

 NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

A must-read for living happier!
—DR. OZ

Secrets
from the
World's
Happiest
People

Thrive

FINDING
HAPPINESS THE
Blue Zones
WAY

New York Times Best-Selling Author

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What makes people happy? For many it's belonging to a club or social group, as 90 percent of Danes do. Rasmus Bjerger trains his champion rabbit outside Århus, Denmark, to compete at his local Rabbit Jumping Association. PHOTO BY DAVID MCLAIN/AURORA

The Truth About Happiness



*For many it's belonging to a club or
planes do. Rasmus Bjerner trains his
Denmark, to compete at his local*
PHOTO BY DAVID McLAIN/AURORA

Before we dig deeper into the nature of happiness, I'd like you to take a short quiz. I'm going to introduce you to three people I met during my travels, and I want you to tell me which one you think is happiest.

The first is Jan Hammer, a 42-year-old father of three girls who lives in Århus, the second largest city in Denmark. Each morning at three o'clock, his alarm clock rings, and he rolls out of the warm bed he shares with his wife of 15 years. He eats two fried eggs and toast, washes it down with a mug of coffee, and slips into a blaze orange jumpsuit. By four o'clock he's at the wheel of a high-tech garbage truck and is staring at a NASA-like dashboard with flashing buttons and multiple-view video screens. At each of 59 stops he jumps out of

the cab and, with marmot-like zeal, trots from Dumpster to Dumpster and heaves fresh refuse into the hopper with the help of a hydraulic lift. "I don't even smell it anymore," he huffs, sweat seeping through his jumpsuit.

The second person is Norridah Yusoh, a 43-year-old housewife who lives with her husband and three school-age children in an apartment in Singapore. Each morning she dutifully puts on a head scarf, covering her hair as her religion requires; makes her children breakfast; prepares lunch for her husband, an accountant; and sends her family off for the day. After they're gone, she does household chores and, at midday, she might walk to a nearby food market, to buy food from various vendors and stop to chat along the way. Some nights after dinner, she goes to the local McDonald's, where she socializes with other Muslim mothers as her children nibble french fries and do homework. Then, each night before bed, as tradition dictates, she kisses her husband's hand to show respect.

The third person is Manuel Uribe, a 45-year-old Mexican man who lives in a working-class neighborhood of Monterrey. Manuel has a knack for trading, a soothing facility for conversation, and a sincere compassion. He's also a big man. In fact, a combination of bad genes and a taste for junk food has ballooned his weight to the point where he's confined to a bed in the living room of his mother's house. This doesn't impede visitors. On any given day, his room is abuzz with people seeking to cut a deal, to get advice, or just to experience a dollop of Manuel's charm. At noon, Manuel's mother brings out his lunch—a lean filet of meat and a generous helping of

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steamed broccoli. "It's from the Zone Diet," he says. "I've lost 200 pounds in the last year." Just then the door opens. Claudia Solis, a 30-something secretary, walks in on high heels. She puts a knee on the bed, cranes her lovely neck, and plants a pink-frosted kiss on Manuel's lips.

So what's the answer to the quiz? Which of these three people is the happiest? You've probably already guessed the answer: *All three of them are happy*—so happy, in fact, that, according to the latest research, they are almost certainly three of the happiest people in three of the happiest places on the planet.

How can that be?

Let's go back to the garbageman. I met Jan at six o'clock on a gray morning in the alley behind my hotel in Århus. He was emptying Dumpsters into his behemoth garbage truck. He greeted me heartily, and I could instantly tell that he was a nice guy. Pulling off a dirty cotton glove, he offered me his plump hand, which emitted the sweet-sour smell of his profession.

Later, seated in his cab, Jan punched the accelerator, and we sped through the misty Danish dawn. "You can't find a better job than delivering garbage," he whispered conspiratorially. "I work only 21 hours a week and make \$80,000 a year. I drive a Mercedes and take my family to Greece each year." I looked over at him. He was wearing red square-rimmed glasses, Nike running shoes, and a bracelet that read "World's Most Beautiful Garbage Man." By eight o'clock he'd be done with his route and back at the garbage truck depot, he said. After a shower, he'd hit the gym and spa provided by his workers' union. Some days, he might go to a second job

where he worked as a freelance bricklayer. There he would make another \$60,000 a year.

