

Government seeks secret of keeping us all happy

Ministers' thinking is being influenced by new research that shows the contented live longer

Gaby Hinsliff, political editor
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It is a simple question, but it may just reveal whether or not you will live to a ripe old age: does somebody love you?

Those who can confidently answer 'yes' are significantly more likely to be alive for the next 10 years than those who feel all alone. For love is a more accurate factor than smoking in predicting life expectancy, according to David Halpern, a senior policy adviser in the Downing Street strategy unit.

His work on the science of happiness is increasingly influencing government. He says adored people are happy people, and the happier they are, the longer and more productive lives they lead.

Such ideas may raise eyebrows, but they are being taken increasingly seriously within government as the startling impact of happiness on citizens' lives - and lifespans - becomes clearer.

'There is a study of college graduation photographs, the sort where you are told to smile,' Halpern told The Observer. 'A third of people have a true smile, about a third have got a fake smile, and the rest look miserable. People have used those photographs [to trace the students' future lives] and they are predictive of hard outcomes like your life expectancy and the state of your marriage.'

A similar study in nuns, meanwhile, analysing statements given when entering cloisters, showed life expectancy varying by nearly a decade between the happiest and unhappiest. And love, it seems, has the biggest impact of all: 'There is a pretty strong relationship between subjective wellbeing and longevity. The single strongest predictor of whether you will be alive in 10 years' time is whether you say yes to the question, "does somebody love you?"'

While the biological relationship between happiness and health is unclear, research has shown happy people have lower blood pressure and are less likely to abuse drink or drugs. Being shown kindness can even produce a measurable surge of oxytocin - the 'bonding' hormone released by breastfeeding mothers and couples during orgasm - which has a de-stressing effect.

Halpern's surprising findings are at the heart of the forthcoming policy review designed to establish Tony Blair's legacy. Ideas now being studied by ministers include proposals to stimulate kindness towards others - shown to make both giver and receiver happier - by offering special 'community credits' to those who do good works. In Japan, for example, such a scheme

funds community care for the elderly.

Japanese couples who live too far from their ageing parents to look after them will 'adopt' an elderly stranger locally and care for them instead, earning credits that their own parents can use to 'buy' similar volunteer care near by. The US state of Minnesota has established a similar system of 'community service dollars', where volunteering to care earns the caregiver favours in return.

A pro-happiness administration, Halpern argues, would prioritise reducing unemployment - a critical cause of unhappiness - over reducing inflation, which makes people unhappy but less so, and concentrate on improving parenting skills, since strong attachment between parents and young children is a strong indicator of future happiness.

It would also value more highly informal care, such as looking after elderly relatives; promote volunteering; and most controversially, ditch public service targets in favour of targets to ensure clients are satisfied: 'Do we say to health professionals, "We will scrap 95 per cent of those targets and the one thing we want you to worry about is whether your users are happy with what you do"?' said Halpern, who argues that what patients actually say they want most is respect and dignity.

A pro-happiness government might also treat public servants differently. In one of Halpern's studies doctors asked to make a diagnosis from x-rays did so faster and more creatively when offered sweets while working, which boosted their mood.

Many of his ideas are already being picked up in cabinet: Alan Johnson will publish a new parenting strategy later this month, while Work and Pensions Secretary John Hutton will sell a forthcoming welfare crackdown partly on the basis that working makes people healthier and happier. New ways of providing community care, such as the Japanese trading scheme, are also being debated inside the policy review.

'There's no doubt that ministers are really interested in [this issue]. We have to figure out what are the policy choices - what would a community-service pound look like?' said Halpern.

Other findings - such as that a materialistic culture of keeping up with the Joneses fuels unhappiness, since someone will always have possessions more desirable than yours - are ahead of their time. Halpern admits government is not ready for taxes on consumption. None the less his findings show that increased economic prosperity has not produced happier citizens. 'When you look at wealthy nations, GDP is less important than the measures of institutional freedoms,' said Halpern.

For ultimately, according to Halpern, our happiness relies on those closest to us: 'The way in which people treat each other is really, really important. Acts of consideration and kindness loom very large.' In other words, to do yourself a favour - first do a favour for someone else. It could just save your life.

Ways to happiness

- **Move nearer the office** Commuting, says Halpern, is the best example of something people think will make them happier - buying a bigger house further out of the city - which actually has a proven negative effect.
- **Get married** But you don't necessarily have children. Happiness peaks in people when they are in their twenties and declines through their thirties and

forties, the childraising years. It doesn't peak again until you retire. Evidence suggests the strain of combining job and family causes the happiness dip - although children should prove their own reward.

- **Earn at least £25,700 a year** Below this sum, individuals are less happy than average. But don't fret about earning too much more - graduates who state making money is a goal in life have lower life expectancy.
- **Cultivate your garden** A shortcut to happiness is so-called 'flow' activities, where the brain is sufficiently engaged to allow you to switch off daily worries. Gardening is a good example.
- **Get out more** Scandinavians, the happiest nations in Europe, tend to spend increased wealth on socialising more. Anglo-Saxons practise greater isolation as they grow richer, for instance by buying children televisions in their bedrooms which separate the family.