Who's Happy?  
New research reveals who’s really
Who’s Not?
living the good life.

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Does happiness favor those of a particular age, sex, or race? Does wealth enhance well-being? Does happiness come with having certain traits? Close friends? A marriage partner? An active faith?

These questions not only went unanswered during psychology’s first century, they went largely unasked. Traditionally psychology has focused on negative emotions, such as depression and anxiety, and ignored such positive emotions as happiness and satisfaction. That is now changing. A new cadre of researchers is offering a fresh perspective on an old puzzle: Who is happy— and why? Psychologists and sociologists have now exploded some myths about what makes for happiness, and the findings are remarkably consistent with Christian wisdom and what the Bible teaches.

Myths of happiness
Is happiness being young? middle-aged? retired? Many believe there are unhappy times of life—the stress-filled teen years, or the midlife-crisis years, or the declining years of old age. But interviews with several hundred thousand people of all ages reveal that no time of life is notably happier or unhappier. The ingredients of happiness change with age. And the emotional terrain varies with age (teens, unlike adults, usually come up from gloom or down from elation within an hour’s time). Yet tell me how old someone is and you have given me no clue to the person’s sense of well-being.

Nor do we find in rates of depression, suicide, or divorce any evidence of increased personal upheaval during the supposed early forties “midlife crisis” years. Many of us do face crisis times, but not at any predictable age. The “empty nest syndrome”—a sense of despondency and lost meaning when children leave the home—also turns out to be extremely rare. For most couples, the empty nest is a time when marital happiness rebounds after the stresses of child rearing.

Does happiness have a favorite sex? There are striking gender gaps in misery: Women are twice as vulnerable as men to disabling depression and anxiety, and men are five times as vulnerable as women to alcoholism and antisocial personality disorder. Yet happiness is equally available to either sex. In a 1980s survey of 169,776 people in 16 nations, 80 percent of men and 80 percent of women said they were at least “fairly satisfied” with life. Slightly less than a quarter of each sex declared themselves “very happy.”

Does happiness discriminate by race or culture? Knowing someone’s race also gives little clue to the person’s psychological well-being. African-Americans, for example, experience nearly as much happiness as European-Americans and are actually slightly less vulnerable to depression. Blacks and whites also score similarly on tests of self-esteem. Curiously, though, there are striking national differences in happiness, ranging from Portugal, where one in ten say they are very happy, to the Netherlands where four in ten say the same.

Does money buy happiness? More than ever, the American dream seems
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to be life, liberty, and the purchase of happiness. In 1991, 74 percent of America's entering collegians declared that a very important life goal was "becoming very well off financially"—nearly double the 39 percent who said the same in 1970. Most adults share this materialism, believing that 10 to 20 percent more income would make them happier, by relieving the stress of unpaid bills and enabling a few longed-for purchases.

Are they right? Let's make the question more specific: First, are people in rich countries happier than those in poor countries? Are the French happier than Hungarians? A little bit. But the association between national wealth and well-being is surprisingly modest. For example, during the 1980s the Irish had half the incomes and purchasing power of the West Germans. Yet year after year, the Irish were happier.

Second, within any country, are rich people the happiest? Having food, shelter, and safety is basic to our well-being. But once able to afford life's necessities, increasing levels of affluence matter surprisingly little. Wealth is like health: Although its absence can breed misery, having it is no guarantee of happiness. We need bread, yet happiness does not come by bread alone. In one survey, people on Forbes's list of wealthiest Americans reported only slightly greater happiness than other Americans; 37 percent were less happy than the average American. Even people who have won a state lottery or a British pool gain only a temporary jolt of joy. Satisfaction is not getting what you want; it is wanting what you have.

Third, as cultures become more affluent, do their people become happier? In 1957, as John Galbraith was about to describe us as The Affluent Society, our per-person income, expressed in today's dollars, was less than $8,000. Today it is $16,000, making us The Doubly Affluent Society. Compared to 1957, we have twice as many cars per person; we have microwave ovens, color TVs, VCRs, air conditioners, answering machines, and $12 billion a year worth of brand-name athletic shoes.

So, are we happier than we were 35 years ago? We are not. In 1957, 35 percent of Americans told the National Opinion Research Center they were "very happy." In 1991, with doubled American affluence, 31 percent said the same. To judge by soaring rates of depression, the quintupling of the violent-crime rate since 1960, the doubling of the divorce rate, the slight decline in marital happiness among the marital survivors, and the tripling of the teen suicide rate, we are richer and unhappier. How can we avoid the shocking conclusion: Economic growth in affluent countries gives little boost to human morale.

