

# **EFFECT OF SELF-MONITORING OF HAPPINESS ON HAPPINESS**

## Using the web-based 'Happiness Indicator'

*Expert paper prepared in December 2020 for Saratov National Research State University, Russia Faculty of Psychology, Regional Center for Applied Psychology*

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Happiness Indicator is a self-help website as well as a scientific follow-up study. Participants record periodically how happy they feel and how they spend their time. Every year they report on major changes in their life.

#### *Benefits for participants*

The website offers its users instant feedback on their happiness. Participants can:

- Accurately assess how happy they feel most of the time
- Compare their happiness with similar people
- Track their happiness over time
- Chart how much they enjoy daily activities using the happiness diary
- Compare with similar people who use their time differently

#### *Scientific uses*

The website provides longitudinal data on a lot of people at low cost. The instrument can be used to assess:

- How people really spend their time
- How happy particular people feel during particular activities
- How interventions such as of trainings or organizational change work out on happiness, both in the short-run and on the long-term
- How life-choices, such as early retirement, work-out on the happiness of particular kinds of people.
- The Happiness Diary allows within-person comparisons and as such provides a better view on causal effects than current cross-sectional studies.

# 1 TOOLS FOR WORKING ON YOUR HAPPINESS

The Happiness Indicator ([www.happinessindicator.com](http://www.happinessindicator.com)) is an online device designed to make people more aware of their own happiness. The theory behind the website is that a keener awareness of one's own happiness helps one find an optimal lifestyle and consequently promotes happiness among users of the website. The website provides three 'tools for working on your happiness'

## 1.1 Happiness Comparer

The participants' first task is to answer two questions: first, how happy they feel that day, and next, how happy they have felt over the past month. The answers are rated using a visual faces scale, ranging from zero (very unhappy) to 10 (very happy); see Figure 1. In asking the participants first how they feel that day, we focus the participants' attention on the affective component of happiness and minimize the influence of their current mood on their answer to the second question on their happiness over the past month. After answering the two questions, the participants receive instant feedback in the following two ways: comparison with others and comparison over time.

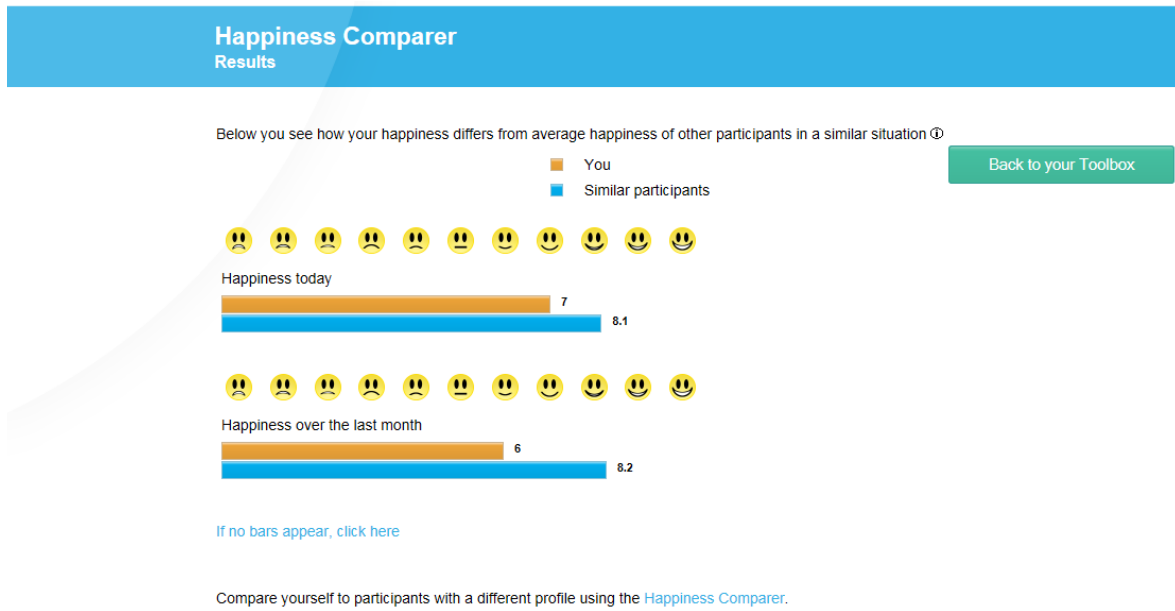
**Figure 1:** Questions about how happy the participant feels