More important than the money, though, was the satisfaction he felt with his life. "I'm like the yolk of the egg!" he said, using a Danish expression for "fat and happy." In his community, there was no stigma attached to the "garbage delivery" business. On weekends, he'd socialize with the dentists and lawyers who lived on his block. Home by three o'clock every afternoon, he had time to help his three daughters with their homework. Three nights a week he'd go to a local gym, where he'd put on shorts, sneakers, a red sports shirt, and a whistle to coach his daughters' indoor soccer team. His life was rewarding and full.

As for Norridah, listen to what she said when I asked her to rate her happiness on a scale of 1 to 10: "I'm a 9.5! I have a lot of friends from a wide variety of backgrounds." This was important for her, living in Singapore, because the government there strongly encourages harmony among the nation's three major ethnic groups: Chinese, Indians, and Malays such as Norridah. "Ever since my school days, I've mixed with Chinese and Indians and learned how to make friends with all of them," she said. "Maybe I talk most with my Malay friends on the phone, but when I go out—which I do every day—I meet my Indian friends at the market or play cards with Chinese friends. My children are the same way. They don't see color or race, they see people."

"How about your *tudong*?" I asked, using the Malay word for a head scarf. "You live in this modern city, your husband

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is an accountant, your kids listen to iPods. Your scarf seems so traditional. Do you feel you're free to take it off and show your hair, if you want?"

"That is my own choice," she said, gently passing her hand over the scarf. "It's part of our religion, and it is the way of our leaders. I choose to wear it. My daughter's generation might have different ideas. But it makes me comfortable, so I wear it."

"And how about this custom of kissing your husband's hand?" I asked.

"This is a form of respecting each other," she said. "It's part of being a good Muslim. Doing it every day makes sure you're purged of guilt and grudges. I do it from the bottom of my heart, not that I have necessarily done anything wrong. It's just a show of respect. My husband reciprocates, but in his own way."

And Manuel? What was the source of his happiness? Here's what he told me:

"When I was younger, I saw an ad for an electronics company in Texas looking for technicians who could speak English," he said. "But by the time I was 35, I'd lost my savings, my auto parts business, and my wife," he said. "I bought a gun and kept it in my bed, thinking I might use it on myself. Then one night God came to me and told me I had work to do." Manuel went on a diet and started to lose weight. With his mother's consent, he had a hole punched through his bedroom wall, installed double-wide glass doors to admit the world, and unleashed his knack for deal making. Today he receives up to 70 visitors a day—clients seeking to trade everything from blue

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jeans to Thompson helicopters, cousins and friends stopping by for a chat, or people seeking his business advice. He doesn't have to go looking for social interaction; it comes to him.

As I sat with him one evening, his cell phone rang and he lifted the tiny device to his ear. On the other end, a desperately overweight girl was searching for hope. "If I can turn my life around," he said tenderly, "you can too, dear." When he hung up, an old friend stopped by for a visit. Then another phone call. This time it was news that the website Manuel runs had crashed. In his smooth, unflappable voice, he troubleshooted the problem with the webmaster. I sat back and watched. "Does this ever end?" I asked.

"If it did, I'd be dead," he said.

A year later, Manuel married Claudia. With her help, he has lost more than 500 pounds. Life has never been better.

These three individuals—a garbageman with time for his kids, a housewife surrounded by close friends, and a junk dealer on a personal mission of faith—share a common characteristic: They all consider themselves to be "very happy."

Thriving

According to the Gallup organization, "thriving" countries are those whose citizens think positively about their lives and report more happiness, enjoyment, interest, and respect. These countries also report significantly lower rates of health problems, sick days, stress, sadness, and anger.

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More than that, they all believe that they will become even happier in the years to come. Like many people, they deal with challenges every day. They experience stress, periods of sadness, and grief. Life sometimes deals them a bad hand. They are, in many ways, not so different from the rest of us. Yet somehow they experience a sense of happiness greater than ours. Researchers have a term for this positive, optimistic condition: They call such people *thrivers*.

What's their secret?

During the past few decades, a small army of psychologists, social scientists, and scholars have asked the same question. Through rigorous experimentation and exhaustive surveys, they've given birth to a new science of happiness, focusing not only on defining the nature of human happiness, but also on discovering ways to improve our chances for personal well-being. Before we strike off around the world to learn the lessons of the world's happiness people, let's turn to some of the leading experts to understand the scientific fundamentals of the field:

Ed Diener, Ph.D., is Joseph R. Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the author of *Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth*.

Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and the author of *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*.

