

Happiness: Health and Productivity Booster

We all enjoy the feelings associated with happiness, and as someone whose career centers around health and wellness I want those enjoyable feelings to be a part of everyday life for everyone. Research has demonstrated time and time again that feelings of happiness are associated with increased health, both physical and mental health. Indeed, the “science of happiness” has long been a topic for research in many fields: traditional physical health fields and also for sociologists and psychologists.

We know there is a significant and firm relationship between being healthy and happy. A study published in *Health Affairs* linked the happiness of individuals to their overall health more strongly than it is to wealth. Yes, having more money makes people happy to a certain extent. Wealthier people as a group are happier than the most poor among us, and generally speaking we know that wealthier countries are happier than extremely impoverished and poor nations. Most interesting though when you look carefully at the research is that the magnitude of difference is not as significant as you might imagine. And once a certain level of wealth is reached, it no longer has any influence on the happiness of individuals or countries levels of happiness.

Trying to carefully define happiness is not an easy task, as it comprises not only feelings of contentment, but also involves self-worth and dignity. Difficulty also arises when scientists try to measure the happiness of individuals or groups. Some countries have created a sort of “National Well-Being Account” to compliment and add to traditional economic measures like the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). One such long existing data set is the World Database of Happiness, which is based on numerous surveys and polls. Asked to rate their happiness on a scale of 1 to 10, Americans and Canadians average approximately 7.4. But with a measured value of 8.5, the people of Costa Rica are the happiest in the world, according to the World Database. Though it is not a wealthy nation, Costa Rica has a terrific climate, a relatively long life expectancy, a stable democratic government, and comparatively little violence.

Of course, there are subtleties and complications associated with this line of research. People in poor nations may feel as happy as those in wealthy ones simply because they expect less. And those who are well-off and eager to be even more so, may not be satisfied. Context matters in other ways, too. For example, obesity is often, though not always, accompanied by deep level of measured unhappiness; thus an example of the strong link between physical wellness and feelings of overall contentment and happiness.

We do know that research has consistently identified several attributes of those who report the highest level of personal happiness. Chiefly among these are supportive friends, love of family, respect from, and feeling valued by, colleagues, and a sense of being in control. Two other consistent traits of those that are happiest are being optimistic and possessing a positive

attitude. All of these qualities tend to over time make people the happiest and most productive in their work and home lives. From a wellness perspective, this is certainly an overarching and far reaching goal.