

Leo Bormans

The World Book of
HAPPINESS.

**100 experts
from 50 countries**
*share how to find happiness
in difficult times*



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The Penguin Moment

‘What’s your happiness moment?’ the journalist asked. ‘The Penguin Moment,’ I replied. He allowed me to explain. I’d gone to pick up my four-year-old grandson from school for the first time. There you are, standing at the enormous, unfamiliar school gate in the city. Along with a hundred other parents and grandparents you don’t know from Adam. The school bell rings. The gate swings open.

My instructions were clear – I have to find the ‘penguin classroom’. I follow the arrows, paying no attention to the zebras and the ducks. It’s quite a search. Then, there we are. In front of us, a knot of twenty-five excited toddlers. And just as many would-be guardians around me. In a second, my grandson’s eyes meet mine. He grins, grabs his things and rushes over to me. Nothing else matters. Not for him, not for me. **Unconditional trust.** I’ve often wondered how penguin parents and chicks find each other in the mass of waddling creatures on such a vast ice floe. I don’t know and I don’t understand. But one thing I do know: a ‘Penguin Moment’ is the ultimate happiness. It only lasts a second and I hope with all my heart that everyone has a chance to enjoy such an experience. Could this be ‘the essence’ of happiness?

I heard Professor Barbara Fredrickson (USA) offer a scientific explanation for it before. She uses *The World Book of Happiness* in her classes and later in this book explains what happens in our brains during such **micro-moments of positivity**. Those wonderful, brief moments of intense joy, gratitude and pleasure have an incredible effect on two domains: horizontal and vertical. They ‘broaden’ our view: we see our connection with others, make creative connections and see everything more clearly. And they ‘strengthen’ us: we change, grow, and become better versions of ourselves. The more, the better. With the 3:1 ratio, your life significantly changes for the better. In fact, the benefits only materialise when you experience three times as many such small positive emotions as negative ones. The good news: you can seek out, nur-

ture and create those micro-moments, often despite everything, in difficult circumstances. We reached the same conclusion in a large-scale survey of 7,000 participants who received small positive tips daily or weekly for a month. The long-term impact of this is measurably significant and tangible, especially if people apply it creatively in their own way. The essence is found in ‘other people’ rather than ‘my things’. And the feeling is reciprocal. Happiness is relational.

But I want to refrain from navel-gazing and look beyond the ‘penguin classroom’ and the little life around us. Fifteen years ago, I began my research for the first *World Book of Happiness*. It became an international bestseller, and the President of the European Council gifted it to 200 world leaders, urging them to **put quality of life, well-being and happiness on the political agenda** as well. It was followed by *The World Book of Love* and *The World Book of Hope*, for which Nobel laureate and former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan wrote the foreword. The how-to books and children’s books based on them also became an international success, and I now have the good fortune to travel the world, from Bhutan to the Masai in the Serengeti, to speak about them and conduct further research.

Although some things have improved, we have failed to create a better world, with less misery and more happiness for all humanity. New Times call for New Answers. But the light does not originate from outside. It comes from within – it is an extraordinary power that lives within each of us. An eternal story of

universal discovery. We think we know ourselves, but we don't. Our inner resources are far greater than we realise, and the world around us offers infinitely more possibilities than we take advantage of. Only when we are willing to admit that, just like everyone else, we don't know either, can **we open the unwritten book of ourselves and our loved ones**. We tend to focus on the external, and on the symptoms, but when we dig below the surface, we find consistent patterns and deeply rooted stories. We can meet, connect and strengthen one another in our stories. We can tap into an abundance of potential once we admit that we may not have all the answers.

I invited 100 top researchers and experts from 50 countries to share everything we know about happiness in 1,000 words, 6 concrete pieces of advice and finally 1 sentence that summarises everything: the essence. In a language that everyone understands. The researchers were all eager to embark on the task, but it proved to be harder than they thought. **They spent nights honing and polishing**, and now you hold their wisdom in your hands, a brilliant diamond reflecting light from all its facets, and all backgrounds and continents. Also included are the spiritual perspectives on happiness from five of the world's major religions.

This global project's award-winning members have published over 10,000 academic reports, distributed over twenty-five million popular books, and generated over 200 million inspirational views on TEDx. The treasure trove of 50,000 academic reports in The World Database of Happiness and the scientific analyses of The United Nations World Report on

Happiness sparkle in their words. **We now have the opportunity to explore their wisdom, expertise and insights distilled into one book**. It's almost like having a front-row seat at one of the world's largest international conferences – like The International Association of Positive Psychology or The International Society of Quality-of-Life Studies – that bring together thousands of researchers, including numerous contributors to this book.

When you open *The World Book of Happiness*, you get a 360-degree view of the essence of the key drivers in our lives. And the world has changed. Fake news, crisis, war, a virus, environmental issues, suicide, loneliness, poverty, inequality and ... artificial intelligence. Yes, we also got ChatGPT to write a text for this book, but in its well-structured analysis, we didn't feel the heart, passion or uncertainty of the human behind the researcher. **We live in New Times and are looking for New Answers**. We need new priorities to make a profound shift towards greater quality of life, well-being and happiness.