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Ruut Veenhoven, Ph.D., is director of the World Database of Happiness and editor of the *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

Jim Harter, Ph.D., is chief scientist of workplace management and well-being for Gallup and coauthor of *12: The Elements of Great Managing* and *Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements*.

Bruno S. Frey is a professor of economics at the University of Zurich and research director of CREMA (Center for Research in Economics, Management and the Arts). He is the author of *Happiness: A Revolution in Economics*.

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi is Distinguished Professor of Psychology and director of the Quality of Life Research Center at the Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California.

In what follows, I've distilled ideas from their books as well as from my interviews with these experts and sorted their answers according to key questions. Here's what they told me.

WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi: As many a thinker since Aristotle has said, everything we do is ultimately aimed at experiencing happiness. We don't really want wealth, or health, or fame as such—we want these things because we hope they will make us happy. But happiness we seek not because it will get us something else, but for its own sake.

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Sonja Lyubomirsky: I use the term “happiness” to refer to the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile. However, most of us don’t need a definition of happiness because we instinctively know whether we are happy or not.

Ed Diener: The word “happiness” means many things. It means positive emotions. It means life satisfaction. It means generally your life is going well. It means many different things in the different ways people use it. Everyone has this general idea. So I don’t define happiness. I try to use these other, more exact terms, such as positive emotions, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction.

HOW DO YOU MEASURE HAPPINESS?

Sonja Lyubomirsky: We let people define happiness for themselves. There’s no happiness thermometer. No one else can tell you how happy you are. It’s a subjective phenomenon. No one but you knows, or should tell you, how happy you truly are.

Jim Harter: We ask people to rate the quality of their overall life today on a 0-10 ladder of life developed by Hadley Cantril of Princeton, and what they think it will be in the next five years—to tap into their “reflecting” self. The good news is that most people have a more positive view of the future than the present . . . maybe this keeps us striving for something better. We use responses to questions to categorize people as “thriving,” “struggling,” or “suffering.” We

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also ask people to recall their experiences from the previous day. This allows us to tap into the “experiencing” self or how much positive and negative emotions and experiences people have on a typical day. These are both important aspects of well-being . . . the evaluating self and the experiencing self.

Ruut Veenhoven: In my definition, happiness is how much one likes the life one lives. So if people say they are happy they are happy, unless they are lying.

Ed Diener: The key is that each person is making the evaluation of his or her life—not an expert’s, philosopher’s, or somebody else. Thus, the person herself or himself is the expert: Is my life going well, according to the standards that I choose to use?

DO THE SAME THINGS MAKE EVERYONE HAPPY?

Sonja Lyubomirsky: There are many faces of happiness. The face of happiness may be someone who is intensely curious and enthusiastic about learning; it may be someone who is engrossed in plans for his next five years; it may be someone who can distinguish between the things that matter and the things that don’t; it may be someone who looks forward each night to reading to her child. Some happy people may look outwardly cheerful or transparently serene, and others are simply busy. In other words, we all have the potential to be happy, each in our own way.

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Ed Diener: Some things about happiness are universal. If everyone hates you, nobody respects you or supports you, that makes you unhappy, no matter who you are. But other things are unique. They depend on your personality. For example, I love analyzing data. Most people don't. They'd rather read a book, see a movie, or gossip. The evidence is strong that social relationships are now a basic need. The other things we talk about in terms of happiness are a little more abstract, like making progress toward your goals and values, and having purpose and meaning.

DO WE HAVE ANY CONTROL OVER OUR HAPPINESS?

Sonja Lyubomirsky: On average, 50 percent of individual differences in happiness is influenced by our genetic makeup, 10 percent is influenced by our life circumstances, and 40 percent is influenced by how we think and act every day. Research has shown that each of us is born with a kind of happiness "set point," a natural predisposition for happiness that we carry throughout our lives. But that doesn't mean your happiness *level* cannot be changed. We can rise above our happiness set points, just as we can rise above our set points for weight or cholesterol. Genuinely happy people do not just sit around being content. They make things happen. They pursue new understandings, seek new achievements, and control their thoughts and feelings. We can also learn from others. If an unhappy person wants to experience interest, enthusiasm, contentment, peace, and joy, he or she can make it happen by learning the habits of a happy person.

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HAPPINESS?