The screenshot shows the 'Happiness Comparer' interface. At the top, there is a blue header with the title 'Happiness Comparer'. Below the header, there is a paragraph of instructions: 'First rate how happy you feel today. Next estimate how happy you have felt in the last month. After having answered these questions, you can compare with the average score of participants in a similar situation. You can also compare with participants in a different situation. Click the button 'compare with others' If you have answered these questions twice or more, you can also compare with your earlier scores and with the average score of similar participants at these times. Click the button 'Compare with earlier''. Below the instructions, there is a section titled 'Rate your happiness on these 0 to 10 scales:'. This section contains two rows of a 0-10 faces scale. The first row is for 'How happy do you feel today?' and the second row is for 'How happy did you feel over the last month?'. The scale consists of 11 faces, numbered 0 to 10, ranging from a very sad face to a very happy face. In the 'How happy did you feel over the last month?' row, the face at index 6 is selected. Below the scales, there are three buttons: 'Back to your Toolbox', 'Compare with others', and 'Compare with previous'.

### *Comparison with others*

The program compares the participant's answers to the two questions with the average score of all participants and with the average score of participants with the same profile; e.g. those in same age category, with same gender and with a similar level of education. A screenshot of this feedback is shown in Figure 2. This feedback is meant to provide the participants with insight about the likelihood of becoming happier than they are at present.

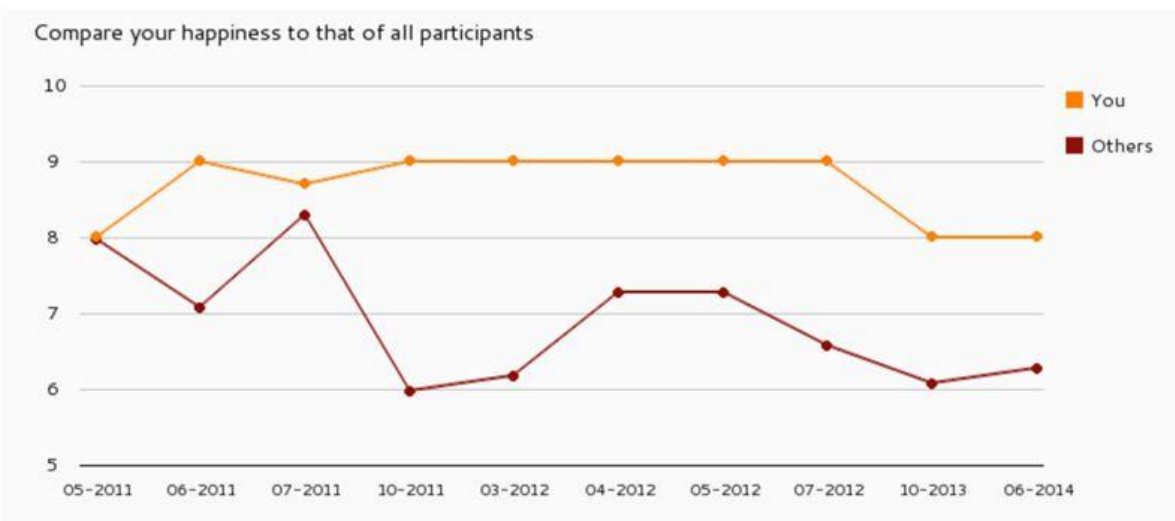
**Figure 2:** the participant's happiness compared with the happiness of other participants



## 1.2 Happiness History

If the participant has previously used the Happiness Comparer, the program generates a trend line (see Figure 3). This trend line shows participants whether they have made progress in their happiness and whether they have fared better or worse than similar participants have.