Whereas 15 years ago it was primarily about the leap from 'me' to 'we', most researchers now also bridge the gap to 'us'. This evolution is unstoppable. We cannot be happy in a world that is not happy. The 'rat race' of individualism, consumerism, achievement, success, exploitation, pollution and short-term thinking has not made us happy. More than ever, we are aware that we are all battling the same storm, and only broad social commitment targeted at **sustainable happiness** offers a prospect of happiness for all.

Yes, we're weathering the same storm, but not in the same boat. Some still believe their luxury cruise liner is the real world, while others cling for dear life to makeshift boats that are welcome nowhere. In the storm, you can be guided by the foolish captain or the wise captain. **The foolish captain looks down** and sees only the waves of delusion. But the waves are treacherous and changeable. The wise captain looks to the sky, fixing his gaze on the stars. They are steadfast and offer guidance and perspective.

Hope is **optimism**
with its sleeves rolled up.

The researchers all worked independently of each other. Yet they do not contradict each other. Even when the ideas of different authors coincide, each speaks from his or her personal perspective. Think of leafing through this book as a journey through the world, where you will meet fascinating people, who, like you, are seeking happiness, and want to share their knowledge, insight and wisdom with you.

Take your time. Thinking about happiness is not naive. All the research tells us that optimists live longer and happier lives. Despite everything and for this very reason.

There is often little you can do to change the situation, but you can control how you perceive and cope with it. We are sometimes guided by suspicion, pessimism, fear or prejudice in doing so. **Negativity has a tremendous impact.** According to *Nature Human Behaviour*, online news headlines that contain negative language are more likely to draw readers than those containing positive words. So, it's highly likely that some people will also fail to pick up on the ideas in this book. And that would be a shame because they'd be missing out on an opportunity to hold up a mirror and see what people and society have to offer us.

I am thrilled to have had the opportunity to collaborate with **people from all over the world** on this book. From 'happy' and 'unhappy' nations, such as Qadir Nadery from Afghanistan, the world's 'unhappiest country', where after banning women from education, the Taliban have now banned all forms of music and burn musical instruments because 'music corrupts the mind'. To them, even laughter is suspicious. Every now and then we had to stop and wait until the

air raid sirens ended, as was the case during the intense contacts with Professor Sergii Boltivets from Ukraine, who, with his wife, helps victims of war, and whose sons are on the front lines, fighting for the right to life.

We can transform anger into courage and be inspired by the numerous initiatives, large and small, dedicated to well-being and happiness, such as those of the United Nations and Action for Happiness, as well as those of many citizens, schools, businesses, policy-makers, institutions and organisations. There are far more hopeful and positive people than we may think. The formulation of **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights** represents a watershed moment in human history, as does the discovery of DNA, which shows that all humans on Earth are almost genetically identical. But it appears that only 'aliens' can convince us of that. No one in the world is illegal. However, times can change in an instant, and what we take for granted can vanish in the blink of an eye.

This book is a heartfelt plea not simply to reflect, but to act. Each text may serve as a catalyst to that end. Hope is optimism with its sleeves rolled up. A goal is a dream to which you add a verb. Nothing can be taken for granted and there's no point in procrastinating. Later is too late. **Life happens, here and now. It is not a dress rehearsal.** People who only read books on dieting will not lose weight. People who only read books on happiness and don't act on what they've learnt will not become happier. You will find more than 600 concrete pieces of advice in this book, on three different levels. Put those insights to work in your own life, with those you love, and for the sake of the society growing in our hands. And when you

*There are far more hopeful
and **positive people** than we may think.*



do so, you don't just serve your own interests, but those of all the people in the world with whom we can co-exist, in peace and respect. This is the fundament of happiness for all.

I worked on this book day and night and would like to thank the 100 experts for their research, dedication and enthusiasm from the bottom of my heart. I feel we have become friends and are energised by **an overwhelming sense that we have something vital to say**. In our shared uncertainty, we will search for a moral compass and an inspiring guide together.

Later, I will read to my grandchildren from the Great Book of Happiness, but for now, I want to spend time with them because it makes me happy. My father was a travelling salesman and when I was a toddler, he took me with him on his visits to small-town grocers where I was allowed to recite a poem. I was good at that, he said. Later, I realised that what he did was known as 'positive reinforcement'. The shopkeeper

would give me an upturned vegetable crate to stand on, and I would do my thing. These days, when I travel the world speaking about hope and happiness, I do exactly what I did back then: I get to stand on an upturned crate, tell my story, and be appreciated for it. The circle is complete. We are our story, nothing more, nothing less. Wherever I go, I take my father's suitcase. My son does the same thing.