Sonja Lyubomirsky: We tend to look for happiness in the wrong places. What we believe would make a huge difference in our lives actually, according to scientific research, makes only a small difference, while we overlook the true sources of personal happiness and well-being. Many of us think that moving into a bigger house, securing a promotion or pay raise, or flying first class will boost our happiness. But such pleasures are fleeting, leaving us no happier than we were before. The true keys to happiness lie in changing the way we think and behave, seeking out experiences such as savoring a beautiful moment and taking a picture of it, thanking a friend, writing a gratitude journal, or performing random acts of kindness. Such habits add up to create an upward spiral that boosts happiness.

Jim Harter: When we considered factors that explain both life evaluations and daily experiences, we found five areas that individuals can act on: career, social, financial, physical, and community. Career well-being is more than just having a job and it is relevant for people in all different life stages and situations . . . students, people who work in the home, people who are retired, self-subsistence farmers, and people in traditional work settings. It's really what you do with your life, how you spend your time, whether it is enjoyable and meaningful.

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Ed Diener: Here's what I would say to an auditorium of average people from Iowa (or wherever), if they asked me how to increase one's happiness: We can't control our genes, so why worry about that? We can control our behavior and our thinking, so that's what we focus on. It's not a scientific argument. It's a practical argument. Some of the most powerful things we can do involve our relationships with others.

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi: If one wants to improve the quality of everyday life, happiness may be the wrong place to start. Other feelings are much more influenced by what one does, who one is with, or the place one happens to be. These moods are more amenable to direct change, and because they are also connected to how happy we feel, in the long run they might lift our average level of happiness. For instance, how active, strong, and alert we feel depends a lot on what we do—these feelings become more intense when we are involved with a difficult task, and they get more attenuated when we fail at what we do, or when we don't try to do anything. The quality of life does not depend on happiness alone, but also on what one does to be happy. If one fails to develop goals that give meaning to one's existence, if one does not use the mind to its fullest, then good feelings fulfill just a fraction of the potential we possess. True happiness involves the pursuit of worthy goals. Without dreams, without risks, only a trivial semblance of living can be achieved.

CAN MONEY BUY HAPPINESS?

Sonja Lyubomirsky: The truth is that money *does* make us happy. But our misunderstanding, as one happiness researcher eloquently explains, is that “we think money will bring lots of happiness for a long time, and actually it brings a little happiness for a short time.” Being wealthy has its advantages, of course. But it doesn’t make us dramatically happier, she explains. The richest Americans, those earning more than ten million dollars annually, report levels of personal happiness only slightly greater than the office staffs and blue-collar workers they employ. The reason may be that wealthy people are preoccupied with staying wealthy. Meanwhile, in our effortful pursuit of such dead ends to pleasure, we end up ignoring other, more effective routes to well-being.

Ed Diener: Yes, money buys happiness, but there are important exceptions. Money is more than a fixed amount of legal tender. Wealth is, in part, also about your desires. Being satisfied with your paycheck, just like being satisfied with your life, is about your point of view. Studies have shown that an individual’s income is a poor predictor of their happiness. Some people with a lot of money could not meet their desires, and others with little money were able to do so. Materialistic people, that is, are seldom the happiest people because they want too much. It is generally good for your happiness to *have* money, but toxic to your happiness to *want* money too much.

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Bruno Frey: People make a mistake when it comes to predicting how much money will make them happy. Consider the individual who chooses a job with more income but a longer commute. If you get an increase in income, two-thirds to three-quarters of the happiness from that increase wears out in one year, because you get accustomed to a higher income level very quickly. But you never get used to a long commute.

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi: Material well-being is attractive and relatively easy to attain, but there's a point of diminishing returns. Kids that value material goals beyond a certain point end up not having many friends. They become selfish and more depressed. You can't pile up more things and expect an increase in well-being. The same thing holds true for society in general. There is only a very weak relationship between finances and satisfaction with life; billionaires in America are only infinitesimally happier than those with average incomes. One conclusion that the findings seem to justify is that beyond the threshold of poverty, additional resources do not appreciably improve the chances of being happy.

IS HAPPINESS CONTAGIOUS?

Sonja Lyubomirsky: Surrounding yourself with people who are happy is going to make you happier. Conversely, if you're married to a negative person, it's going to take a toll on you. The problem is that we adapt: We really have to work to appreciate what we have.

Ed Diener: It's certainly true that if you're around somebody that's giving you many compliments, you start giving people compliments yourself. If you're around people who are more positive in general, you get more positive. On the other hand, when you're unhappy and you're bitching all the time, you're not just affecting yourself, you're affecting other people, too, and you're also teaching them about how to act or not act.

