

# Why Are the Danes So Delighted?



The first-ever World Happiness Report recently ranked Denmark the most contented country. *Deidre Donnelly* explores what we can learn from them.

**HOT OR COLD**, rich or poor, big or small ... these are some of the ways we usually compare countries. Now, it seems, we can add a subjective emotion: happiness. While it's hard to believe joy can be measured, compared or ranked on a global scale, a new survey proves that it can.

The World Happiness Report, by the Earth Institute at Columbia University, was commissioned by the UN to get an overview of wellbeing across the globe. It's hoped that the study – part of a growing field called “happiness economics” – will get governments to reconsider progress by factoring in emotions right alongside economics. “Higher average incomes don't necessarily improve national welfare,” explains the survey leader, Jeffrey Sachs, PhD. “And affluence has created its own set of afflictions and addictions.”

So, what did Sachs and his team discover? Sadly, on the life evaluation score, which ranks the 156 countries studied, the top four places are held by the wealthy Nordic states, while the bottom four are all sub-Saharan African nations. On a scale of zero to

10, Denmark, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands are at an average of 7,6 for joy. Benin, Central African Republic, Togo and Sierra Leone are at 3,4. South Africa? We're at 4,7. But the good news is that these scores are about more than just income.

Yes, people living in the top four countries have higher salaries and life expectancies. But they're also more likely to have someone to call on in times of trouble (by 30 percent), they enjoy more freedom and are around 50 percent less likely to complain of corruption. We know from neuroscience that happiness can largely be learnt. So let's look at the study for clues on lifting our optimism – and, maybe next time, our national score.



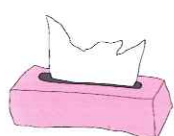
## THE BUCK STOPS HERE

How many times have you indulged in “If I won the Lotto ...” fantasies – only to return to reality with a slump? For most of us, money is the first thing we'd say we needed more of to be blissful. But the biggest finding of this study was that cash doesn't equal contentment. Across

first-world countries, people with more resources often weren't more content. And “at any given level of income, people who cared more about their earnings were less happy with life overall.” Sure, a windfall will help you clear your debt, but it's relative. Think of this: Give someone living below the breadline R100, and he'll beam for days. But for someone who earns, say, R10,000 a month, it'll take a lot more. While the researchers agree that poorer countries need to prioritise basic living standards, once these are met, other variables (like strong social networks, rewarding work and freedom of choice) are more important.

The “hedonistic treadmill” (a.k.a. “keeping up with the Joneses”) causes misery. South African researchers, like Ronelle Burger from the economics department at Stellenbosch University, are interested in how comparing our incomes would play out here. “Previously, because of apartheid, comparisons were racial (people measured themselves against others of the same race). But as our society becomes more integrated,

individuals are comparing themselves to all South Africans." The lesson here is to ditch the wishful thinking, be less materialistic, and grow your spiritual and social "capital," instead.



## GRIEVE AND GROW

If you've ever been unemployed, you'll know how it can lower your spirits. In fact, the emotional bombshell can rank just as high as bereavement or separation. This goes some way in explaining why SA scores so low on happiness, especially relative to Denmark. (Compare their 7.4 percent unemployment with our 23.9 percent.) So if you're out of work, take heart: You're allowed to mourn. But, since the study also says a "bad job" is better than no job for positivity, consider taking a temp position to prevent prolonged sadness from setting in. Joburg-based, Martha Beck-certified life coach Nqobekile Manyoni agrees that job loss is a challenge that should be turned into an opportunity. "You need to ask yourself, What can I do in my situation? Then, volunteer or look for a part-time job. Stay busy," she suggests.



## THE REWARDS OF WORK

Here's some surprising news: When there's a rise in unemployment, those with jobs are twice as affected as those who lose theirs. This is because it impacts job security, which influences a worker's wellbeing more than a pay increase or flexi-time. Why should employers even care about whether their staff feels secure, you may wonder. Well, chipper employees are known to be motivated and productive. In fields where lay-offs are on the rise, managers should nurture the inspiration of their team first, rather than rely on costly externals, like raises. The best way to do



According to a new global survey, European nations – like the Netherlands – are among the happiest in the world.

this, says the report, is to be clear on the goals of the job – and always show support, appreciation and feedback.