When I was born, the average life expectancy in our country was 66. For my grandson, it is 82 (in some other countries 89 or 53) and in 2100, statisticians say we will easily live to be 91. What can we do so that we all live **not only 'a long' but also 'a happy' life**, on a planet where polar bears and penguins flounder on melting ice floes? I wonder as I weave through children playing in the school corridor, on my way to my grandson's classroom. I've taken time off again to relish my 'Penguin Moment', my benchmark for 'the essence of happiness'. I can hardly wait to look my little penguin in the eye again. We'll share a spark of recognition. And my heart will leap for joy. The gate swings open. He has no idea how happy he makes me. And I him.

Leo Bormans, editor-in-chief
of *The World Book of Happiness*

Leo Bormans holds a master's degree in Languages and Philosophy (University of Leuven, Belgium) and is, among other things, a Distinguished Lecturer in Happiness Economics Research at Erasmus University in Rotterdam (Netherlands). He is a noted speaker and author of many international bestsellers and positive interventions on well-being and happiness, including the successful series of children's books 'Happiness for Children'. More on www.leobormans.be

**Watch the video about this book
and discover more background,
news and blogs on happiness at
www.theworldbookofhappiness.com
and www.happinus.eu**

Welcome to The New World

I was the first economist to study happiness statistics, some 50 years ago. Back then, there was no *World Book of Happiness*. Indeed, aside from a few surveys by public opinion specialists, happiness was a subject confined almost exclusively to the humanities. Since then, happiness has taken off in the social sciences, most notably in psychology, but to some extent even in economics. So, it is with real pleasure that I write this introduction for the *World Book of Happiness*, the results so far of my half-century's education, based on the evidence, of what makes people happy.

Prescriptions for increasing happiness abound, by both specialists and non-specialists. Surprisingly, the presumptive sources of happiness are typically based on preconceived notions of what makes people happy. Almost none are based on the evidence of what people themselves say makes them happy. A notable exception is the work of social psychologist Hadley Cantril, who, over a half-century ago, conducted face-to-face surveys in a number of countries, in which an interviewer asked the respondent to describe in detail the life that would make him or her on the one hand perfectly happy and on the other, totally unhappy. Although the survey was open-ended – respondents were free to say whatever they wished – **there was a remarkable similarity in the responses in all countries**, rich and poor, democratic and authoritarian. Everyday circumstances, the things to which most people's time is devoted everywhere in the world and that they think they have some ability to control, are what people describe as important for their personal happiness.

Leading the list by far in every country are three items: one's economic situation, family circumstances, and health. Detailed types of concern, e.g., the content of "economic situation", may differ among countries – "owning one's own farm" in an agricultural society, "a job that offers good opportunity for advancement" in an industrial society. But one's economic situation in general, whatever the specifics,

tops the list everywhere of concerns important for happiness, with family and health considerations next. So, if we want to increase people's happiness, **we should focus on the concerns that most people say are most important for their happiness**: their economic situation, family life, and health.

Happiness can be increased via two channels – personal decision-making and government policy. At the personal level, each individual has only a limited amount of time to devote to different activities – more time spent at work means less time for family and health pursuits – so maximising happiness depends on distributing one's time in the most fruitful way. And here is where the problem comes in. We tend to think that more money will make us happier, and so we sacrifice family and health time for more time for work. But there is a special confounding factor undermining the positive effect of money on happiness, so, in fact, **increases in income over time are not matched by a corresponding increase in happiness**. In the US, for example, over the last half century, income in real terms (that is, in terms of what money will buy) has tripled, but happiness has, on average, declined slightly. The confounding factor is "social comparison".

The way in which social comparison undermines the positive effect of money on happiness can be made clear by a simple thought experiment: 'Which would

you prefer, A or B? A = Earning \$100,000. B = Earning \$50,000. Easy choice, the answer is A.’ But suppose the A and B options were: A = Earning \$100,000 when others earn \$200,000; B = Earning \$50,000 when others earn \$25,000. Not so easy. The \$100,000 option now comes with the drawback that others earn twice as much, while the \$50,000 option reverses the comparative situation, giving you double what others earn. In fact, the majority of people now prefer option B, demonstrating the importance of social comparison in affecting people’s happiness when it comes to income. **When others’ income increases more than yours, you’re less happy.** When others’ income increases less than yours, you’re happier. And when your income and others’ income increase about the same – which is, on average the typical situation as the economy grows – happiness remains unchanged. More money does not, on average, make people happier. (This has come to be called the “Easterlin Paradox” because I was the first to point out the evidence for it.)

Social comparison, however, does not operate with regard to family life and health, because, in contrast to income, we know little about other people’s actual health and family lives. So, improvements in one’s family circumstances and health are not undermined by social comparison. The important conclusion: happiness can be increased by devoting more of one’s limited time to family life and health, and less time to work and the pursuit of money.

