

## ***“The Key to Happiness May be in Your Pocket”***

The U.S. ranks 15<sup>th</sup> in the world in our level of happiness, according to the 2015 World Happiness Report (Commissioned by the United Nations). We’re just behind Mexico, and way behind most of Scandinavia. Does that surprise you? Don’t you think *you’re* happier than that? This is an important question because, you see, how we feel and what makes us feel that way dramatically affects our health, our longevity, our wealth, and even how we are governed.

- **Study “Happiness”? Are You Kidding?** None other than Thomas Jefferson wrote that the care of human life and happiness is the only legitimate object of good government. So, if promoting social well-being, security, and freedom are at least some of the reasons we enact our laws and policies, doesn’t it make sense to see if they are actually successful in this regard?
- **How Do You Study Happiness?** The World Happiness Report (172 pages!) looks at GDP per capita, healthy life expectancy, generosity, absence of corruption, social support, and freedom, among other factors. Africa is the “unhappiest” continent, while Switzerland is the happiest country, followed closely by Iceland and Denmark.
- **Can Money Make You Happier?** To a point, yes, it can. A University of Michigan study (Wolfers and Stevenson) found that, globally, rich people are generally happier than people in poorer countries. However, happiness does not rise appreciably after an annual income of approximately \$75,000 (Kahneman and Deaton).
- **It’s all Greek to Me:** To the Greeks, happiness had two components. Momentary pleasure and well-being were termed *hedonia*; and *eudemonia* referred to a flourishing, meaningful life. Think of *eudemonia* as your general feeling of well-being or your *happiness baseline* . . . and *hedonia* as those occasional spikes in happiness that occur. The relationship and balance between the two is important.
- **The Hedonic Treadmill:** The momentary thrill of buying something we want (*hedonia*) can easily subside or get stale over time. Studies show these feelings don’t last for very long (“Happy Money”, Dunn and Norton), and that we often seek another quick happiness fix to maintain (or regain) our “happiness high”. We’re on a treadmill, and it’s hard to get off. Without a core sense of purpose and happiness (*eudemonia*), people live life in adrenaline spikes driven by heavy spending or thrill seeking. Ultimately, this proves unhealthy and unsustainable.

- **What Makes You Happy?** If you need that next online purchase, the home remodel, or a new car every couple of years to make you feel good, you may be on the hedonic treadmill. Your happiness peaks at the time of purchase, and trails off within weeks. Two activities, though, do offer deeper and longer-lasting feelings of happiness: spending money on someone else, and spending money on experiences.
- **When You Give it Away:** Are you one of those people who gets more joy watching someone open a present you gave them than in receiving one yourself? People report greater satisfaction from spending on others rather than on themselves in study after study (Dunn; Lyubomirsky, et al). Even people from relatively poor countries and few resources found this to be true. Making a difference in someone else's life, even for the moment, pays us huge dividends.
- **When You Buy an Experience:** Taking a trip with friends and family is the heavyweight of deep, enduring happiness. You're spending money on "doing" rather than "having". People report more pleasure in the anticipation, more happiness in the sharing, and greater gratification and contentment in reliving and recalling the experience, even when it's long past.
- **Staying Happy's a Battle:** Today, in the midst of national elections, we are told that things are terrible. We're bludgeoned by half-truths and outright lies in order to fuel our fears. Sure, there are many issues which we must tackle as a nation, but *–by objective standards–* there have been many times when things were far worse. Few of us don't have the freedom to do what we want or own what we want. Maybe it's time to take a breath and count our blessings.

**Happiness is a universal aspiration among Homo sapiens** yet it's elusive for a lot of us. Even for people of ample means, *how* we spend our money is as important as how much we've got. Greater happiness comes from sharing experiences, investing in others, in not spending money we don't have, and in being thankful for what we already have.

***This is why we say most of us hold the keys to our own happiness.*** Maybe it's right there in front of us. Don't let other people tell you it's not.

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