

Can we make ourselves happier?

By Pascale Harter BBC News

Can we make ourselves happier? According to studies from all over the globe collated by the World Happiness Database in Rotterdam, we can. But the path to happiness may not be where we are looking for it.

Prof Ruut Veenhoven, Director of the Database and Emeritus professor of social conditions for human happiness at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, says his own study found a slight negative correlation between the number of times people in a study spontaneously mentioned "goals" and their happiness.

"Though it is generally assumed that you need goals to lead a happy life, evidence is mixed. The reason seems to be that unhappy people are more aware of their goals, because they seek to change their life for the better."

Although there is some positive correlation between seeing meaning in life and being happy, studies suggest this is not a necessary condition for happiness. In fact, studies suggest leading an active life has the strongest correlation with happiness.

"In order to lead a happy life, a rewarding life, you need to be active," says Veenhoven. "So involvement is more important to happiness than knowing the why, why we are here."

But the best news on file at the World Happiness Database is that we can make ourselves happier, and not just through external changes like having more money.

"Research has shown that we can make ourselves happier because happiness does change over time," says Prof Veenhoven, "and these changes are not just a matter of better circumstances but of better dealing with life. Elderly people tend to be wiser, and for that reason, happier."

So what should we do to make ourselves happier?

Studies collated by the database say you tend to be happier if you:

- Are in a long-term relationship
- Are actively engaged in politics
- Are active in work and in your free time
- Go out for dinner
- Have close friendships (though happiness does not increase with the number of friends you have)

And there are some surprising findings:

- People who drink in moderation are happier than people who don't drink at all.
- Men tend to be happier in a society where women enjoy greater equality.
- Being considered good looking increases men's happiness more than it does women's.
- You tend to be happier if you think you're good looking, rather than if you actually, objectively speaking, are.
- Having children lowers your happiness levels, but your happiness increases when they grow up and leave home.

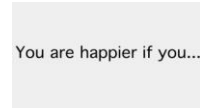
And be careful of that morning commute to work. A German study (by Frey and Stutzer published in 2004) found a strong link between time spent commuting and satisfaction with life. Those who spent an hour on their journey to work were found to be significantly less happy than those who did not commute. And the study suggests that higher earnings from a job that involves commuting do not compensate for the time lost.

Prof. Veenhoven and his colleagues have been trying to encourage people to do more of what makes them happy with a diary they can fill in online: <http://happinessindicator.com>. So far it has attracted more than 20,000 users. Pensioner Jana Koopman says it has changed her life, not just because it helped her identify what makes her happy, and prompted her to take up a painting class, but because it made her do less of what doesn't make her happy. "You can make everything clean and tomorrow it's dirty again, so why do it? Or don't do it too often. I like to read. So now I just pick up a book I want to read and leave all the other things." Don't worry, though, if you can't put down your laptop and pick up a book or a paintbrush. We can't be happy all the time.

Research shows that sadness is useful. It acts as a red traffic light to curb negative behavior. According to studies on the database it's actually good for us all to be sad 10% of the time. Professor Veenhoven and his colleagues have begun analyzing the data collected in the online diary to conduct more happiness studies.

So far, analysis on self-confessed workaholics shows, perhaps unsurprisingly, that unwinding after work with exercise rather than a beer on the sofa makes for a happier life.

Video: Pascal Harter visits the World Database of Happiness in the Netherlands



You are happier if you...

Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23097143>

Top 10 happiest countries

Countries ranked in order of "satisfaction with life", according to the [World Database of Happiness](#):

1. Costa Rica
2. Denmark
3. Iceland
4. Switzerland
5. Norway
6. Finland
7. Mexico
8. Sweden
9. Canada
10. Panama