Similarly, in the realm of public policy, the implication is that policies focused on family and health concerns – on a social safety net – are more likely to increase happiness than those emphasising the higher incomes that come with economic growth. The

evidence for this is that **the countries leading the world in happiness are welfare states** – notably, the Nordic countries plus New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Since the inception of the World Happiness Report in 2012, which reports annually on happiness in about 150 countries worldwide, these countries have almost invariably been in the top 10. The social safety net in these countries deals directly with people’s foremost concern – such things as income support in recession, raising and schooling children, care of elderly parents, unexpected health incidents, and the like. In contrast, policies aimed solely at economic growth favour businesses and ignore the urgent everyday personal needs of people.

Greater happiness for the individual and society is within reach, but we must build on the evidence of how to attain it – putting people’s personal needs in the forefront.

Richard Easterlin

Richard Easterlin (°1926) is emeritus professor of Economics at the University of Southern California (USA) and one of the most respected and renowned authorities in happiness research. He is best known for the economic theory named after him: The Easterlin Paradox (1974). He graduated in 1945 and has worked at the University of Pennsylvania, the National Bureau of Economic Research and Stanford University. He was elected a Member of the United States National Academy of Sciences and has received numerous awards, including the Distinguished Researcher Award by the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies and the Laureate Award from the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population.

Policies aimed solely at economic growth favour businesses and ignore the urgent **everyday personal needs** *of people.*

Rising above adversity

‘Nothing invigorates the present more than hope for the future,’ said Václav Havel, former President of the Czech Republic. Alena Slezačková and Miroslav Světlak explore the role of hope in psychological well-being and posttraumatic growth, trying to discover how we can become a better version of ourselves through coping with adversities.

In the global context of a pandemic and armed conflicts nearby, we gathered data from a thousand Czech adults (mean age 45 years, 51% female) to learn how they have coped with the difficulties and whether they can find hope and meaning amid adversity.

It turns out that almost half of the respondents felt personally threatened by the war in Ukraine, and over three-quarters said that they perceived the harmful effects of the conflict on their country. Unsurprisingly, during the past year, most people experienced frequent anxiety, worry or irritability due to sociopolitical issues.

However, despite the adverse circumstances and related distress, **most people reported above-average satisfaction with their personal lives.** The satisfaction with other life domains, such as national politics, the economy, social issues and climate problems, was significantly lower.

THE INSIGHT Feelings of uncertainty and threats surrounding recent sociopolitical events have caused widespread psychological distress, often leading to anxiety and depression. However, amidst these difficult times, people have shown incredible resilience and a remarkable capacity for hope and personal growth.

THE ESSENCE Hope is an essential pillar of mental health: people who do not lose hope are less anxious, have higher psychological well-being, and show higher levels of posttraumatic growth.

Regarding future prospects, people remain relatively optimistic about their personal lives, but they are rather pessimistic about sociopolitical and economic development and the chances for world peace in the coming year.

The critical question for us was: What helps people remain hopeful despite the challenging circumstances and prevailing pessimistic views of the mentioned life domains? And can higher perceived hope contribute to maintaining psychological well-being and becoming a better version of ourselves?

Primary sources of hope

Surprisingly, responses to our questioning revealed that almost three-quarters of Czech adults could maintain hope in positive outcomes, even in difficult situations beyond their direct control. So we wanted to understand what people’s primary sources of hope

*Even double trauma can have a profound transformational **potential** to induce positive psychological **changes.***

are. The responses revealed that factors promoting hope include, in particular, **engaging in meaningful activities, receiving support from family members and friends, and spending more time in nature.**

As expected, it turned out that the feelings of threat and anxiety, which are natural responses to stress, have a detrimental effect on well-being. However, those individuals who may suffer from higher anxiety but at the same time do not lose hope are more likely to experience increased well-being and posttraumatic growth.

Challenging life crises

Posttraumatic growth refers to the experience of positive change resulting from struggling with highly challenging life crises. It can manifest in many domains, including improved relationships with others, greater appreciation of life, enhanced personal strength, openness to new possibilities, and spiritual development.

Our investigation also revealed that positive changes related to challenging events in the last two years mainly occurred in **re-evaluating priorities, feeling greater inner strength and improving interpersonal relationships.** Interestingly, the average values for individual domains of posttraumatic growth increased slightly in 2022 compared to 2021. It suggests that even double trauma, which occurs when a traumatic event, such as a pandemic, is followed by another traumatic event, such as armed conflict, can have a profound transformational potential to induce positive psychological changes.

Looking at coping strategies related to higher levels of posttraumatic growth shows that people who can grow through adversity lead an active approach to solving problems, use a positive reframing strategy, tend to plan for the future, accept help and emotional support from others, and cultivate their spirituality or religiosity.

Rebuilding happiness

The conclusion that emerges here is that if we do not lose hope that changes for the better are possible and that we can contribute to them, we can reduce

the effects of stress on our mental health and well-being and emerge from challenging situations strengthened. **Positive psychology strategies**, such as focusing on the bright side of life, fostering gratitude, and showing kindness and compassion towards others, can help promote well-being and resilience on individual and societal levels.

REFLECTION

Challenging life situations are associated with increased psychological burden and distress. However, coping with difficult life periods can significantly contribute to our personal growth, greater insight and wisdom if we maintain hope.