## GIVE A LITTLE, HELP A LOT

At the United Nations summit in April, Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, author of *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*, described how joy is closely linked to altruism. In one study cited, a group told to do three acts of kindness a day felt good for weeks. Plus, these effects show up in the brain's reward centres in MRI scans. Though you may not get a lift every time you give, caring for others in general ups your pleasure.

Marie Wissing, PhD, an expert in positive psychology at North-West University, says that "giving bolsters self-esteem, builds social bonds and lessens negative emotions."



## WISDOM WORKS WONDERS

When it comes to bliss, the fifties are the new twenties. All around the world, lust for life dips in the forties, and rebounds between 50 and 60. One reason (apart from financial stability)

is that maturity brings wisdom and more realistic expectations. So how can you prepare for a mid-life crisis? Wissing says it's about having resilience – so work on your ability to bounce back. And reassessing your aspirations, especially the unrealistic ones, will help you appreciate a life filled with meaning, good health and rewarding interactions.



## PARTS OF THE WHOLE

"I'll stop smoking, start exercising and eat healthier when life calms down and I'm less stressed." Sound familiar? If so, you'll be interested to know that health and happiness are so closely linked, they can't be separated. Subjects who responded most positively to the question, "All things considered, how happy would you say you are?" had better cardiovascular, inflammatory and neuroendocrine functioning.

At the other end of the spectrum, a lower sense of joy was shown to lead to heart disease, strokes, suicide and a shorter life. So, if you want to improve your mood or your health, take an active interest in your wellness as a whole, rather than treating mind or body individually. ▶



"Of all the types of social life, personal relationships with loved adults explain the greatest variation in happiness," says the report. Since these mostly come through family, this is another reason the Danes are better off. For them, family time is sacrosanct. But note the focus on adult relationships. You can't expect your kids to make you happy, because at times, they won't. During the teen years, lean on family and community support, and take heart: It'll pay off in the end. "Parenting may not be associated with happiness in the present tense, but it has been shown to bring more meaning to the bigger picture," says Wissing.



It turns out, Shakespeare was right to praise the "marriage of true minds." The Happiness Report shows saying "I do" leads to greater contentment, thanks to more social ties, wealth, trust and a healthier lifestyle. But there is a condition: There can't be any "happiness gap" between spouses. If you both remain satisfied, there's a far better chance you'll stay together. For Wissing, this means being each other's cheerleaders through good and bad. So kindly check in with one another to balance out any happiness see-saws.

As policy-makers consider the World Happiness Report's findings at the macro level, we can all make micro changes to lift our own wellbeing scores – and help those around us, too. Together, we might be able to take our nation up a notch or two on the serenity scale. 10

# The Geography of Happiness

More noteworthy findings from the World Happiness Report.



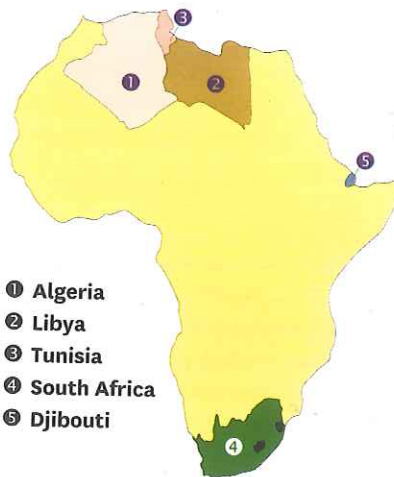
## COSTA RICA: A Third World Triumph

Coming in at number 12, just after the US, Costa Rica is the most satisfied Third World nation. Add to this their low environmental impact, and they set an impressive example for other developing nations.

*"A household's income does count for life satisfaction, but only in a limited way. Other things matter more: Community trust, mental and physical health and the quality of governance and rule of law."* –The World Happiness Report

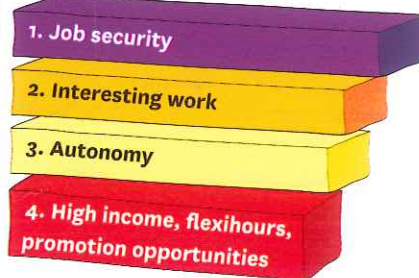
## Our Continent's Content

The five happiest African countries



## What Makes Workers Happy?

(In order of importance)



## THE CLAIM:

A wealthy nation ≠ Happy citizens

## THE PROOF:

American GNP has risen by a factor of three since 1960, but their average happiness has remained the same.

## How Happy is Sub-Saharan Africa?

This is how most South Africans answered ...

