

# The World's Happiest People Share These 15 Things in Common

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Americans' satisfaction with their personal lives reached a near-record low in 2024, with just 47% expressing high satisfaction
- › Journalist Dan Buettner spoke with Dan Witters, research director of the Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index, who revealed 15 interconnected elements that often signify authentic happiness
- › These "cowbell metrics" often occur synergistically and, when they do, are a harbinger of contentedness and joy
- › Among the 15 elements are making time for vacations with family and friends and using your strengths to do what you do best daily
- › Eating healthy every day, visiting the dentist regularly and feeling safe and secure in your community are also important for happiness

Americans' satisfaction with their personal lives reached a near-record low in 2024, with just 47% expressing high satisfaction. The finding, from a Gallup poll,<sup>1</sup> suggests economic uncertainty is to blame, but finances are just one factor in finding happiness. Physical health, social connections and a sense of purpose also play a role, as do other, more concrete, variables.

Journalist Dan Buettner, author of "The Blue Zones of Happiness: Lessons From the World's Happiest People," spoke with Dan Witters, research director of the Gallup

National Health and Well-Being Index, while doing research for his book.<sup>2</sup>

Witters revealed a set of interconnected elements that often signify authentic happiness. These so-called "cowbell metrics" often occur synergistically and, when they do, are a harbinger of contentedness and joy.

## **15 Habits of Happy People**

Witters told Buettner that if these 15 statements describe you, there's a good chance you're happier than most other people:<sup>3</sup>

1. You manage your finances well and live within your means. You have enough money to do everything you want to do.
2. You set and reach goals on an ongoing basis.
3. You always make time for trips or vacations with family and friends.
4. You use your strengths to do what you do best every day.
5. You feel safe and secure in your community.
6. You learn something new or interesting every day.
7. You have someone in your life who encourages you to be healthy.
8. You eat healthy every day.
9. You eat five servings of fruits and vegetables at least four days every week.
10. You go to the dentist at least once per year.
11. In the last 12 months, you have received recognition for helping to improve the city or area where you live.
12. You don't smoke.
13. You are of a normal, healthy weight.
14. You exercise at least 30 minutes at least three days per week.
15. You are active and productive every day.

## Where Are the Happiest Places on Earth?

Blue Zones are areas in the world where people tend to be unusually long-lived. Buettner has spent decades studying the five blue zones — Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; Nicoya, Costa Rica; Ikaria, Greece; and Loma Linda, California — where some of the world's longest-living people tend to live.

He's also identified blue zones of happiness — areas of the world he describes as "happiness hotspots." Among them are countries he found embodied three types of happiness that he could measure:<sup>4</sup>

- Life satisfaction, measured by people rating their lives on a scale of 1 to 10
- Purpose, measured by rating level of engagement with meaningful daily activities
- Daily enjoyment, which is measured by asking people to report how many times they felt joy, laughed or smiled in the last 24 hours

Singapore, Buettner says, epitomizes happiness from life satisfaction. As the happiest country in Asia, people in Singapore, he found, "like a clear and easy path to success, and they don't mind working hard. They prefer security over freedom, and they want to live out largely conservative values." In Denmark, however, people enjoy happiness from their high sense of purpose:<sup>5</sup>

*"In Denmark, people live with more purpose than anywhere else. All their health care, social security, and education is covered. They have almost all their daily needs taken care of, so they don't need to keep up with the Joneses. This pushes people into careers they love. The Danes work 37 hours a week, belong to clubs, and are able to pursue their passions and use their strengths."*

Having a sense of purpose and staying productive, for instance, were shown to promote longevity in The Longevity Project, a Stanford study spanning 80 years.<sup>6</sup> The concept of "eudaimonic well-being," coined by Aristotle, also refers to a type of happiness derived from endeavors that foster a deeper sense of purpose, life meaning or self-actualization.

This might include your career, family life, volunteering efforts or even pursuits like attending a cooking class. Additionally, studies indicate that people whose happiness stems from eudaimonic sources have favorable gene-expression profiles.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, in Costa Rica, the people prioritize and embrace daily enjoyment:<sup>8</sup>

*"It's green, there's easy access to nature, and there's a feeling of equality as everybody has their basic needs covered. They prioritize social interaction, and they will almost never work extra hours if it means they have to forego a good party. They also prioritize family – Sunday afternoons are spent with family and big long lunches. They are also religious, and research shows that religious/spiritual people are happier."*

## **Communities With These Features Promote Happiness and Longevity**

You can still find happiness even if you don't live in one of the happiest places on Earth. Buettner states that communities designed with certain metrics in mind may promote longevity and well-being.<sup>9</sup> This includes access to healthy food from farmers markets and a clean environment, along with trustworthy politicians, police and neighbors.