ACTION

Hope is a vital healing force. Growing through adversity is truly the ABC of life:

1. **Accept reality with an open mind.**
2. **Be grateful for the good.**
3. **Connect with others.**
4. **Develop a growth mindset.**
5. **Engage in meaningful activities.**
6. **Focus on the new possibilities.**

Alena Slezackova is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the Faculty of Medicine, Masaryk University, Czech Republic. She is a founder and director of the *Czech Positive Psychology Centre (CPPC)* and the author of the first comprehensive monograph on positive psychology in the Czech language.

Miroslav Svetlak is a clinical psychologist, psychotherapist and teacher at the Masaryk University Faculty of Medicine, where he is currently the head of the Department of Medical Psychology and Psychosomatics. He is the representative of the Czech Republic in the *Global Psychology Alliance of the American Psychology Association (APA)*.

The sense of democracy

‘Tolerance and democratic sentiments are a prerequisite for maximising well-being,’ says Alessandra Tinto, who is project manager of the team of researchers at the Italian National Statistical Office permanently measuring equitable and sustainable well-being. ‘We observe that adherence to a sense of democracy is weaker in areas where indicators show a lower level of well-being.’

In 2010, the Italian National Statistical Office launched a complex process involving stakeholders, academia and citizens to define the framework for measuring equitable and sustainable well-being in Italy (the so-called BES framework: *Il Benessere Equo e Sostenibile*). The BES indicators, organised into 12 domains, are in line with the main international studies, but also specific to the Italian context. The indicators are based on official statistics and are analysed over time, space and social groups.

Civil rights

The flexibility of the system for measuring well-being is an important feature, allowing changes in society to be identified, while remaining consistent with the original framework. The set of indicators is reviewed regularly. A recent development is the focus on the measurement of democratic sentiments, a prerequisite for maximising well-being. In a multidimensional well-being framework, measuring a sense of democracy means **measuring explicit behaviours as well as attitudes and values** on which individuals base their voluntary adherence to the social rules that positively underpin civic coexistence. It is therefore a major commitment to find appropriate tools to measure this complex dimension.

A new set of 10 items on attitudes towards democracy is included in the 2022 edition of the

THE INSIGHT Human development and the promotion of equitable and sustainable well-being are only possible in a context of solidarity with present and future generations, civic engagement and participation. This substratum is defined as a sense of democracy, with the implicit assumption that certain values can only be cultivated within a democratic conception of society.

THE ESSENCE The social objective of maximising well-being must address all the domains of which this multidimensional concept is composed. The sense of democracy should also be brought into the picture.

annual survey of the *Italian National Statistical Office* (*Istat*) on aspects of daily life. The topics covered reflect the country’s constitutional principles and **the main conditions for democratic functioning**, including freedom of thought, information and religion; civil rights; gender equality; non-discrimination on grounds of ethnicity or sexual orientation; and political rights. Respondents aged 14 and over were asked to rate items on a 4-point scale from ‘very important’ to ‘not at all important’.

Participation

In 2022, a sense of democracy ranks highly for all the items. Gender equality has the widest consensus: 78.5% of the population aged 14 and over consider it very important that men and women have the same rights. 76.1% of the population feels that a fair judicial system is very important, and 73.6% believes that everyone has the right to freely express themselves. In terms of political participation, the results are in line with the **low level of trust in parties and parliament** in Italy and the trend of growing disaffection with the electoral system observed in recent years. The percentages of those who consider it very important that opposition parties can operate freely (56.0%) and that free elections are held regularly (60.8%) are the lowest among all items. The proportion of people who attach great importance to the

fact that newspapers and mass media can express different points of view is also low (61.8%), in line with the growing decline in newspaper reading.

Adherence to a sense of democracy is weaker in areas where indicators show a lower level of well-being, such as the south of Italy, which is also characterised by a poorer functioning of institutions. Furthermore, in contrast with their elders, young people are more likely to rank holding free elections regularly, and the freedom of opposition parties to operate, as less important. Overall, 3.7% of the population aged 14 and over (almost 2 million people) give mostly or exclusively low ratings.

Education

Those with higher levels of education are more likely to choose **answers associated with democratic sentiments**. Differences of more than 20 percentage points compared to those with the lowest level of education concern statements about freedom of expression of newspapers and mass media, free elections, and the free operation of opposition parties. There are also large differences in opinions on all other issues. Education is a driver of well-being, also in terms of maintaining a sense of democracy to prevent the emergence of non-tolerant attitudes.

The results of this study are encouraging, with a very low non-response rate (about 2%) and a high internal cohesion of the set of items identified. However further research is needed on the possible effects of social desirability on the items. It is important to have official statistics from surveys based on large samples that allow robustness, reliability of estimates and disaggregation to better understand the distribution of the phenomenon. We believe that

we have found a tool that is capable of capturing not only general trends but also their many nuances.

