

# The psychology behind happiness

Measuring a person's happiness is a difficult task. How would someone go about measuring a person's emotional state that is arguably completely subjective? This leads on to the question of: How can happiness be measured using a scientific approach? One major challenge for this type of research is reliability. For example, asking people "How happy are you?" might invite a very different answer than the question "How satisfied are you with your life?" CEO of the Happiness Research Institute (HRI), **Meik Wiking** spoke to us about using positive psychology to measure happiness, which countries are statistically happier than others and provides us with tips to make us happier.

**H**ow do we define and measure happiness? One of the many key questions that Positive Psychology researchers try to answer.

Simply put, subjective well-being is defined as your evaluations of a) your own life, and b) your moods and emotions-hence the label "subjective." Subjective well-being is the primary way Positive Psychology researchers have defined and measured people's happiness and well-being.

The Danish Happiness Research Institute is an independent think tank exploring why some societies are happier than others. Their mission is to inform decision-makers of the causes and effects of human happiness, make subjective well-being part of the public policy debate, and improve quality of life for citizens across the world. To discuss this in greater detail, CEO Meik Wiking spoke with *Research Features* to discuss this and provide tips on how small changes to our lifestyles can make a dramatic difference.

*Hi Meik! Could you tell us some more about what your role involves as CEO of the Happiness Research Institute (HRI)?*

My career is essentially focused on trying to answer three questions. Firstly, how do we measure happiness? Secondly, why are some people happier than others? And finally, how can we improve quality of life? Those are also the same questions we work with at the HRI – whether we are working with governments, cities, foundations or companies, our projects do shed some light on answers to these questions.

*What first prompted you to set up HRI back in February 2013, and what have been some of your proudest achievements since that time?*

Two events influenced me in establishing the HRI. Firstly, in 2011, the UN published a resolution which stated that "the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal" and in 2012, it released its first World Happiness Report. Considering several factors, the report has been published every year since and, I'm pleased to say that Denmark has topped the list four out of

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CEO of HRI,  
Meik Wiking.

five times. It occurred to me that someone from Denmark should try to obtain some intelligence because we're doing so well in the happiness rankings, and then I thought "maybe I should do that". In a matter of two months, I had left my job and started paying more attention to the global interest in what makes us humans happy.

Secondly, at the same time of these studies, my mentor at my work – a good colleague and friend – became very ill and died at the age of 49. Many years ago, my own mother also died when she was 49. So, when my mentor died, I began to think to myself, what if I was also only going to make it to 49? This led me to then ask myself: 'What would I like to do? Why not create something that could be very exciting?'

I started out with a laptop and what I thought was a good idea. It has also been a lot of hard work with little money. I have had to spend months on my friend's sofa with his two cats. You know – living the dream.

But to me, it was worth the risk and all the hard work. Interestingly, we also see this in the happiness data. Self-employed people are usually happier with their lives. Today, I believe I may have the best job in the world. I try to understand what makes people happy and because of that, I get to talk with people all around the world about their hopes and dreams. I am happier now than I ever was before.

#### How do you measure happiness at HRI?

I encounter plenty of scepticism as people ask: "How can you possibly measure a subjective thing like happiness?" but I respond with "If I were studying depression would you ask me the same question?" I am yet to hear a convincing argument on why happiness cannot be studied in a scientific manner. Why should we not try to understand the thing that perhaps matters the most for our mental well-being?

Yes, of course, happiness is subjective, and it should be. To me, that is not an issue. What I care about in my research is how you feel about your life. That is what counts. I believe you are the best judge of whether you are happy or not. How people feel emotionally is our new metric – and then I try to understand why people feel that way.

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another. Therefore, the first thing we must do is to break the concept of happiness down into its various parts. The first lesson in happiness research is to distinguish between someone being happy right now and someone being happy overall. They overlap to some extent. If your days are filled with positive emotions, you are likely to be happy with your life overall. Equally, we can have difficult mornings and still feel we have a wonderful life overall. But ideally, we follow people over time to understand how changes in their lives impact the different dimensions of happiness. What is the average effect on happiness – say from getting promoted, getting divorced or falling in love for instance? It is my job to understand just that.

