

# CONSEQUENCES OF HAPPINESS

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## 1 SYNONYMS

Effects of happiness

## 2 DEFINITION

Effects of enjoying life or not, on oneself, on other people and society.

## 3 DESCRIPTION

While the focus of happiness research is typically on *determinants* of happiness, there is also a strand of research on *consequences* of happiness. An early publication on this subject was published by Veenhoven in 1988. A recent review of the literature is found in Lyubomirsky, Diener, and King, (2005). A listing of all the literature on this subject is available in the Bibliography of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2012) Section Q “Consequences of Happiness,” which involved some 300 titles in January 2012.

## 4 RELEVANCE

Knowledge on effects of happiness is relevant in discussions on the value of happiness and in particular in discussions on the merits of the utilitarian creed that we should aim at greater happiness for a greater number of people. If happiness has bad consequences, such as making people lazy uncritical and egocentric, that would plea against this ethical principle. Several opponents of utilitarianism have indeed argued that happiness spoils and one of these is Aldous Huxley, who in his famous “Brave New World” depicts happy people as sullen consumption slaves.

Knowledge on effects of happiness is also required if one does aim at greater happiness. The question is then to what extent greater happiness will affect sources of happiness, such as marital bonds, and will therefore be sustainable or not. Likewise policymakers want to know how greater happiness will work out on other policy aims, such as freedom and equality. Policymakers serve different goals and have for that reason a preference for synergetic goals.

#### 4.1 Topics

One strand of research is at the *macrolevel* and tries to assess the effects of a happy or unhappy populace on societal development, for instance, whether unhappiness of citizens fuels discrimination of minorities. This literature is listed in Section Qb1 of the above-mentioned Bibliography of Happiness.

Another line is at the *meso-level* and considers effects on the functioning of organizations, typically work organizations. One of the questions is then whether the happiness of employees adds to business success (Section Qc02 of the Bibliography).

A third strand is at the *microlevel* and considers effects on individual functioning, psychological functioning, as well as physical functioning. A topic in the latter theme is the effect of happiness on longevity (Section Qc03).

A question at all these levels is how much happiness is optimal; there is a small literature on whether one can be too happy (Veenhoven, 2012, Section Qe04.01).

#### 4.2 Methods

One way to identify causal effects of happiness is to depart from cross-sectional correlations and try to filter out reverse causality. For instance, in the case of the correlation between happiness and income, using path analysis to see whether consumption is a mediating factor. A better way is follow-up, for instance, check whether people who were happy earlier make more money later in life. Experimental studies can also give a clue, for instance, when people in a happy mood do better in negotiation games.

#### 4.3 Findings

All effects of happiness shown so far are positive. As yet there is no evidence for the often assumed negative effects of happiness. Much of the research supports Fredrickson's (2004) "Broaden and build theory," which holds that happiness broadens the behavioral repertoire, which results in the building up of resources.

##### *Macrolevel*

Cross-national comparisons have shown that happiness of citizens tends to go hand in hand with desirable functioning of society, such as with more economic activity and less social conflict. Though it is often difficult to disentangle causal effects at this level, the data bear no indications of negative effects. This means that there is no great conflict between individual and society, at least not at the present stage of societal development (Veenhoven, 2009). Shortage of time-series data limits longitudinal analysis as yet. Still there is good evidence for a correlation between rising happiness and positive social developments, such as economic growth and political democratization, one of the mechanisms being that happiness fosters activity.

##### *Meso-level*

Though there is a wealth of research on job satisfaction and organizational performance, there is as yet little data on the effects of life satisfaction. None of the available studies found a negative correlation between life-satisfaction and performance at work, and follow-up studies by Wright, Cropanzano, and Meyer (2004) documented a clear relation between earlier happiness and later improvement of performance. Happy people invest more in voluntary organizations, which is also likely to add to institutional functioning. As yet there is a remarkable lack of research on the effects of happiness on the functioning of schools.

### *Microlevel*

Contrary to the stereotype of the 'happy lotus eater', happiness appears to be an energizing force. Happiness fosters activity and creativity. One of the reasons is probably that happiness works as a *go signal*, informing the organism that the coast is free, while feeling unhappy rather signals that something is wrong and presses to restraint. This activating effect manifests in better work performance but also in better performance in intimate relations. Happy people are more helpful, more emphatic, and provide more support. As a result they develop more stable and rewarding relationships.

There is also evidence for beneficial effects of happiness on several aspects of psychological functioning, such as on perceived fate control. Likewise there is good evidence of positive effects of happiness on physical health, one of the manifestations being that happy people live longer (Diener & Chan 2011; Veenhoven, 2008).

There are indications that happiness makes us more prone to positive illusions and that this gives rise to more risky behaviors. Yet a recent study by Goudi et al. (2011) showed that happy people use safety belts more often.

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### **Cross-References in encyclopedia:**

[Happiness.](#)  
[Utilitarianism.](#)  
[World Database of Happiness](#)  
[Greater Happiness](#)