REFLECTION

We live in a globalised world where different views and opinions can clash. It is essential that we promote tolerance and democratic sentiments to ensure that everyone can live peacefully and happily.

ACTION

1. **Demonstrate kindness and understanding** towards people of diverse backgrounds and life experiences.
2. **Listen more than you talk.** Respect the opinions of others, even if they are different from yours.
3. **Speak out** when you hear or witness offensive language or behaviour.
4. **Participate in community events** that promote inclusion and understanding.
5. **Follow and support the government and non-governmental organisations dedicated to tolerance and democratic values.**
6. **Engage with people of different political affiliations and discuss issues in an open and constructive manner. Invest in the transmission of democratic culture and values between generations.**

Paola Conigliaro, Miria Savioli, Stefania Taralli and Alessandra Tinto are researchers at the Italian National Statistical Office (Istat) and work at the *Project to measure Equitable and Sustainable Well-being*. The primary outcome of the project is the annual publication of a report, with the 10th edition being released in 2023. While working as a team, particularly concerning insights such as those relating to the sense of democracy, each researcher follows specific aspects of the measurement of well-being.

Certain values can only be cultivated within a democratic conception of society.

Sustainable well-being

‘Positive psychology has shown us that by moving the focus away from ourselves to consider others, we can improve our mental health. Altruistic individuals enjoy happier and healthier lives than egoistic ones,’ says Amsale Kassahun Temesgen. ‘Now we can take it a step further. If we include non-human animals and the earth as part of the larger “I/We”, we benefit not only ourselves but also our companions on this earth and future generations. Nurturing well-being in sustainable transitions feels like swimming against the stream, but there is a reward.’

Sustainability transition initiatives are spaces where engaged citizens and activists (alternatively, agents of change) come together to solve sustainability challenges in their local contexts. Many join these initiatives motivated to do their part in finding solutions to the interconnected social, economic and environmental problems that are evident in our modern societies. Some manifestations of such sustainability initiatives are ecovillages, transition towns, local exchange trading systems, and the like. These initiatives are more prominent in the Western world. This is not surprising, as the Western world faces problems connected to over-consumption while the rest of the world struggles to meet its basic needs.

THE INSIGHT The essence of happiness within planetary boundaries entails flourishing as human beings. In the mainstream economic paradigm, maximising pleasure is seen as the epitome of happiness. Flourishing, on the other hand, is more than just pursuing pleasure through material consumption. It emphasises other important aspects of a fulfilled life, such as ‘autonomy, freedom, achievement, and the development of deep interpersonal relationships, which cannot be decomposed into momentary affective experiences’ (Kahneman & Sugden). These are fundamental needs as opposed to “wants”.

THE ESSENCE It is possible to have a good life within planetary boundaries. We just have to redefine what that means. The key is turning the focus away from the myopic, egoistic and materialistic view that is currently prevalent to one where we adopt a deeper understanding of human flourishing and the path to a more fulfilled and empowered life.

A new lifestyle

These agents of change join sustainability initiatives with high ideals and look for kindred spirits that are also looking for a higher purpose in life. Some find that their nine-to-five jobs conflict with their inner values while others want to have better control of their time and want to work towards goals that give them meaning. They correctly identify the importance of **establishing a community of like-minded individuals** where they can meet their social and individual needs. Cultivating close social relations is crucial for happiness. Once material needs are met, social relations (or ‘relational goods’) play an important role in people’s subjective well-being.

*If we include the Earth
as part of the larger “We”, we all benefit.*

Choosing a lifestyle where one can combine building community around shared ideals and goals sounds like a perfect recipe for a happy life. However, many find that when they join a group of similarly motivated people in sustainability initiatives, they experience a sense of insecurity as they are met with the task of building a shared identity and vision with others. They find that there are **diverse interpretations of what a fulfilled life looks like**. In addition, they find that creating their ideal community is constrained by lack of financial resources, formal rules and regulations, and possibly disagreements with their community members about the content and vision of the community.

Freedom

The two most important risks that endanger sustainability initiatives are economic insecurity and, relatedly, time scarcity. These are particularly relevant for place-based initiatives such as ecovillages and co-housing initiatives. These initiatives are dependent upon **heavy investments of time and financial resources** to get off the ground. Structural elements such as private/shared housing, infrastructure, schooling, community spaces, etc. eat into precious common resources. Choosing how initiatives go about building these structural elements will have consequences that will last decades.

Initiatives that turn to large bank loans or extensive involvement of outside investors find that their freedom to shape their community as they see fit and their time sovereignty will be restricted. If they are beholden to outside investors, the primary interest in developing the initiative could possibly be to ensure returns on investment. That may limit their freedom in shaping their community. Loss of time sovereignty is related to the former. **Time spent on servicing a debt cannot be spent on building a community** or social bonds. As a result, sustainability initiatives are well-served by carefully considering the type of infrastructures and funding sources they choose.

REFLECTION

Crafting a brighter future and achieving genuine change and well-being can be a core part of sustainability transitions.

