

Three New Ideas About Happiness and Well-Being

Psychologists are questioning whether our current understanding of well-being is too limiting and what else is important for a good life.

BY KIRA M. NEWMAN | AUGUST 7, 2023

Last month, around 1,000 people from over 56 countries gathered at the International Positive Psychology Association's 8th World Congress (IPPA) in Vancouver, Canada, to share cutting-edge insights on the science of well-being.



This year more than ever, there was an acknowledgement that the ways we think about happiness—and the studies that have been conducted—are mainly based on Western ideas and Western participants. This not only marginalizes the experiences of different communities, argued some researchers, but deprives everyone of the fullest picture of what it means to live well and be well.

How might our goals and our everyday decisions change if we thought about well-being in new ways? What kind of benefits might we see in our own lives, and in our communities? Here are some emerging ideas about happiness and well-being that you might want to ponder in your own life.

1. Psychological richness

What makes a good life? In positive psychology at least, there have been two main answers to that question: a happy life or a meaningful one.

A happy life brings you comfort, joy, security, and fun—you feel good and satisfied. Meanwhile, a meaningful life is more about feeling purposeful and significant, like you made a difference. Of course, our lives are usually a mix of both, with some people valuing one kind of pursuit more than the other.

But a few years ago, Shigehiro Oishi, a researcher at the University of Virginia, asked a provocative question: Is there a third kind of good life, one that isn't defined by happiness or meaning?

He was motivated by a few puzzling findings, including research suggesting that conservatives and Facebook users with less diverse social networks tend to be happier. Did that mean that liberal thinking and diverse connections weren't paths to a good life?

Eventually, his explorations led him to what he calls a *psychologically rich* life: a life of curiosity, adventure, novelty and variety, exploration, and openness. Our lives become more psychologically rich when we study abroad, read certain kinds of books, change our perspectives, and experience dramatic life events. If your life is psychologically rich, you'd probably say that you've seen and learned a lot.

If this pathway to a good life piques your interest, think about adding more spontaneity and playfulness into your day; find new things to try and learn, and be open to where they might take you. While happiness and meaning may fluctuate more alongside the ups and downs of life, psychological richness may be something we can slowly build up over time, new experience by new experience.

2. Balance and harmony

Every year, the Gallup World Poll asks people from over 150 countries about their well-being, querying them about how satisfied they are with life and whether they smiled, laughed, or felt enjoyment the day before (among other things).

Implicit in these questions is a certain idea about what well-being is, which is also reflected in the recommendations you might see in the media about how to be happier. It's a kind of energetic happiness that is characterized by feelings of excitement, enthusiasm, and elation.

But a group of researchers are trying to study and elevate a different kind of happiness that has been somewhat neglected in well-being research: quiet feelings of calm, balance, and harmony.

Starting in 2020, the Global Well-Being Initiative has worked with Gallup to ask people how calm, content, at peace, in balance, and in harmony they feel in their daily lives. And they've learned some interesting things: For example, when you ask people around the world whether they'd prefer an exciting life or a calm life, most say they'd like a calm life. Even though this idea of calm is inspired by Eastern notions of well-being, it is relevant to people globally. And people who experience more balance, harmony, and peace are more satisfied with their lives.

What does that mean for us? If you aspire to more calm, some research suggests it's more often found in the moment—when you practice mindfulness, or tune in to what you appreciate about your life right now. It may also mean embracing negative emotions, as part of the full spectrum of what it means to be human.

3. Connection to your culture

While there's much to learn from cultures around the world about what makes a good life, we can't forget about our own culture. In fact, more and more research is finding that engaging in cultural practices and connecting to your cultural identity is a strong pathway to well-being.

At IPPA, we heard about the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework, which was created by community leaders in Canada as a way to understand First Nations well-being. "The cultural values, sacred knowledge, language, and practices of First Nations are essential determinants of individual, family, and community health and wellness," their report states.

In one study, for example, Indigenous participants who engaged in cultural practices like prayer, smudge, sweat lodge, and fasting increased their wellness by 8-10%, reported Carol Hopkins at IPPA.

Other studies back this up. For example, research finds that Indigenous youth can find healing, strength, and well-being by engaging with their culture, traditions, and community, and that the Latino values that caregivers nurture in their children help them grow up to be kind and connected to others. According to another new study mentioned at IPPA, identifying as Black helps people feel more satisfied with life even when they're experiencing financial hardship.

"People have greater well-being when they're involved in passing on knowledge to young people, engaging with their community, participating in cultural events, and developing a strong sense of identity and self-worth," write Elizabeth Doery and her coauthors.

All these insights remind us that there isn't one well-defined pathway to a good and happy life, and that we can learn a lot if we're open and curious enough to see what other paths are out there.

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