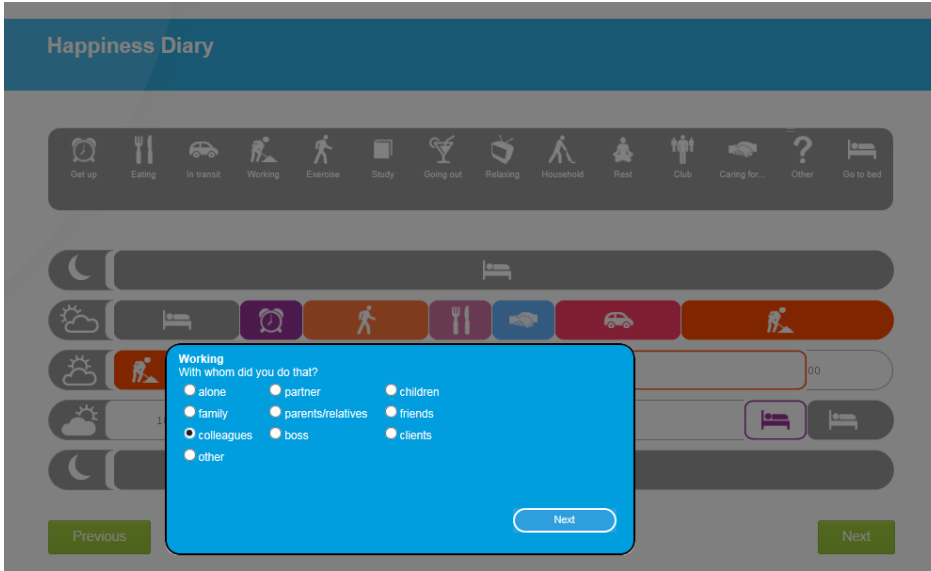
**Figure 3:** Example of a comparison over time



### 1.3 Happiness Diary

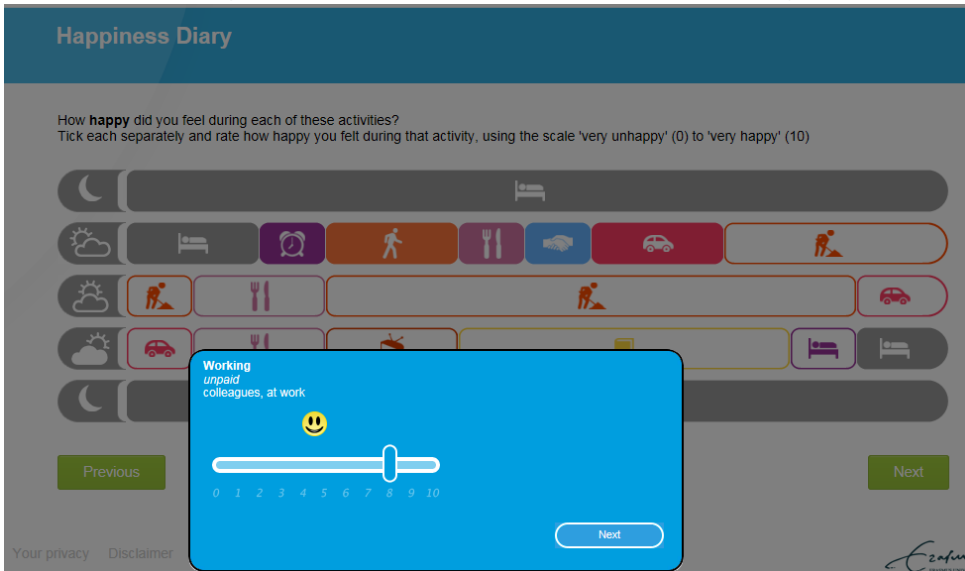
Participants are first asked to record everything they did the day before, such as eating, completing household tasks, working and resting. They also state how much time they spent on each activity, where the activity was carried out (e.g., at home or at work) and with whom (e.g., alone, with a partner, with family, or with colleagues). See Figure 4..

**Figure 4:** Example of a diary



Happiness during the activities is indicated on a scale ranging from 0 (very unhappy) to 10 (very happy), identical to that shown in Figure 1. Participants can use this scale to indicate how happy they felt during each activity. See Figure 5