ACTION

1. Time and money are important, so take care of them. Agents of change do not have to live in poverty. However, finding **simpler and less costly physical structures** frees up time and resources for other creative activities.
2. Conflict may arise while working towards common goals. **See the conflict as an opportunity** to examine shared values and visions and use this opportunity to come out stronger. Affordable and non-commercial spaces are useful for such community-building activities.
3. **Apply a critical eye to initiatives that may just be 'greenwashing'**. Radical change from the mainstream should look, sound and feel different. It involves a shift of values and worldviews.
4. **Return to human needs**. For scholars and activists that want to work towards sustainability and well-being, focusing on human needs rather than wants provides solutions that contribute towards human flourishing within planetary boundaries.
5. **Try to form alliances** that will support you in the tough fights.
6. **Think of the long term**. It may not be easy to push for radical solutions and still be a successful politician. But it is easier to do this today than 10–15 years ago. It is not the quick and sexy solutions that help us tackle the dire problems we face today.

Amsale Kassahun Temesgen is an Associate Professor of Ecological Economics and Management at Nord University Business School in Norway. She has over ten years of research experience in international development, studying the living conditions of populations in fragile states and in poor and middle-income countries. She has previously contributed to international reports including the *State of the World's Cities Report* of UN-Habitat and the *World Development Report* of the World Bank.

The winning combination

‘One of the barriers that can prevent individuals and households from trying to lead more sustainable lifestyles is the perception that acting sustainably requires some kind of sacrifice on their part. But are these perceptions accurate?’ asks Amy Isham, who founded the *Sustainable Well-being Research Group*. ‘People think that sustainable lifestyles are effortful, costly, or perhaps most worryingly, can reduce their quality of life. But we can take care of ourselves and nature. That is the Winning Combination.’

THE INSIGHT Ecologically sustainable lifestyles

can benefit, rather than undermine, human well-being. There are numerous actions that people can take to achieve sustainable well-being, such as engaging in practices like voluntary simplicity, creating flow experiences and connecting with nature.

THE ESSENCE Well-being should not be considered

an individualistic pursuit. Rather, it is something that we achieve through care for other people and the planet. Individual, collective and planetary well-being are all interconnected.

Research now documents that continual increases in material wealth do not consistently deliver higher levels of well-being once basic needs have been met. Further, those individuals who demonstrate a greater focus on acquiring material goods have been shown to report poorer levels of well-being spanning areas such as life satisfaction, self-esteem and even physical health. Materialistic and consumerist visions of what we need to live well are therefore misguided.

In addition to this, it has been suggested that **engaging in more sustainable actions can benefit individual well-being**. That is, people can benefit their own well-being whilst increasing care for the planet; allowing them to achieve what I have called ‘*sustainable well-being*’. In this way, acting more sustainably does not need to be detrimental to our well-being. Quite the opposite, acting sustainably can even enhance our well-being beyond what current materialistic lifestyles often provide. So, what specific things can people do to help achieve sustainable well-being?

Learn to do more with less

In contrast to consumerist lifestyles focused on the endless pursuit of more, our well-being may benefit from engaging in sufficiency-oriented lifestyles, or what is sometimes called **voluntary simplicity**. As a

lifestyle, this involves purposefully trying to reduce material consumption, live naturally, and meet any necessary material needs as simply and directly as possible. Doing so can increase the amount of time and money that an individual can dedicate to pursuing non-material sources of satisfaction and meaning such as community engagements, time with family, and artistic or intellectual projects.

Choices made by those following the voluntary simplicity lifestyle often include a reduction in working hours, relocation to more rural areas, and engagement in what psychologists call ‘**pro-environmental behaviours**’, such as recycling, buying local produce, and turning off lights and appliances when not in use. A survey of an international sample of people who had adopted a voluntary simplicity lifestyle reported that 87% were happier because of living more simply. Recent cross-cultural work has also demonstrated that the positive link between engagement in pro-environmental behaviours and personal well-being remains regardless of an individual’s income.

Get into the flow

Flow describes a state of total immersion in an activity. Individuals are completely concentrated and may lose track of time and their everyday worries. Being



‘in the flow’ is highly enjoyable and the field of Positive Psychology has clearly documented that frequent experiences of flow enhance individual well-being. Through my research, I have found that **flow experiences also tend to occur in activities with low environmental impacts**. The specific types of activities that frequently support flow, whilst also being less environmentally costly, are: positive, romantic relationships (e.g., spending time with a partner and physical/sexual intimacy), contemplative activities (e.g., prayer, yoga and meditation), creative activities

(e.g., arts and crafts and performing arts), sports and physical exercise (e.g., cycling, running, aerobics and ball games), social engagement (e.g., playing with children and talking with neighbours).

By allowing these more sustainable activities to be highly rewarding, flow experiences can encourage further engagement in them. Note that none of these activities are extreme, unusual or novel. Rather, they are dimensions of ordinary life that work and that other commitments often prevent us from dedicating meaningful time and energy to.

