

# Happiness in Focus

*Wellbeing. Are you happy moment-by-moment but dissatisfied with your life?  
Perhaps it's the way you're measuring it*

**By: Cass Sunstein**

When I was working in the federal government in 2010, I asked a colleague how things were going. His answer was unusual: “My moment-by-moment happiness is pretty low, but my life satisfaction is great.” As it happens, he was an expert on the past two decades of social science research on happiness (often called “subjective wellbeing”), and he was referring to two different measures of that elusive concept.

The first measure, and still the most popular, is to ask people to say how satisfied they are with their lives, frequently on a bounded scale of zero to 10.

Remarkably most people are willing to give rapid responses to that question. In Britain, the average was recently 7.4.

If we take those responses seriously, we will be able to reach some conclusions about how people are affected by income, unemployment, marriage, divorce, children, long working days and illness. By this measure, both men and women become much happier in the year that they get married. But a few years after that point, they return to their pre-marriage state – and woman actually appear to fall below it.

Perhaps that's not so surprising but some of the social science findings are jarring. In particular, many apparently terrible events have only modest effects on people's subjective wellbeing – after an initial period of distress. In answering questionnaires, kidney dialysis patients and young people who have lost a limb as a result of cancer, do not show reduced levels of life satisfaction. Paraplegics show only modest reductions. Colostomy patients report levels of life satisfaction that are about the same as those of people who have not had colostomies. Whether or not we trust these findings, they require some kind of explanation.

When social scientists ask people about satisfaction in life, they are asking for some kind of overall evaluation; they are not measuring people's actual feelings as they experience their lives. Within the literature on subjective wellbeing, it is not common to distinguish between “evaluative well-being”, reflecting people's general evaluations, and “experienced wellbeing”, reflecting people's assessments of their experiences as they actually live them.

If you spend a week doing volunteer work as a soup kitchen, you might have a high level of life satisfaction but you might not much enjoy what you are doing. If you spend a day watching a dozen episodes of a silly (but fun) television series, you might have enjoyed the day; the idea of “guilty pleasures” captures the phenomenon. And in fact, social scientists have uncovered some systematic differences between people’s overall evaluations and their assessments of their particular experiences. Unmarried women report a lower life satisfaction than married women, but their experiences of wellbeing is about the same.

At this point, you might be wondering how social scientists can possibly measure people’s experienced wellbeing. The answer is that they ask people about their particular experiences. They might ask people at night, to evaluate the various activities of their day (again, on a scale of zero to 10). They might ask people to specify how they felt while commuting, working, eating, shopping, exercising, spending time with children, watching television, socialising, and so forth.

Over the past two decades, research on subjective wellbeing has grown at a spectacular rate, in part under the influence of a series of essays authored or co-authored by Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman. In 1997, Kahneman was the first author of an influential essay called *Back to Bentham? Explorations of Experienced Utility*, in which he argued that it is both possible and important to measure people’s feelings about their experiences. In Kahneman’s account, we should pay close attention to “the experiencing self”. His claim has inspired a great deal of research on how people feel about their lives.

Policymakers have noticed that research, and the idea of measuring subjective wellbeing has attracted keen interest in many nations, including Britain and the United States. Both evaluative and experienced wellbeing are discussed in several recent reports from the Obama administration’s Office of Management and Budget, and *Subjective Well-Being*, an impressive 2013 report from the National Research Council of the National Academies, focused directly on experienced wellbeing.

The report emphasises the difference between evaluative wellbeing and experienced wellbeing, and it draws attention as well to the separate idea of “eudemonic wellbeing, which refers to a person’s perceptions of meaningfulness, sense of purpose, and value of his or her life.”

The report concludes that it is important to measure experienced wellbeing and that public policy should pay attention to what is measured.