Walkability, or safe streets and sidewalks that promote physical activity and social connections, are also important, as is access to nature. Indeed, spending time in nature may significantly improve well-being, including benefits to:<sup>10</sup>

- Perceived stress
- Relaxation
- Positive and negative emotions
- Sense of wholeness
- Transcendence

Buettner also mentioned civic engagement, or active participation in city governance to uphold and enhance quality of life, affordable and regular access to dental care services,

and people-friendly streets that prioritize humans over cars as useful for fostering happy communities.<sup>11</sup> Within the U.S., Buettner noted that cities with government leaders who favor quality of life over unchecked development tend to be happier.<sup>12</sup>

Further, cities with bikeable and walkable infrastructure tend to have happier populations, while providing access to parks and green spaces contributes to residents' overall happiness. Moreover, reducing fast food and junk food consumption while making fruits and vegetables more affordable and accessible leads to happier and healthier residents.<sup>13</sup>

## **Happiness and Longevity Go Hand in Hand**

Experiencing emotional well-being, positive mood, joy, happiness, vigor, energy and other measures of "positive affect," along with positive dispositions like life satisfaction, hopefulness, optimism and a sense of humor, is associated with increased survival in healthy people, including reduced cardiovascular mortality.<sup>14</sup>

In short, higher levels of happiness predict longer life expectancy. In a study of 6,073 older adults, happiness was significantly associated with lower mortality.<sup>15</sup>

Psychological health factors, like feeling depressed and scores on mental health and self-health, were most important (60%) in explaining how happiness relates to living longer.

Physical health factors also played a role (33%) in how happiness protects against early death. This effect was similar to other factors like age, support from others and lifestyle choices. Further, according to Buettner:<sup>16</sup>

*"Health and happiness go hand in hand. You cannot pull the two apart, and one doesn't exist without the other. If you are among the happiest 20 percent of people, you live around eight years longer than the saddest. So a real strategy for living longer is getting happier.*

*In the original blue zones regions, where people live the longest, healthiest lives, people tended to be happy. Their environment and culture nudged residents into*

*positive behaviors that improved life satisfaction."*

Happy people even tend to get sick from colds and flu less often. Researchers evaluated over 300 individuals for their emotional style, which included assessing how often they experience positive emotions, such as happiness, pleasure and relaxation, and negative emotions like anxiety, hostility and depression.<sup>17</sup> The participants were then exposed to one of two cold viruses via nasal droplets.

Across both viruses, individuals with a happier disposition had a reduced risk of catching a cold. Specifically, one-third of those with a negative emotional style (NES) contracted a cold, whereas only 1 in 5 of those with a positive emotional style (PES) became ill. The researchers noted:<sup>18</sup>

*"Although PES was associated with lower levels of endocrine hormones and better health practices, these differences could not account for different risks for illness ... The tendency to experience positive emotions was associated with greater resistance to objectively verifiable colds. PES was also associated with reporting fewer unfounded symptoms and NES with reporting more."*

In a separate study, nearly 200 volunteers underwent assessment for their emotional style and were then exposed to either a cold or flu virus. Not only were individuals with a positive emotional style less prone to illness, but they also reported experiencing fewer symptoms. "These results indicate that PES may play a more important role in health than previously thought," the researchers noted.<sup>19</sup>

## **What Can You Do To Be Happier?**

Buettner believes that up to 50% of happiness is controlled by each individual, while the rest is dictated by a combination of genes and luck.<sup>20</sup> This means there's plenty you can do to get happier, starting today. When asked what you can do right now to become happier, Buettner suggested:<sup>21</sup>

*"Make a new happy friend – that's one of the best things you can do. Your happiness will go up 15 percent. And volunteer, even if you think you don't have*

*the time. People who find meaningful ways to give back are happier. Also, do your best to always sleep 7.5 hours a night. People who sleep 6 hours a night are 30 percent less happy than people who sleep more."*

People who sleep well are also more satisfied with life, even after controlling for other factors like personality.<sup>22</sup> "As many societies become more competitive and market-oriented, sleep is easily regarded as a waste of time (and money). However, sacrificed sleep may create a vicious cycle of making the world appear as a zero-sum competition, which aggravates interpersonal stress," researchers wrote in *Frontiers in Psychology*, adding:<sup>23</sup>

*"What constitutes a good life? Many people in modern society may shove a 'good sleep' below other priorities, such as high status or income. However, our study suggests that this inconspicuous daily routine not only restores the body, but also elevates the mind's view of life."*

Having meaningful conversations with those around you is also conducive to happiness – much more so than small talk. In one study, small talk was defined as "uninvolved conversation of a banal nature," in which only trivial information was exchanged. A substantive conversation was defined as one in which meaningful information was exchanged.<sup>24</sup>

Compared to the unhappiest participants, the happiest participants spent 25% less time alone and 70% more time talking. However, while talking, they had one-third as much small talk and twice as many substantive conversations.<sup>25</sup> It could be, then, that simply making an effort to have deeper conversations could be a key to increasing happiness.<sup>26</sup>

*"Together, the findings demonstrate that the happy life is social rather than solitary and conversationally deep rather than superficial ... On one hand, well-being may be causally antecedent to having substantive interactions. Happy people may be 'social attractors' that facilitate deeper social encounters.*

*On the other hand, deep conversations may actually make people happier. Just like self-disclosure can instill a sense of intimacy in a relationship, deep*

*conversations may instill a sense of meaning in the interaction partners. Therefore, our results raise the interesting possibility that happiness can be increased by facilitating substantive conversations."*

So, putting effort into your social relationships, particularly nurturing those that provide deep, meaningful conversations, will pay off in terms of happiness, but addressing other elements — like finances, productivity and purpose — is also essential to creating a well-rounded, joyful life.

## Sources and References

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