Realizing our capacity to adapt to changing circumstance—even to becoming rich or to becoming disabled—can be freeing. It can free us from envy, freeing the lifestyle of the rich and famous. It can free us from pointless spending on luxury items such as expensive cars or extravagant vacations—all purchased in a vain quest for an elusive joy. It can free us to share. And it can free us to invest ourselves in developing those attitudes, traits, relationships, and spiritual resources that do make for a joyful and joy-spreading spirit.

The traits of happy people

So, if happiness is available to those of any age, sex, or race, and to those of most income levels, who is happiest? Through life's ups and downs, some people's capacity for joy persists undiminished. In one National Institute of Aging study of 5,000 adults, the happiest people in 1973 were still relatively happy a decade later, despite changes in their work, their residence, their family status. Who are these chronically happy people? In study after study, four inner traits mark happy people's lives—self-esteem, a sense of personal control, optimism, and extroversion.

First, happy people like themselves. They agree with such statements as "I'm a lot of fun to be with" and "I have good ideas." Contrary to the myth that most Americans are groveling with low self-esteem, most people express moderately high self-esteem. Indeed, most
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exhibit “self-serving bias” (social psychology’s reinvention of “pride”) by believing themselves more ethical, more intelligent, less prejudiced, better able to get along with others, and healthier than the average person (as illustrated in Freud’s joke about the husband who said to his wife, “If one of us should die, I think I would go live in Paris”). This generally positive self-esteem helps explain why, contrary to those who would have us believe happiness is rare, nine in ten Americans describe themselves as at least “pretty happy.”

Second, happy people typically feel in control. Those who feel empowered rather than helpless typically do better in school, cope better with stress, and live more happily. When deprived of control over one’s life—an experience studied in prisoners, nursing home patients, and people living under totalitarian regimes—people suffer lower morale and worse health.

Third, happy people are optimistic. Optimists—those who agree, for example, that “when I undertake something new, I expect to succeed”—tend to be more successful, healthier, and happier. If restrained by a realistic awareness of our limits—recognizing that not everyone can be at the top, that half the teams must lose, that the mortality rate remains 100 percent—optimism pre-

Forth, happy people are outgoing. One could imagine opposite findings—that pessimists would live with greater gladness as things keep turning out better than expected, or that introverts would be happiest living serenely in their peaceful solitude. But in study after study, it is the sociable extroverts who report greater happiness. Outgoing people are temperamentally more high-spirited and less anxious about reaching out to others, which may explain why they marry sooner, get better jobs, and make more friends.

Although some of these traits are genetically influenced, people who seek greater happiness can apply one of social psychology’s arch principles: we are as likely to act ourselves into a way of thinking as to think ourselves into action. This phenomenon is social psychology’s version of another ancient Christian idea, concerning the interplay between obedience and faith, between doing the word and knowing it. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarized in The Cost of Discipleship, “Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.” Therefore, to become happier, act as happy people do. In experiments, people who feign high self-esteem actually feel better about themselves. So put on a happy face. Feign optimism. Simulate outgoingness. Going through the motions can trigger the emotions.

The relationships of happy people

We could easily imagine why close relationships might exacerbate illness and misery. Our closest relationships are fraught with stress. "Hell is others," surmised Sartre. Asked what caused yesterday’s greatest emotional strain, people’s most frequent answer is “family.” But their answer is the same when asked what prompted yesterday’s greatest pleasure.

Fortunately, the benefits of close relationships outweigh the strains. People who can name several friends with whom they share intimate concerns are healthier, less likely to die prematurely, and happier. In experiments, people relax as they confide painful experiences. In one study, 33 Holocaust survivors spent two hours recalling their experiences, often in detail never before disclosed. Fourteen months later, those who were most self-disclosing had the most improved health. Confiding, like confession, is good for the soul.

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Some psychologists believe that today’s epidemic levels of depression stem from impoverished social connections. Today, 24 percent of Americans live alone, up from 8 percent a half-century ago. In contrast to the independence valued in Asian societies, modern Western cultures celebrate independence, as when psychologist Carl Rogers claimed, “The only question which matters is, ‘Am I living in a way which is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?’”