IS HAPPINESS OVERRATED?

Ed Diener: We actually think it's underrated, rather than overrated. We think the reason everybody wants to be happy is because it's pleasant. It just feels good. We're saying, it's not just that. If you're happy, you function better. You're more sociable. You're a better citizen. You do volunteer work. You're healthier. All these things. Conversely, if you look at really unhappy people, angry and depressed people, they don't normally function well. Angry people are disruptive in group work. Depressed people, they're withdrawn, they have no energy. Nothing sounds good to them.

Unhappy Places

According to World Values Surveys from 1995 to 2007, the 10 unhappiest places on Earth are:

1. Zimbabwe, 2. Armenia, 3. Moldova, 4. Belarus, 5. Ukraine, 6. Albania, 7. Iraq, 8. Bulgaria, 9. Georgia, 10. Russia.

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Sonja Lyubomirsky: A recent review of all the available literature has revealed that happiness does indeed have numerous positive by-products, which appear to benefit not only individuals, but families, communities, and the society at large. The benefits of happiness include higher income and superior work outcomes (e.g., greater productivity and higher quality of work); larger social rewards (e.g., more satisfying and longer marriages, more friends, stronger social support, and richer social interactions); more activity, energy, and flow; better physical health (e.g., a bolstered immune system, lowered stress levels, and less pain); and even longer life. The literature, my colleagues and I have found, also suggests that happy individuals are more creative, helpful, charitable, and self-confident; have better self-control; and show greater self-regulatory and coping abilities.

HAPPINESS BLUE ZONES

How can you benefit from the insights of these researchers and thrive in your daily life? The answer goes back to the quiz you took at the beginning of this chapter. As the stories about the garbageman, housewife, and bedridden wheeler-dealer demonstrate, happiness comes in many shapes and sizes. Although we might think we know what we need to be happy, such as physical beauty, financial success, or the recognition of our peers, the scientific evidence points in a different direction. The true sources of happiness, the experts say, are deeper patterns of behavior and thinking

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in our lives—patterns that we can adjust if we just put our minds to it.

Fortunately, we don't have to start this process of change from scratch. As we'll see in the chapters that follow, scientists have already identified places around the world where people today are experiencing levels of happiness and well-being that are probably higher than yours or mine. All we have to do is figure out how they do it, and then adapt their lessons to fit our lives.

In pursuit of this quest, the National Geographic Society sent me around the world to visit four of the happiest regions on three continents to see if I could find common denominators—a common recipe for human happiness. In each place I talked to writers, economists, social scientists, demographers, physiologists, anthropologists, a prime minister, and ordinary people to piece together the local formula for happiness. I examined which government policies seemed to yield the greatest well-being, which cultural norms encouraged the most happiness, and which personal habits and environmental factors favored the greatest life satisfaction. I used a science-based approach to probe the one sure source of knowledge about happiness: the people who are verifiably experiencing it. In the chapters that follow, you may be surprised by what people told me. You might find their stories of happiness hard to believe, especially when they spring from conditions that are difficult or challenging. But in the end I think you'll discover that these stories will reveal new ways of thinking, and that the lessons they offer can help you get more joy out of

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each day—and ultimately set up your life so that true, authentic, and lasting happiness can ensue.

Measuring Happiness

A number of polls measure happiness on a world scale. Here are a few of the most significant polls and what they address:

World Database of Happiness

Started in 1984, this collection of thousands of scientific research reports on happiness from around the world, compiled by Ruut Veenhoven at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, examines the subjective enjoyment of life, including feelings correlated with happiness, and how nations around the world compare with one another in terms of happiness levels.

World Values Survey

This worldwide network of social scientists has conducted surveys in 97 nations since 1981. Conducted in five waves, in collaboration with the European Values Study, the surveys assess the impact of changing values on social and political life.

Gallup World Poll—This poll, which synthesizes survey information from 155 countries, uses Gallup's global information gathering resources to identify the strengths and challenges faced by different countries and regions. Subjects were asked questions about economic conditions, government and business, health care and well-being, infrastructure and education, and life satisfaction.

Latinobarómetro—This public opinion survey is conducted annually in 18 Latin American countries with more than 400 million people and measures public opinion, attitudes, and behaviors on topics including trade, democracy, trust in institutions, and other topical issues pertaining to Latin American countries.

Eurobarometer—Conducted by the Public Opinion Analysis sector of the European Commission, the Eurobarometer has measured public perception of quality of life in various European cities.