

• An 8 out of 10: Ruut Veenhoven, who maintains the World Database of Happiness, gives himself a good 8 for satisfaction on a scale of 0 to 10.

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# "Can Happiness Be Measured?"

Yes, says Ruut Veenhoven, Professor of Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam and director of the World Database of Happiness. His findings are also instructive to all of us in practical terms. Xchange1585 spoke with the researcher.

## **What is happiness?**

The definition varies. I define happiness as being satisfied with your life. How high you would rate your quality of life. How much value you attach to life as you lead it. For me, happiness is taking pleasure in how you live.

## **What are the prerequisites for this?**

A human being is happy when his needs are met: with food and sleep, but also with love, appreciation, security and enrichment. That last one is of particular importance. Human beings want to improve themselves, to be challenged.

## **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the American happiness researcher, finds that people are happiest at work when they reach a state of flow and become at one with their work. Do you agree?**

Yes, people are most content when they have to exert and stretch themselves, whether physically or mentally. It's indisputable: being active makes you happier than being lazy. A lot of the time, people don't realize this until after they've completed a very demanding project.

## **Is the ability to be happy a matter of personality? Is there some sort of happiness gene?**

In our affluent societies here in the west, people are pretty happy. The differences come more from psychological factors. Some of these psychological factors are inherited—around 30 percent, I would say. In general, happy people show a lot of personal initiative. They know what they want, are independent and active, tackle problems head on, can handle stress. They know how to approach other people and nurture contact with them.

## **Does being happy also entail holding up against stress, problems and misfortune?**

Definitely. Happy people are not people without problems. But they're certainly people who bear up well in the face of difficulty.

## **An American study has shown that older people are often happier. Why is that?**

Our research has demonstrated that young adults and older people are most content. Between them is what you could call life's rush hour, with its loss of freedom and many obligations: career, children, loans.

Ruut Veenhoven has files cabinets full of happiness.

He is a Professor of Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam, specializes in the social conditions of human happiness. Since 1994, the Dutchman who lives in Harmelen, Netherlands, has been amassing scientific data and literature from all over the world to add to the World Database of Happiness—the biggest repository of its kind worldwide. Professor Veenhoven, 64, also publishes the *Journal of Happiness Studies* (Springer Verlag). He is currently at work on a study of life choices and life satisfaction in the Third Age with the aim of easing (early) retirees' transition into the next phase. [www.worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl](http://www.worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl)

### **You head up the World Database of Happiness. What's its purpose?**

We've built up the database since 1994 to collect empirical data on happiness. The database offers an overview of average happiness perception in 91 countries all over the world, which means that we cover two-thirds of the world's population. It also

contains data on special groups—such as children, people with disabilities and lottery winners—and flanking areas, like income and health.

### **In comparing countries, you determined that people in Denmark are the happiest, followed by Switzerland and Iceland. What makes that so?**

These countries have a long tradition of democracy and give their citizens a strong voice—Switzerland, for instance, with its referendum system. The countries have reliable governments. They are blessed with material wealth. And their societies are not very hierarchical. Class differences in these countries are pretty minimal, and men and women enjoy extensive equality.

### **How does the rest of Europe stack up?**

The countries of Europe—Germany, for instance—range in the center of the pack. There is, of course, a huge difference between Western and Eastern Europe. Eastern Europeans have been relatively unhappy to date, but there will soon be less divergence from the West. This is a product of the political turnaround there. When you look at data for the entire world, you will see that the picture in African countries like Tanzania or Zimbabwe is very bad. The scores on a scale of zero to 10 are about three, that's five points behind Denmark. The countries are



politically unstable, and the people are poor.

In a comparison by continent, North America heads the pack. Overall, we demonstrated with our research that happiness also really and truly depends on the country an individual lives in.

### **What conclusions can leaders from the political and business communities draw from this?**

They could develop the factors that enhance happiness. People need to have political freedom and a say in their governance. A climate of tolerance is also important. And personal freedoms are just as important as political freedom. The more freedom of choice an individual has, the more he can live life as he pleases—the happier he will be.

### **What role does material wealth play?**

A Dutchman who makes a living will not be significantly happier with more money. But if a man from Zimbabwe were to attain the level of affluence a man from Mexico enjoys, he would be extremely happy. The happiness curve grows steeper as the level of affluence rises, but remains relatively the same once it's reached a certain point—which Mexicans recently reached. Of course, striving to **grow** and compete makes us happy because we want to be challenged. It's like a soccer match: the game and how you play it matter, not so much the final score.

### **Is happiness an economic factor for a country?**

Yes. Happy people are healthier, more open, more active. And that impacts productivity as well as consumption patterns. Outward appearance is also important: a happy society attracts good workers from other countries. We're gradually entering a new era. While security and wealth were once the decisive factors, human happiness and well-being will in the

future be more important. Consumer goods and services have to be judged more strictly by whether or not they actually make buyers happier. And I think happiness should be accorded greater value in education—for instance, the art of living well could be taught in schools.

### **Also because happy people are healthier people?**

Yes. Actually, happier people have a longer life expectancy. Chronic unhappiness activates a program of stress in the body which impairs the immune system.

### **What makes a happiness researcher happy?**

My family and my work. ■

