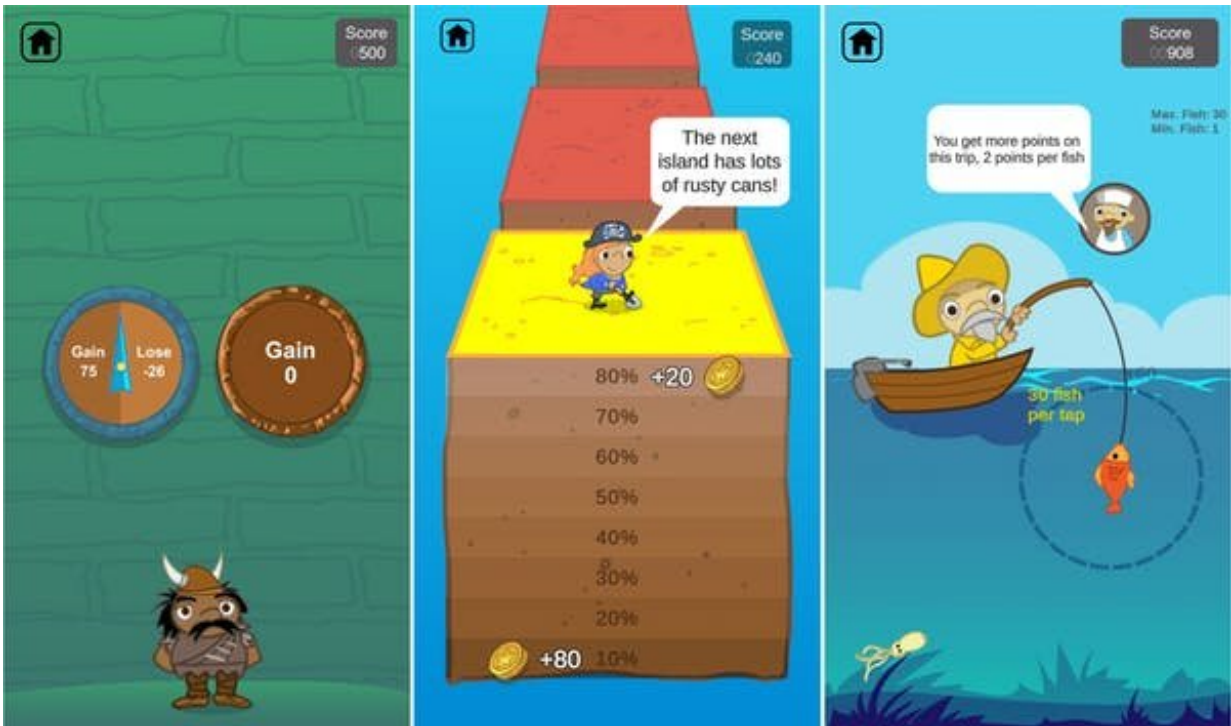
We recently launched a [smartphone app, The Happiness Project](#), which anyone can download for free. In less than five minutes, you can play one of four games to learn about and contribute to happiness research. So far, thousands of people have played, answering the question "How happy are you right now?" over one million times.

Expectations

So far, we've managed to work out that expectations matter a lot. In 18,420 people [playing a simple risky decision game](#) on their phones, we showed that happiness depended not on how well they were doing, but whether they were doing better than expected.

Our research shows how high expectations can be a problem. Clearly, it's not a good idea to tell a friend that they will love the gift you are about to give them. Lowering expectations at the last moment increases the

probability of a positive surprise.



Smartphone games can reveal how happiness works. Credit: Robb Rutledge, Author provided

The problem with using this trick to hack your own happiness is that expectations about future events also influence happiness. If you make plans to catch up with a friend after work, you may be unhappy if they suddenly cancel. But expecting your friend to cancel won't make you happy—you might be a little happier the whole day if you look forward to seeing them, even if there is some risk that things don't work out.

Another reason that it's hard to hack your happiness is that expectations are really important for decision making. If you always expect the worst,

it's difficult to make good choices. When things go better than expected, that's information your brain can use to revise your expectations upward so you make even better choices in the future. Realistic expectations are generally best. In fact, we discovered that happiness is closely linked to learning about our environment.

There are times, such as on holiday, when lowering your expectations might not be a bad idea. After all, your expectations might be a bit unrealistic if you chose your holiday destination based on a friend's rave review. You may enjoy yourself more if you don't expect everything to go perfectly.

Tool versus goal

Another lesson from our smartphone games is that most events [don't affect happiness for long](#). This is referred to as the "hedonic treadmill." You might think that there is something wrong with you if you don't feel lasting happiness about a promotion, but time-limited joy is an adaptation that helps your brain adjust to your circumstances so you are ready to make your next move. In uncertain environments, including both games and real life, what happened minutes ago is often irrelevant to the task at hand.

The ephemeral nature of happiness means we might be better off thinking about happiness in a different way. Happiness is a tool, not a goal in itself. It can help us better understand what we care about, what we value. It can tell us whether things are going surprisingly well, which could motivate us to keep going at key moments. When our happiness drops, it may be a sign that we should try something new.

The pandemic [has had a big impact](#) on mental health. It's never been more important to understand happiness and well-being. We don't know why some people stay upset for longer than others. We don't know why

uncertainty is really stressful for some people but not others.

Our games aim to find out. Each of the four games focus on something that scientists know is important for happiness: uncertainty, thinking about the future, learning, and effort. In one [game](#), you can use information about the future to make different decisions depending on whether things look good or bad. In another, you are a fisherman deciding how much effort to spend to increase your catch. By asking about happiness as you play these games, we can figure out the factors that matter for everyone.

The thousands of people playing the games in [The Happiness Project](#) will help scientists write the equations for happiness. There will never be one formula for happiness, but science can help explain the different factors that matter for [happiness](#) in each and every one of us.

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