

The secret of happiness and the meaning of life

Countries get richer but people don't keep getting happier

Western governments traditionally have based their policies on trying to increase the amount of money made by the country. However, research has shown that although many countries have got richer the people in them haven't got that much happier. Many governments have therefore started researching 'life satisfaction' to find out what their policy aims really should be. What does make their citizens happier? What is the meaning of life?

A UK government report pulled together what was known about this issue. You can find it at www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/strategy/assets/paper.pdf . Its findings are summarised below

It's partly in your genes

Differences in life satisfaction are partly due to factors we are born with

Personality plays a part

Optimism, extroversion and self-esteem are important to life satisfaction

Money isn't that big a factor

Money does help people be happier but other things are important too e.g. relationships and employment. Once you reach a certain level of income, extra cash may not increase happiness that much

Relationships are important

Having supportive friends, family and workmates are important. Having a successful marriage (or presumably partnership) is even more important. People who take part in community life are also happier

Work can actually help people be satisfied

A 'good' job includes

- Chances to use skills
- Control over what you do
- Variety
- Support from supervisors
- Contact with others
- Money
- Social position
- Job security

Education is mainly important in helping people earn enough

Formal education helps people earn enough money to get beyond the point where poverty makes them unhappy. Education in itself doesn't seem generally to improve people's happiness very much however.

My own view

In the past I have produced guidelines on what schools could teach young people in health and wellbeing classes. My curriculum covers some of the above issues in a little bit more detail. Below is a summary. I hope they are useful for people of all ages.

Human Needs

I would suggest that a focus on human needs, as well as the needs of the natural world, should inform everything we do.

Humans have biological needs which are both physical and psychological. These are of course intertwined. Physical needs include food, water, air, hygiene, safe environments, protection for the body, exercise, touch and rest. Humanistic psychologist John Heron believes our psychological needs are

- To love and be loved
- To understand and be understood
- To be chosen and to choose (i.e. how we live our lives on a daily basis and not just who we are with)

He also thinks that it is very important that we are able to share and release emotions. If our physical or psychological needs are not met our health and happiness will suffer. This could be directly through turning to inappropriate coping mechanisms, such as smoking, to get by.

Power

The word 'power' is often used negatively. It can have connotations of 'power over' and abuse, or simply to do with money, political authority etc. I use it here to mean how far we can meet our own real needs and those of others. Personal power depends on an individual's skills, knowledge and feelings:

1. Self-esteem
 - a. How far we can make and implement choices in our lives, however difficult, and are not just helpless victims
 - b. How far we believe that we deserve to have our needs met and be happy
2. Decision-making skills
 - a. Aware of our own conditioning. i.e. an understanding of how the family, friends, media etc effect our judgements, and also the processes we go through currently in making a decisions
 - b. The ability to contact our own real needs

- c. Thinking skills, including an understanding of learning from ‘mistakes’ and concept of risks
 - d. Emotional Intelligence, i.e. how far we understand and can utilise the link between our rational processes and our feelings
 - e. Ethical awareness, i.e. how far we have examined some basic philosophical issues, such as our rights against the rights of others, how far we should obey society’s rules etc. (So we can base decisions not only on what we can do but what we should do)
 - f. Specific knowledge about the actual issue or problem
3. Interpersonal skills
 - a. Communication skills
 - b. Dealing with conflict: Co-operation and conflict
 4. Understanding the system
 - a. Individuals and organisations that can help us with personal issues
 - b. Individuals and organisations concerned with making the World a better place

Constraints on our needs and power

Individuals of course do not always get their needs met by using their own power. Our society limits our abilities to meet our real needs in two main ways. One is through the way society is structured, for example not everybody has the same access to resources. The second way is that our conditioning limits us. So we really believe that as men we should behave in a certain way, that as a woman we aren’t capable of particular things etc. These limits have evolved from how society is structured and are based around some of the following factors

- Gender
- Class
- Race
- Age

They are based around power inequalities and the idea that one group is better than another. So men are superior to women, the rich to the poor, working age adults to the elderly and the young.

We need to work out ways of making a fairer world where everyone can meet their own needs. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett wrote ‘Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better’. They present research into how even more well off people have better lives in more equal societies e.g. Japan and Sweden. This is because a range of problems are linked to inequality e.g. crime, mental illness etc and these make life worse for everyone.