**Figure 5:** Rating of how happy the participant felt during each activity

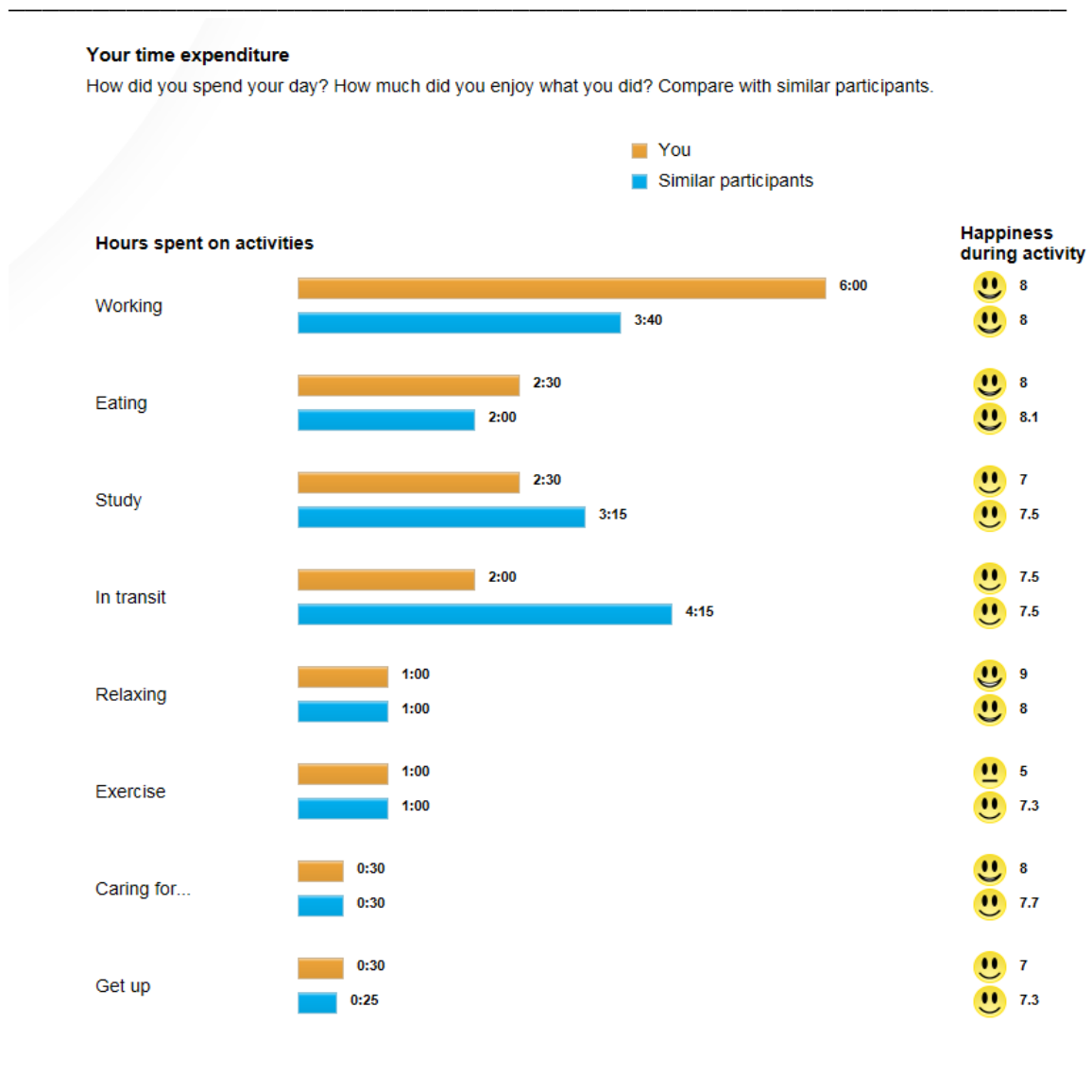


This diary provides participants with instant feedback in the following ways: how much time they have spent on their daily activities, how well they have felt during these activities and to what degree their time use and enjoyment had differed from other users of the Happiness Indicator.

*Feelings during each activity*

The program generates an at-a-glance overview that shows the activities during which the participant felt the least and most comfortable, see Figure 6. This overview can help participants allocate their time optimally.

**Figure 6:** Example of a comparison of an individual's happiness profile with that of similar people



### *Comparison with other participants*

This part of the program also provides instant comparison with other participants with similar life situations, see again Figure 6. This comparison can help when the participant is making choices, for example when deciding whether to look for a new job. The fact that a person does not feel great at work is in itself not a reason to change jobs, because most people feel one point less happy at work than at home. However, if your difference between work-happiness and home-happiness is greater than that of similar participants, it is most likely worthwhile to try to improve your work conditions or look for a job that fits you better

## **2 EFFECT STUDY**

### **2.1 Participants**

Participants were recruited using various channels, including different types of customer communications from the health insurer company that financed the development of this tool. Since its start, the Happiness Indicator has attracted 40,495 participants all of whom completed a profile and the Happiness Comparer at least one time. Of these 40,495 participants, 9,091 (22%) subsequently filled out the Happiness Diary at least once.

The average happiness of these visitors at the first time of participation was a 6.32 on scale 0-10, which is well below average life satisfaction scores reported in Dutch surveys; 9 out of 20 people gave his or her monthly happiness a 6 or lower. This indicates that the Happiness Indicator particularly attracts individuals who are less happy than the average citizen is and probably for this reason they would like to work on their happiness.

