10 Keys to True Happiness | Reader's Digest

By Bob Holmes

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Better living through science is possible. Over the last 70 years or so, researchers have been probing happy and unhappy people, and they’re finally zeroing in on the factors that make a difference. What follows are the top ten. By the way, the experts think your genes account for about 50 percent of your disposition; the other nine factors make up the rest.

1. Wealth
Money can buy a degree of happiness. But once you can afford to feed, clothe and house yourself, each extra dollar makes less and less difference.

Whenever and wherever they look, scientists find that, on average, wealthier people are happier. But the link between money and happiness is complicated. In the past half-century, average income has skyrocketed in industrialized countries, yet happiness levels have remained static. Once your basic needs are met, money only seems to boost happiness if you have more than your friends, neighbors and colleagues.

“Dollars buy status, and status makes people feel better,” says Andrew Oswald, an economist at Warwick University in Coventry, England. This helps explain why people who can seek status in other ways — scientists or actors, for example — may happily accept relatively poorly paid jobs.

2. Desire
How much stuff do you need to feel good? In the 1980s, political scientist Alex Michalos, professor emeritus at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, asked 18,000 college students in 39 countries to rate their happiness on a numeric scale. Then he asked them how close they were to having all they wanted. He found that the people whose aspirations — not just for money, but for friends, family, job, health, the works — soared furthest beyond what they already had, tended to be less happy than those who perceived a smaller gap. Indeed, the size of the gap predicted happiness about five times better than income alone. “The gap measures just blow away the absolute measures of income,” says Michalos.

This "aspiration gap" might explain why most people fail to get much happier as their salaries rise. Instead of satisfying our desires, most of us merely want more. In surveys by the Roper polling organization over the last two decades, Americans were asked to list the material possessions they thought important to “the good life.” The researchers found that the more of these goods people already had, the longer their list was. The good life remained always just out of reach.

3. Intelligence
Only a few surveys have examined whether smart people are happier, but they indicate intelligence has no effect. That seems surprising at first, since brighter people often earn more, and the rich tend to be happier.

Some researchers speculate that brighter people could have higher expectations and thus be dissatisfied with anything less than the highest achievements. “Or maybe scoring high on an IQ test — which means you know a
lot of vocabulary and can rotate things in your mind — doesn’t have a lot to do with your ability to get along well with people,” says Ed Diener, a psychologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He speculates that “social intelligence” could be the real key to happiness.

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4. Genetics
Are some people born happy or unhappy? David Lykken, a behavioral geneticist and professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, believes our feeling of well-being at any moment is determined half by what is going on in our lives at that time and half by a “set point” of happiness, which is up to 90 percent genetically determined and to which we eventually return after dramatic events. “While our happiness set point is largely determined by our genes,” says Lykken, “whether we bounce along above it or slump along under it depends on our — or our parents’ — good sense and good training.”

Lykken found that genetic variation accounted for between 44 and 55 percent of the difference in happiness levels. Neither income, marital status, religion nor education accounted for any more than about 3 percent.

But whether you trudge through life on the low side of your set point or skip along on the high side is up to you. Many studies have shown that extroverts tend to be happier than most people, and a lot happier than introverts. And research has found that putting people in a good mood makes them more sociable. Michael Cunningham at the University of Louisville in Kentucky showed that people were more talkative and open with others after watching a happy film than after watching a sad one. Theoretically, even someone with a low set point can boost his or her outlook.
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5. Beauty

First the bad news: Good-looking people really are happier. When Diener got people to rate their own looks, there was a "small but positive effect of physical attractiveness on subjective well-being."

Perhaps the explanation is that life is kinder to the beautiful. Or it could be more subtle than that. The most attractive faces are highly symmetrical, and there is evidence that symmetry reflects good genes and a healthy immune system. So perhaps beautiful people are happier because they are healthier.

You may be able to cash in on beauty’s emotional high even if you aren’t gorgeous — if you believe you look great. Unfortunately, studies show that women tend to think they are too fat and men worry about being puny.