**We are seeing more and more countries, cities, companies and foundations looking at happiness and people's quality of life** ”

#### Why does Denmark have such a great reputation for being such a happy country?

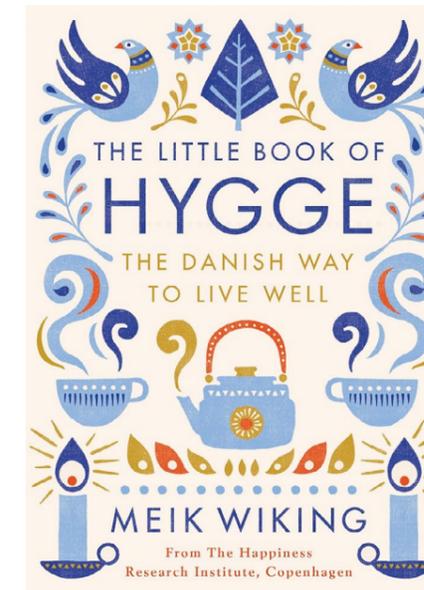
I guess it is because Denmark is always top of rankings on either happiness, quality of life or liveability. I think it is fair to say that all the Nordic countries do well in these rankings – not just Denmark. In addition to this, we find many happy people throughout the world – and it is important to underline that these rankings are based on averages. For example, we look at the average happiness level for a country.

Denmark is relatively good at delivering a great quality of life to people – but Denmark is neither a utopia nor holds a monopoly on happiness. I think what Denmark does well (together with the other Nordic countries) is that they are good at converting wealth

into wellbeing with universal healthcare, free university education, equal opportunities (relatively speaking) for men and women, etc. Those are the things that drive quality of life. A lot of journalists will ask: 'How can you be happy as you pay such high taxes?' I say: 'Maybe we are happy because we pay high taxes. We are investing in the quality of life. We are investing in the good – which yields a high return on personal happiness. People can enjoy a relatively good quality of life whether you are rich or poor in Nordic countries'.

#### The HRI's website states that a person's level of happiness relies on a combination of biology, policies and behaviour. What do you mean by this, and how does HRI's current research tie into this area?

If we look at what impacts health (why some people live longer than others) we can create three categories: 1) Genetics: Why are people born healthy and predisposed to some diseases 2) Policies: Access to and affordability of healthcare. The level of air pollution in the city etc. 3) Behaviour: Do you smoke? Do you exercise? Do you have



a balanced diet? Do you drink alcohol? etc. We have no control over our genetics, little control over policies but, we do have control over our behaviour (although, our policies obviously impact our behaviour). I often look at happiness, or what impacts happiness, with those same categories. Genetics – we are born happy as we have learned from twin studies. Policies – are the reason why some countries consistently do well in the happiness rankings. Behaviour – the choices we make impact our quality of life.

#### HRI frequently release reports and other publications, such as the recent World Psoriasis Happiness Report. What impact have these publications had on initiating change for the better?

I think there is a long-term and short-term impact. The long-term is to impact upon the course of nations. How can we measure our progress as countries? Are we only getting richer or are we also improving the quality of life? What strategies can countries apply from those countries that are constantly doing well in delivering a great quality of life for their citizens? The short-term is the inspiration we can generate and provide to people across the globe through our books and courses.

#### From your perspective, can true happiness be achieved? And, if so, how?

Yes, some people do feel extremely happy or achieve 'true happiness'. We have found this by examining what kind of emotions they experience but also ask them to take a step back and evaluate their lives. Our focus is then to understand what these people have

in common. My latest book *The Little Book of Hygge* looks at the following six factors: relationships, kindness, money, trust, health and freedom, these seem to explain why some people from different countries are happier than others.

#### You personally have recently authored two popular books, including *The Little Book of Hygge* and *The Little Book of Lykke*. What influence have these had on raising public awareness?

Books are a wonderful way to spread ideas. Both books have been translated into more than 35 languages and they seem to be great conversation starters. It's because of them, that I give more than 300 interviews per year. HRI seeks to increase public awareness and understanding by identifying well-being gaps and societal inequalities. How do you decide which areas are worthy of investigating? We find the blind spots or dark areas on the scientific map. What has not been investigated? What is the link between happiness and X, Y, Z?

#### How do you see the landscape of happiness research changing over the coming years, and how will HRI's leadership strategy play into this?

We are seeing more and more countries, cities, companies and foundations looking at happiness and people's quality of life. Governments are putting happiness at the core of public policies and as the new measure of progress. Foundations are looking at measuring the return on quality of life on their investment and, of course, we will help that agenda along. What we measure matters, and therefore, we should measure what matters.

• To find out more about the Happiness Research Institute and their ethos, please visit their website at <https://www.happinessresearchinstitute.com/>.



## Contact

The Happiness Research Institute  
Suomisvej 4  
1927 Frederiksberg (Copenhagen)  
Denmark

E: [info@happinessresearchinstitute.com](mailto:info@happinessresearchinstitute.com)  
W: <https://www.happinessresearchinstitute.com/>