Of course, many people are highly critical of these claims and indeed of the entire research agenda. Some sceptics doubt that you can learn much, if anything, by asking people to assess either their overall life satisfaction or their experiences on a scale of zero to 10. Other sceptics object to the emphasis on “happiness”, which they believe to be poorly defined. That broad idea can include qualitatively different feelings, including joy, serenity, exhilaration, fulfilment, excitement and delight. People might be unhappy because they feel humiliated, hopeless, fearful or agonised. Do we think that a good life is adequately described as one in which people maximise pleasure and minimise pain? Kahneman and others prefer the term “subjective wellbeing” to “happiness,” on the ground that it produces less confusion, but the same question remains.

Paul Dolan, an economist by training, is now a professor of behavioural science at the London School of Economics and Political Science. In Britain, he has worked with public officials on their efforts to measure happiness, and his thinking has informed their work, in *Happiness by Design*, he has written what appears, in places, to be a self-help book, but it is actually far more ambitious than that. Dolan’s real goal in this impressive and engaging book is to offer fresh understandings of what happiness is and of what produces it.

His most striking claim involves the importance of how people allocate their attention. Drawing on the idea of the “focusing illusion”, developed by Kahneman and David Schkade, Dolan contends that people greatly exaggerate how much a particular good (warm weather, a fancy car, a specific job) will affect their wellbeing, only because they focus on it. Dolan argues that the “same inputs – money, marriage, sex, stammering, or whatever – can effect your happiness a lot or a little depending on how much attention you pay to them”.

Dolan is aware that some of the happiness research seems to endorse a crude form of hedonism, suggesting that all of our experiences should be measured with some kind of hedonism. John Stuart Mill famously criticise Bentham for ignoring qualitative differences among social goods.

In Mill’s words, Bentham”... but faintly recognises, as a fact in human nature, the pursuit of any other ideal end for its own sake. The sense of honour, and personal dignity – that feeling of personal exaltation and degradation, which acts independently of other people’s opinion, or even in defiance of it; the love of beauty, the passion of the artist; the love of power, not in the limited form of power over other human beings, but abstract power, the power of making our volitions effectual; the love of action, the thirst for movement and activity, a principle scarcely of less influence in human life than its

opposite, the love of ease.... Man, that most complex being, is a very simple one in his eyes.”

Dolan is not so reductionist. For example, he emphasises the important distinction between aroused and non-aroused states. You might count yourself as “happy” when you feel energised and engaged, and you might do the same when you are content and calm. You might count yourself as “unhappy” when you are angry or anxious, and you might do the same when you are sad or depressed. More fundamentally, Dolan insists on the difference between pleasures and purposes. Some activities give pleasure, but they seem essentially pointless. Other activities feel worthwhile and full of meaning, but they are not a lot of fun. Importantly, Dolan is focused entirely on people’s experiences of their lives and hence, on their subjective mental states. But he emphasises that our experiences are much affected by whether we think that they have a point.

In Dolan’s account, experiences of pleasure or purpose “are what most matter to how people feel”, and here the idea of attention becomes crucial. Whether we have a sense of pleasure or purpose depends on where we are focusing our attention as we go about our lives. It is for this reason that Dolan thinks it is best to measure people’s feelings about their experiences, rather than to focus on overall life satisfaction. To be truly happy, he concludes, we need to experience both pleasure and purpose, and when the balance is wrong, or when people focus on one of the expense of the other, their lives will be impaired. For example, research suggests if you are concerned about how pleasant your life is, you might not want to have children. Surprisingly, children seem to reduce both life satisfaction and experienced happiness. But they can add significantly to people’s sense of purpose.

With this frame, Dolan offers a great deal of data about subjective wellbeing. In the US, people get a lot of pleasure from eating and watching television, but for those who want a fulfilled purpose, it’s much better to spend time at work or with children. There are demographic differences as well. Ratings of the level of pleasure and purpose are surprisingly stable across people’s lifetimes, with one notable exception: people between 15 and 23 years give overall purpose ratings that are very low. Apparently, young people have fun but wonder if their life has a point. As compared with men, women experience less pleasure but more purpose from spending time with children. Dolan finds as well that people’s subjective wellbeing increases when they have a job, have short commuting distances, are religious, and are either young or old.

In addition, he finds that money can indeed buy happiness, especially when you are poor, but also when you aren’t. But with respect to money, there is a difference between the two measures of subjective wellbeing. Having additional income increases

people's reported life satisfaction, but above a certain threshold, it doesn't seem to affect their enjoyment of their lives.