6. Friendship

It is hard to imagine a more pitiful existence than life on the streets of Calcutta or in one of its slums, or making a living there as a prostitute. Yet despite the poverty and squalor they face, people with these lives are much happier than you might imagine.

Diener interviewed 83 people from these three groups and measured their life satisfaction using a scale for which a score of 2 is considered neutral. Overall, they averaged 1.93 — not great, but creditable, compared with a control group of middle-class students in the city who scored 2.43. And the slum dwellers, who were happiest of the three disadvantaged groups, scored 2.23, which is not significantly different from the score the students had.

“We think social relationships are partly responsible,” says Diener. He points out that all three deprived groups got high satisfaction ratings in specific areas such as family (2.5) and friends (2.4). Slum dwellers did particularly well, perhaps because they are most likely to be able to cash in on the social support that arises from the importance of the extended family in Indian culture.

7. Marriage

In an analysis of reports from 42 countries, U.S. researchers found that married people are consistently happier than singletons. The effect is small, but that still begs the question: Does marriage make you happy, or are happy people simply more likely to get married?

Both answers may be true. In a study that followed more than 30,000 Germans for 15 years, Diener and his colleagues found that happy people are more likely to get married and then stay married. But anyone can improve his or her mood by getting married. The effect begins about a year before the “happy day” and lasts for at least a year afterward. For most people, satisfaction levels do return to their baseline, but the researchers say this conceals the fact that a good marriage can have a permanent positive effect. Furthermore, people who are less happy to begin with will get a bigger boost from marriage.
And it seems there's something special about signing that piece of paper: The research shows that you can't get as much benefit from simply cohabiting. "My hunch is that cohabiting couples lack the deeper security that comes with the formal band of gold, and that is why they are not quite so happy," says Oswald. "Insecurity, we know from all data, is bad for human beings."
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8. Faith
Karl Marx was fairly close to the mark when he described religion as an opiate for the masses. Of the dozens of studies that have looked at religion and happiness, the vast majority have found a positive link.

Believing in an afterlife can give people meaning and purpose and reduce the feeling of being alone in the world, says Harold G. Koenig at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C., especially as people get older. “You really see the effect in times of stress. Religious belief can be a very powerful way of coping with adversity.”

Religion also brings social interaction and support. But Koenig believes it is not just about receiving. “Studies have shown that people who provide support to others are better off themselves. They even live longer.” This, researchers agree, makes religious involvement a source of greater satisfaction than other socially inclusive activities such as book groups.

9. Charity
Several studies have found a link between happiness and altruistic behavior. But as with many behavioral traits, it is not always clear whether doing good makes you feel good, or whether happy people are more likely to be altruistic.

James Konow, an economist at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, tried to tease apart cause and effect in a lab experiment.

He recruited subjects to answer questionnaires, and toward the end of the session gave half of them $10 and half, nothing. He then told the subjects who had been paid that they could share their money with those who hadn’t been compensated. Konow found that the happier students were overall, the more likely they were to share the money. However, being in a happy mood on the day of the test did not make them any more generous, and students who gave did not report any immediate increase in happiness. In fact, they were slightly less happy.

But those who shared their money were more likely to show the personality traits of a “self-actualizer” — they were concerned with their own personal growth and improvement. Konow thinks that while a single act of generosity did not make his subjects happier, the cumulative effects of being a generous person did.

10. Age
Old age may not be so bad. “Given all the problems of aging, how could the elderly be more satisfied?” asks Laura Carstensen, a psychology professor at Stanford University in California.

In one study, Carstensen gave pagers to 184 people between the ages of 18 and 94, and paged them five times a day for a week, asking them to fill out an emotions questionnaire each time. Old people reported

positive emotions just as often as young people, but they reported negative emotions much less frequently.

Why are old people happier? Some scientists suggest older people may expect life to be harder and learn to live with it, or they’re more realistic about their goals, only setting ones that they know they can achieve. But Carstensen thinks that with time running out, older people have learned to focus on things that make them happy and let go of those that don’t.

“People realize not only what they have, but also that what they have cannot last forever,” he says. “A goodbye kiss to a spouse at the age of 85, for example, may elicit far more complex emotional responses than a similar kiss to a spouse at the age of 20.”