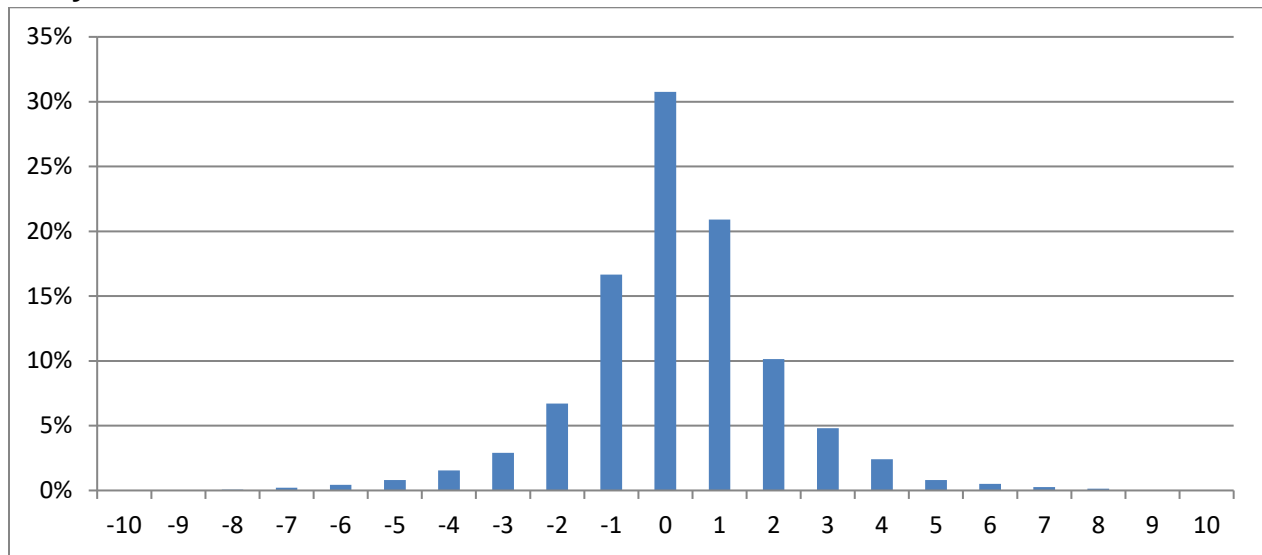
Most of these individuals (86%) only participated once; therefore, we could not ascertain whether these users became happier because of using the Happiness Indicator. Consequently, we limited this study to examining the change in happiness for people who used the Happiness Indicator twice or more. A total of 5,411 participants met this criterion. Those individuals used the Happiness Indicator for an average of 233 days, measured as the difference between the first day and last day of use, where there were on average 3 months between participations.

### **2.2 Results**

An overview of the observed changes in last-month happiness following use of the Happiness Diary is presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7

### Change in Happiness Last Month between First and Last Use of the Happiness Diary



#### 2.2.1 *Happiness is changeable*

First, we examined whether individual happiness fluctuates over time. This was found to be the case. From Figure 7, it can be seen that among the users of the Happiness Diary, only some 30% remained evenly happy and some 20% experience changes of 2 points or more. The average monthly change was 0.09 point on scale 0-10, that is, about 1% of the possible range.

At first sight, this small change supports the ‘set point’ theory, which holds that happiness is a stable ‘trait’ (e.g. Cummins 2010). Yet cumulated over time such minor monthly changes can result in substantial alterations of happiness, such as these demonstrated in long-term follow-up studies, see for example Headey (2008).

#### 2.2.2 *Happiness increases following repeated use of the Happiness Indicator*

We considered whether individuals experienced an increase in monthly happiness following the use of the Happiness Indicator. As we can see from Figure 7, there was more change to the positive than to the negative.

##### *No significant increase after use of the Happiness Comparer*

We examined whether there was an association between repeated use of the Happiness Comparer and an increase in monthly happiness over time. We observed a positive but non-significant relationship.

##### *Significant increase following use of the Happiness Diary*

We found a significant positive relationship between Happiness Diary use and

happiness. Using the Happiness Diary ten times is associated with a monthly happiness of approximately 0.14 points on a 0 to 10 scale when all other factors are held constant. However, less than 4% of the respondents completed the diary 10 times or more, and the average use was only 2.4 times.

*Larger increase among those who initially were the least happy*

Further analysis of the use of the Happiness Diary indicated that the relationship between usage and happiness increase was larger for the participants who were less happy at the first use of the Happiness Indicator.