Research on subjective wellbeing has also uncovered a remarkable human capacity to adapt to adversity. Most of us greatly underestimate that capacity. Recall that some serious disabilities seem to have little or no adverse effect on people's evaluative or experienced wellbeing one reason is that people adapt. Many other setbacks, including divorce, tend to have only short-term effects. Assistant professors expect that if they are denied tenure, they will suffer for a long time. But after a few years, there is no discernible difference between the subjective wellbeing of those who are denied tenure and those who get it.

But in some situations, adaptation does not occur. An instructive example is unpleasant loud noises: people do not get used to them, and they dislike them all the more if those noises are intermittent and unpredictable. Dolan makes a comparison here with a puzzling finding about cancer patients, which is that their subjective wellbeing falls when they are in remission. Dolan says that, "the certainty of death allows a person to put his or her house into order and remission casts uncertainty on that purpose".

Dolan contends that an appreciation of the central importance of attention helps to explain when adaptation will occur. Suppose that you lose the use of a limb. At first, the loss will loom large; you might be able to think about little else. But after a time, the useless limb might well become a mere background fact, one to which you do not pay much attention. Instead you will focus on your family, your friends, your job – the stuff of everyday life. It is for this reason that many disabilities do not greatly affect people's subjective wellbeing.

An appreciation of attention also explains why noise, chronic pain and mental illness has enduring effects. All of these make an insistent claim on your attention. With respect to both noise and pain, it is often said that people should try to "block it out" – but that is far easier said than done. This point has implications for public policy, suggesting the immense importance of increasing efforts to respond to, and alleviate, mental illness in particular.

And in this light, we can also understand why marriage gives people a big boost, at least in the immediate aftermath, and why its effects become smaller over time. Newly married couples focus on the fact of marriage, and it gives them a lot of joy. After a time, even happily married people are less likely to think, with surprise and delight, about the fact that they are married. Some happiness researchers emphasise the

importance of “re-virginising” oneself, by experiencing altogether new things or by trying to see familiar things with fresh eyes.

Dolan contends that “the misallocation of attention is our fundamental problem” and hence “the reallocation of attention must be the fundamental solution”. If the goal is to lose weight, the challenge is to make weight salient, and hence, people should “get a reliable scale and stand on it twice a week at the same time of day”.

More fundamentally, Dolan contends that people should trust their actual experiences rather than either their desires or their beliefs. Venturing into the domain of self-help, he urges people to specify their various experiences and to rank them on the zero to 10 scale according to both pleasure and purpose. The exercise might well seem silly, but he has a serious goal, which is to establish that people’s actual experiences do not track their expectations – and to demonstrate that once they see how the two diverge, they will begin to reallocate how they spend their time, for example by seeing which aspects of a vacation “really made you happy and which did not”.

Dolan’s largest claim is that “happiness is all that matters in the end”. He thinks that if people are “asked enough times why some things matter”, they “will eventually end up by saying, ‘So that I can be happy.’” He contends that “Audrey Hepburn was spot-on when she said ‘The most important thing is to enjoy your life – to be happy – it’s all that matters.’” Pointing out our feelings tend to be contagious, Dolan insists “the pursuit of happiness is therefore, a noble and very serious objective for us all”. As he is aware, Dolan is making a strong set of claims here, and it is vulnerable on multiple grounds.

Begin with the difference between measures of life satisfaction and measures of experience. Dolan much prefers the latter, but the choice is more complicated than he allows. When people answer questions about their life satisfaction, they might well be identifying their deepest values and concerns. If we restrict ourselves to people’s experiences, we might fail to capture what motivates them, and what they most cherish in their lives. To be sure, Dolan is focused on purpose, not merely pleasure. But that focus might itself argue in favour of emphasising satisfaction in life, at least if that measure captures people’s considered judgments about whether they are achieving the right mix.

