



The Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi said, "Happiness is the absence of striving for happiness." How do you define happiness in your life?

What Can Be Done About Unhappiness?

You may have heard that the U.S. no longer ranks among the world's 20 "happiest countries." America finished 23rd in Gallup's [World Happiness Report 2024](#) after placing 15th in 2023.

This is the first time the U.S. has not achieved top-20 status since the happiness report was first published in 2012. It is also the first time Gallup has stratified findings by age group. The results show a dichotomy between younger and older people. Among those under age 30, the U.S. ranks 62nd, with a score of 6.3 out of 10. For those over 60, the U.S. ranks in the top-10 happiest countries, with a score of 7.2 out of 10.

The results are based on responses from a representative sample of about 1,000 respondents in each of the nations featured in the report. Among more than 140

countries, Finland came in first for the seventh consecutive year; Afghanistan remained at the bottom of the list. The rankings are based on a three-year average self-assessment of quality of life based on a 0-10 scale, with 0 the worst-possible life and 10 the best-possible life.

When comparing generations, the study found that, on average, Baby Boomers (born before 1965) are happier than Millennials (born since 1980). Among Millennials, self-evaluation of quality of life declined with each year of age; among Baby Boomers, life satisfaction increased with age. Lower life satisfaction among young adults was also found in Canada, Australia and, to a lesser extent, parts of western Europe and in Great Britain.

Low happiness scores among teenagers and young adults appear to be influenced by factors that they perceive as beyond their capacity to control, such as global climate change, social inequities, political polarization, and unaffordable housing and education. For working parents with young children, childcare expenses are an added concern.

There are also post-pandemic ripple effects. For example, a study published in *Child Indicators Research* on [Diminished Adolescent Social Well-being During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) suggests that lower levels of social well-being stemming from lack of social engagement during the pandemic may be a risk factor for "adolescents developing generally jaded attitudes about their social networks and diminishing their potential engagement with sources of social support."

Measuring Happiness

You may wonder how it's possible to measure something as subjective and transitory as happiness, even over an extended period of time such as the three-year quality-of-life span used in the Gallup study. To weigh certain aspects of happiness, surveys and questionnaires with standardized scales are often used.

They include the:

- [Subjective Happiness Scale](#), a four-item scale of global subjective happiness.
- [Satisfaction with Life Scale](#), in which respondents are asked to rate their degree of agreement or disagreement with five statements.
- [Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale](#) or the Cantril ladder with rungs numbered 0 to 10, which Gallup adapted for its world happiness poll.

Other methods include experience sampling, in which participants are prompted to report their happiness levels at various points during the day; tracking physiological and psychological indicators, such as heart rate variability, cortisol levels and brain activity; and observing behaviors, such as facial expressions, body language and social interactions. Some researchers combine multiple indicators of well-being, into composite indices like the [Human Development Index](#) or the [Happy Planet Index](#).

Becoming Happier

In his new book, *The Science of Happiness: Seven Lessons for Living Well*, Bruce Hood, a British professor of developmental psychology in society at the University of Bristol, explains how to be happier by:

- Altering your ego
- Avoiding isolation
- Rejecting negative comparisons
- Being more optimistic
- Controlling your attention
- Connecting with others
- Getting out of your own head

Hood has also developed a happiness curriculum for college students and a four-week course for organizations and companies to help them prioritize the

well-being of their members and employees, including stress management and how to flourish in challenging environments. In a research paper, [Long term analysis of a psychoeducational course on university students' mental well being](#), published in *Higher Education*, Hood and colleagues in England and the U.S. report on the well-being of students years after they completed the happiness course. They found that consistency is essential. "Just doing a course – be that at the gym, a meditation retreat or an evidence-based happiness course like ours – is just the start: you must commit to using what you learn on a regular basis," Hood said.

A related [March 2024 press release](#) contains additional study findings for anyone who wants to be happier:

1. Talking to strangers induces happiness.
2. Focusing on your reputation via social media is detrimental.
3. Loneliness impairs your immune system.
4. Optimism increases life expectancy.
5. Giving gifts makes people happier than spending money on themselves.
6. The amount of sleep you get affects how well you are liked by others.
7. Walking in nature deactivates negative ruminations that can lead to depression.
8. Kindness and happiness are correlated.

Another useful happiness resource is the [Harvard Study of Adult Development](#), which contains more than 80 years of insights on factors that contribute to a long, healthy and fulfilling life. [The Good Life: What Makes Life Worth Living](#), by Robert Waldinger and Joshua Schulz, focuses on happiness and well-being based on the Harvard study findings. The conclusion: close relationships and social connections contribute to happier lives.

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