In the biblical creation story, God formed the first person and then declared our social character: “It is not good that the man should be alone.” For more than nine in ten people, the most significant alternative to loneliness is marriage. While broken marital relationships are a source of much self-reported unhappiness, a supportive, intimate relationship is among life’s greatest joys. To paraphrase Henry Ward Beecher, “well-married a person is winged; ill-matched, shackled.”

Happily, three out of four married people say their spouse is their best friend, and four out of five say they would marry the same person again. Such feelings help explain why, over the 1970s and 1980s, 39 percent of married adults, but only 24 percent of never-married adults, told the National Opinion Research Center they were “very happy.” Without denying that divorce is sometimes a necessary step toward healing for the abused, more and more data reveal that an enduring, equitable, affectionate marriage promotes the well-being of both the partners and their children. Aware of this, the American Psychological Association recently rated “the decline of the nuclear family” as the number-one threat to mental health.

Faith and well-being
In some respects, the links between religion and mental health are impressive. This emerging fact will likely surprise many psychologists, who typically are less mindful of Jesus’ promise that his joy would be ours (John 15:11) than of Freud’s idea that religion is an illusion, even a guilt-producing “obsessional neurosis.”

Religious people (often defined as those who attend church regularly) are much less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce or be unhappily married, or to commit suicide. Religiously active people even tend to be physically healthier and to live longer. With other mental health indicators, the results are mixed. Religious people are somewhat less likely to feel in control of their lives. But they also are slightly less vulnerable to biologically influenced disorders—depression and schizophrenia.

Across North America and Europe, religious people also report higher levels of happiness and satisfaction with life. The most striking findings come from the Gallup Organization, which compared people low in “spiritual commitment” with highly spiritual people (who consistently agree with statements such as, “My religious faith is the most important influence in my life”). The highly spiritual were twice as likely to say they were “very happy.”

Many studies have focused on the link between religiousness and well-being among the elderly. One statistical research digest revealed that the two best predictors of well-being among older persons are health and religiousness. Elderly people are happier and more satisfied with life if religiously committed and active.

Other studies probe the connection between faith and coping with a crisis. Again, the link is positive. Compared to religiously inactive widows, recently widowed women who worship regularly report more joy in their lives. Compared to religiously active parents of disabled children, those with a deep religious faith are less vulnerable to depression. Those with a strong faith retain greater happiness after suffering divorce, unemployment, serious illness, or bereavement. Faith does not promise immunity from suffering. But it is linked with enhanced joy and a strengthened walk through valleys of darkness.

What faith offers
What explains these positive links between faith and well-being? Here are my hunches, some backed by research:

The Christian life provides social support. America has 294,000 congregations, each a support network for its active members. Faithful churchgoers possess a sense of connectedness, of being upheld by the ties that bind, of bearing one another’s burdens. People who experience such support are less vulnerable to physical and emotional disorders. The Pennsylvanian Amish, for example, are one-fifth as vulnerable to depression as other Americans.

Religious faith gives people something worth living and dying for. An important ingredient of well-being is a sense of meaning and purpose. As Rabbi Harold Kushner points out, “My religious faith satisfies the most fundamental human need of all. That is the need to know that somehow we matter, that our lives mean something, count as something more than just a momentary blip in the universe.”

The Christian gospel offers unconditional acceptance. For those struggling with self-esteem, Christian faith offers good news: The universe has a Creator who became human to demonstrate unconditional love for each of us. No longer do we need to define our self-worth by our achievements, our possessions, or others’ approval. We need only accept that we are accepted.

Christian discipleship allows people to work for something bigger than themselves. In the living out of grace, people discover meaning beyond the self. All four gospel writers record Jesus’ teaching that we find life by losing our lives. Indeed, happy people typically are not those grasping for happiness, but those focused on things beyond themselves.

Is the greater well-being enjoyed by spiritually committed people therefore partly a product of a greater altruism? Punitless research sheds some light. When confronted with minor emergencies, as when hearing someone in the next room fall off a ladder, highly religious people are not more instantly responsive. When making intentional choices about long-term altruism, the differences become real. A Gallup survey reported in a 1990 analysis of Faith and Philanthropy in America that 24 percent of Americans who attend church every week account for 48 percent of all charitable giving. Repeated surveys likewise find a near-doubled rate of volunteerism among weekly church attenders.

An eternal perspective. “Hope,” said Samuel Johnson, is “the chief happiness which this world affords.” Biblical hope allows us to see beyond whatever evil confronts us, knowing in the end that all shall be well.

Although faith may not entail “the good life,” it does enrich our lives—so that C. S. Lewis could write, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.”

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