Of course, efforts to measure life satisfaction run into objections of their own. A pervasive question is whether people’s answers are relative rather than absolute. If people who use wheelchairs give an average answer of seven, they might be comparing themselves with other people who use wheelchairs, essentially saying, “For someone who cannot walk, I am doing just fine”.

We might also wonder whether the measure is stable. If the sun is shining, or if someone has just been kind to you, you might say “eight”, even if grim weather, or a harsh word from a friend, would have produced a five. Dolan worries that “the results tell us much more about what pops into your head when you answer these questions than they do about your experiences of happiness on a day-to-day basis”.

The breadth and unfamiliarity of the life-satisfaction question raise independent doubts. To say the least, people are not used to answering that question, and it is worth wondering what, exactly, their answers are capturing. To be sure, social scientists have been carefully exploring objections of this kind, and at the current time, it is reasonable to conclude that measures of life satisfaction are relatively stable and do capture something important about people’s assessments of their lives. But this is a provisional conclusion, and we need to learn more.

For Dolan’s central argument, the most fundamental problem is that reasonable people do not agree with Audrey Hepburn. Many people think that it matters to spend a lot of time with their children, or their elderly parents, not because that always makes them happy (maybe it doesn’t), but because it is the right thing to do. Many people insist that it matters if people help others, not because it makes them happy to help (it might not), but because the most important thing, or one of the most important things, is helping others.

Many people think that it matters if people produce art, or books or movies, not because it makes them happy to do that (it might not), but because they believe that culture matters, and adding to it counts a lot. Many people believe it matters to pursue high ideals (patriotism, religion, the creation of works of art, political causes), not because their happiness matters, but because those ideals matter.

The idea of devotion – to people, to causes, to nations, to God – seems to be missing from Dolan’s account. Nor does he have much to say about the experience of creation in general – its pleasures and disappointments and intensities.

True, one of Dolan’s main goals is to emphasise the importance of purpose, and he is keenly aware that many people think that their life has more meaning – more of a point – if they engage in activities that are not exactly pleasurable. But he is wrong to insist that when asked why something matters, people will eventually respond, “because it gives me either a sense of pleasure or a sense of purpose.”

Many of the things we do are not so self-directed, and indeed, they would give us less pleasure, and less of a sense of purpose, if they were. If we feel a sense of purpose from some achievement – completing a project, doing something worthwhile – that

good feeling is unlikely to have been our only motivation, and it might not have been our only motivation and it might not have been any part of it. Some people struggle for justice, or fight tyranny, because they believe that it is the right thing to do; but many others do not share those feelings. In many domains, both pleasure and purpose are essentially by products; they are benefits of activities that we pursue for their own sake, not our own.

Nor is it clear that if we were singling out just two positive feelings, we would choose pleasure and purpose.

Both of these are, of course, umbrella concepts, including moods and feelings with important qualitative differences; consider the pleasure of a good book, a swim in the ocean, a visit to Berlin, a conversation with a friend, or settling down for an afternoon. Each of these might involve purpose as well. And, if the goal is to fasten onto what matters most, there are many other possible umbrella candidates, including serenity, passion and commitment. In the history of the world, only a small percentage of cultures would single out pleasure and purpose. This does not mean that Dolan is wrong, but it does suggest that a sustained argument, not provided here, would be necessary to justify his choice.

But there is a more modest and less contentious version of Dolan's argument. It would put aside the deeper questions and urge that pleasure and purpose are important, and that many people's lives have less pleasure and less meaning than they might, in part because of how they allocate their attention. We need not take a stand on the most fundamental issues in order to agree that when people suffer, or feel that life lacks much of a point, one reason is where they choose to focus their attention and that an appreciation of this point might help to reduce suffering and to restore a sense of purpose.

NEW WORK REVIEW OF BOOKS <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **Happiness by Design: Change What You Do, Not How You Think**, by Paul Dolan, with a foreword by Daniel Kahneman, published by Hudson Street. **Subjective Wellbeing: Measuring Happiness, Suffering and Other Dimensions of Experience**, a report by the US National Research Council, edited by Arthur A Stone and Christopher Mackie, National Academies Press. Cass Sunstein is the Robert Walmsley University Professor at Harvard.