*No differences in happiness increases across participant types*

We examined whether the increase in monthly happiness with repeated participation differed according to participant's background (with respect to differences in age, gender, income level, and education level). We found no evidence of heterogeneity across groups in the change in happiness following use of the Happiness Comparer or Happiness Diary.

### **2.2.3 Size of the effect**

The observed increase in happiness that resulted from using the Happiness Diary ranged between 0.1 and 0.3 points on a scale of 0-10, i.e., approximately 1,5%. Is this a lot or a little?

One way to answer this question is to calculate how much additional income is required to achieve the same happiness benefit. The use of a new method developed by Fujiwara, Kundra & Dolan (2014) indicates that a 1% increase in happiness equals an increase in annual income of € 297, so the 1,5% gain in happiness due to repeated use of the Happiness Diary is equivalent to an annual income increase of about € 450.

Another way of estimating the effects size is to compare with changes in happiness following real-life changes. To that end, we scanned the research literature for observed changes in happiness following major life events over periods of about a year. The best comparable findings are presented in Figure 8. The gain in happiness following use of the Happiness Diary appears to be stronger than the, surprisingly small, effect of winning a lottery and about a third of having one's first child. The size of the positive change after using the Happiness Diary appears to be similar to the size of the negative effect of getting injured in a traffic accident. In this comparative view, the advantage of using the Happiness Diary is substantial.

Although the effect of using the Happiness Indicator can still be considered modest, it is a relatively easy road to take in the pursuit of happiness.

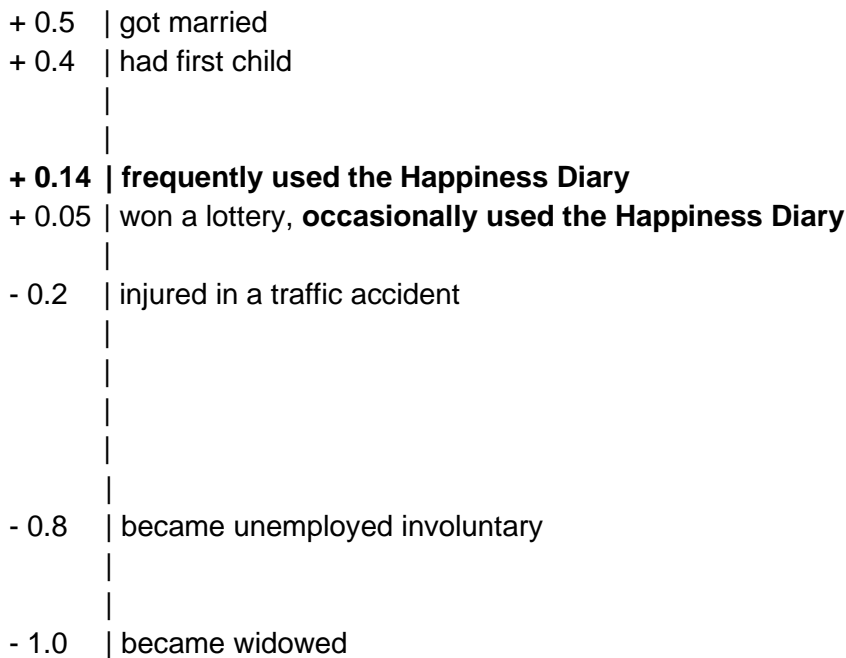


Figure 8

**Changes in happiness following use of the Happiness Indicator and specific life events**

Happiness, measured using a 0-10 scale

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### 3 USE OF THE HAPPINESS INDICATOR BY COLLEAGUES

We welcome use of the Happiness Indicator technique by colleague researchers and practitioners. Now that the system has been developed, large-scale applications are possible at low cost. 'Satellite projects' will run on the same server at Erasmus University. Variants tailored to specific interest can be made if a common core of variables is maintained. Data will be added to a common pool, which all projects can use, among other things for comparison. For further information, please go to <http://www.happinessindicator.com> and click 'project' in the header.

#### FULL TEXT

This text is an abbreviation of: Bakker, A., Burger, M, VanHaren, R. Oerlemans, W. & Veenhoven, R. (2020) *Raise of Happiness Following Raised Awareness of How Happy One Feels: A Follow-Up of Repeated Users of the Happiness Indicator Website* International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology 5 (3), 153-187.

Available at <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41042-020-00032-w>