In search of a moral compass

How lucky we are to have another book like *The World Book of Happiness!* Over a decade ago, as President of the European Council of Heads of State and Prime Ministers, I sent the first edition to hundreds of world leaders. No one could have foreseen that we would subsequently have to face a years-long pandemic of widespread loneliness and millions of deaths. No one had any inkling that the world would once again be caught in the grip of war and even the threat of nuclear conflict. Happiness seems far away. And yet ... Achieving both mental and physical well-being requires us to recognise and follow a steady moral compass, and a spiritual revival.

Even without these tragedies, our societies are at an impasse. This doesn't mean to say there is no hope, but rather that together we must strive to transform fear into hope. The less ripe the time is, the harder we must work to ripen the time. Hope is not a gift bestowed on us from outside; hope flows from efforts to place positive values at the heart of our societies and civilisation. It is said that hope begets life. But what exactly is life? It is living by, for and with others. The very effort to achieve this is hopeful, in and of itself. **Living together leads to hoping together.** The fact that happiness is increasingly talked about indicates a 'happiness deficit'. People crave more happiness in their lives. Why? The reasons are many and varied.

When searching for an explanation, many point to socioeconomics: rising income inequality in the West, intense global economic competition putting pressure on people and businesses, the consumer society, and so on. But I believe that the spiritual void or 'spiritual deficit' also plays an integral role. By this, I mean that all of us long to know the 'why' of our existence: **"What is the purpose of life?"** The reason many of us can't find a satisfying answer is very simple. If we live purely for ourselves, life has little meaning. We need transcendence, we need to rise beyond our Ego. Life is about giving and not taking. The source of our own happiness cannot be found within ourselves. Those who 'enjoy' good things solely for themselves don't experience any

kind of meaningful enjoyment. Certainly not one that is sustainable.

When we are embedded in communities, large or small, we have an easier time bouncing back from boundary situations such as illness, grief, suffering and bereavement. The less socially connected we are the less likely we can weather the storms. Together, we are strong. But today, even when we are faced by circumstances that aren't boundary situations, we tend to crumble more easily. Social and family capital is weakening, and we're feeling the effects. We can't fill that spiritual deficit by seeking refuge in distractions, addictions, or by tuning out. Such things are mechanisms for avoiding self-confrontation, and confronting ourselves or the reality of who we are. We must **opt less for enjoyment and more for happiness**, more for We than Me.

Does this mean we are bad people? No. In a sense, we get sucked into a certain 'way of life'. But we have the power to set a different course. **We can take our destiny into our own hands.** We can empower ourselves, change ourselves. We can make ourselves happier by showing empathy and compassion to people in our lives. Their happiness is ours. Most timeless nuggets of wisdom offer simple life insights. This route to self-improvement is the best form of self-development. But the journey back towards more 'love' also isn't one we can make alone. It is a path we must take with others. To be more focused on our fellow

human beings we need our fellow human beings.

We have become so used to demanding change from governments and other institutions that we forget the adage, **'If you want to change the world, start with yourself'**. In a democracy it's almost electrically impossible to demand that kind of effort from people. Especially in an age of populism where the message is always: you, the citizen, are right, the government and others are the problem. Hence, we must strive for a 'reversal of values'.

Of course, there's still a strong sense of community in society. People empathise with those closest to them – which is entirely normal – but also with those outside their immediate circle. **Crises and disasters bring out the best in us.** The potential is there. That makes me hopeful. Throughout the pandemic and during the vaccination campaigns, we came together and helped others selflessly. We were all in the grip of the same storm, even if we weren't all in the same boat. We should be able to muster that sense of togetherness in non-crisis times too.

Yet, the abundant signs of hope are no reason to be unconcerned about unfettered individualism. We must not be complacent to displays of aggression and the obsession with being 'right' that turn social media into a disrespectful, hostile ecosystem. Where, all too often, I lament the lack of human feeling and compassion. Who derives happiness from hurling

insults and engaging in verbal warfare? Do we feel good by putting others down? Expedience had already induced traditional media to focus on the sensational, the sleazy, the bizarre. To which social media add the extra layer of 'enemy thinking'.

A spiritual revival goes hand in hand with an ethical one. Both can help to build a better society. Together, we are happier.

Genuine happiness and well-being can only be achieved with a moral compass and a spiritual revival. May this book contribute to finding a pathway to create a good life and a better world for all of us.

Herman Van Rompuy

Herman Van Rompuy (°1947) served as the Prime Minister of Belgium and was elected as the first full-time president of the European Council from 2009 to 2014. In 2012, he presented the first edition of *The World Book of Happiness* as a gift to all world leaders of the day, expressing his hope to place happiness and well-being on the international political agenda. He has been described as the painstaking builder of impossible compromises under the motto 'Even if our unity remains our strength, our diversity remains our wealth'. He is the recipient of numerous awards and honorary doctorates. In 2019 he was appointed chairman of the College of Europe.

*We become happier by showing
empathy and compassion to people
in our lives. Their happiness is ours.*