The Happiness Indicator

Combination of a self-help website and a scientific follow-up study

http://www.happinessindicator.com

What it involves
For what purposes it can be used
How you can join

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Summary

The Happiness Indicator is a self-help website as well as a scientific follow-up study. Participants record periodically how happy they feel and how they spend their time. Every year they report on major changes in their life.

Benefits for participants
The website offers its users instant feedback on their happiness. Participants can:

• Accurately assess how happy they feel most of the time
• Compare their happiness with similar people
• Track their happiness over time
• Chart how much they enjoy daily activities using the happiness diary
• Compare with similar people who use their time differently

Scientific uses
The website provides longitudinal data on a lot of people at low cost. The instrument can to:

• Assess how people really spend their time
• How happy particular people feel during particular activities
• How interventions such as of trainings or organizational change work out on happiness, both in the short-run and on the long-term
• How life-choices, such as early retirement, work-out on the happiness of particular kinds of people

Use for practitioners
Practitioners can use the Happiness Indicator for assessing the effects of their interventions on happiness.

Origin
The Happiness Indicator is a joint project of Erasmus University Rotterdam and a large health insurance company in The Netherlands. The project started in 2010 and monitor has now attracted more than 50,000 participants.

Satellite projects
Now that the system is developed, it can host parallel projects in other countries and variants that focus on specific purposes, such as effect studies. Satellite projects can draw on a common database and will also contribute to its enlargement. This paper describes the options and costs.
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Aim of the Happiness Indicator
Greater happiness for a greater number

The prime aim of this project is to foster happiness. It does so in two ways. In the short-term it provides people a better view on their own happiness, which will be helpful in seeking a more satisfying way of life. On the long-term the project generates information about the effects of major life-choices on particular kinds of people, which information can be used in evidence based happiness education.

The short-term goal feeds the long-term ambition. By providing people instant feedback on their happiness, the website will attract a lot of regular participants. Over the years their responses will create the large database required to chart how different ways of life pan out on the happiness of particular kinds of people.

This approach to greater happiness has parallels in health promotion. The short-term aim of informing people about their own happiness is akin to raising health conscience. The long-term goal of charting effects of life-choices is akin to evidence based health education about the effects of life-style.

The Happiness Indicator can also be used by policy makers for getting a view on conditions for happiness, both of people in general and for particular kinds of people, such as employees in a firm or pupils in a school.
Kind of happiness addressed
How well one feels

The focus of this Happiness Indicator is on how happy people feel, that is, on the affective component of happiness, which is also referred to as ‘hedonic level of affect’. This focus on how one feels appears both in the wording of the questions (How happy do you feel), in the use of smilies and in the sequence of questions (first ‘How do you feel today’).

This focus on affective experience has several reasons. One reason is to bypass the various distortions that may be involved in the cognitive evaluation of how successful one is in meeting standards of the good life. Since the tool is to provide a better view on one’s happiness, people should know how they really feel most of the time. Another reason is that affective experience appears to be the more important when it comes to consequences of happiness, such as the positive effect on health.
Use for participants
Tools in the Happiness Indicator

Many people seek ways to get happier than they are, and this quest reflects is an increasing stream of self-help books and advisory websites. These tools focus typically on self-reflection: what kind of person you are, what you really want in life and what inner restrictions keep you from doing that. They also encourage reframing: count your blessing and see that the glass is half full rather than half empty.

This Happiness Indicator follows a different approach and focuses on facts about one’s happiness. How happy do you feel most of the time? Could you be happier than you are now? What changes in your way of life are likely to make you feel better?

The main tools are depicted on the start page of the Happiness Indicator, the Happiness Comparer and the Happiness Diary.
Happiness Comparer: Could I be happier than I am now?

Participants answer two simple questions: How happy they feel today and how happy they have felt during the last month. They record their answers on a 0 to 10 numerical scale marked with smilies. See screenshot 2 below. This task takes less than a minute.

How happy do you feel?

What kind of person are you?
When participating for the first time, users also answer some questions about the following personal characteristics:
- age
- sexe
- education
- marital status
- employment
- health

This takes about two minutes. The resulting profile is used for later comparison with similar people.
This simple tool provides participants a better view on their own happiness in the first place. The questions focus attention on how they actually feel and make them distinguish between how they feel at the moment and how they usually feel. Though people have typically an idea of how happy they are, these notions are mostly less precise.

The comparison with similar people is helpful for estimating the chances of getting happier. Chances are small if you score 9 while the average score of similar people is 7. Yet chances are better if you score 7 while the average person like you scores 9. In that case greater happiness is apparently possible in conditions like yours.
Happiness Tracker: Track your Happiness through time

After online registration, users get an e-mail every month with the invitation to rate their happiness again. Monthly reminders via email are default, but participants have the opportunity change the frequency of getting such reminders (either, daily, weekly, monthly, half yearly, or yearly).

The e-mail contains a link to the Happiness Indicator website. After recording one’s happiness once more the system automatically generates one’s happiness history and displays that in a time graph.

The Happiness Tracker also plots how similar people have fared during the same period. This informs the user on how well he or she is doing relatively.

How happiness has changed over time. Comparison with similar people

The Happiness Tracker provides more accurate information about how happy we have felt in the past than memory typically does. Research has shown that we tend to remember how we have felt in particular situations, but that we are bad in recollecting how we felt most of the time. An accurate view on how we have felt enables a better estimate of why we have felt so. The trend line further indicates whether we are on the right way or not.

The comparison with similar people further informs us on whether we are doing better or worse. If the happiness of all people like us goes down, there is probably an external factor involved that is probably beyond our control. If the happiness of similar people goes up, but your happiness goes down there is probably something going on in your particular situation, which you can possibly change.
**Happiness Diary**

In the Happiness Diary participants note what they have done during the previous day and how happy they have felt during each of the activities. This tool is an internet application of the ‘Day Reconstruction Method’ (DRM), developed by Nobel Laureate Daniël Kahneman and his co-workers (2004) as an affordable alternative for experience sampling. Yesterday’s Happiness Diary works as follows:

Participants first ‘reconstruct’ the previous day, recording their activities from rising in the morning until going to bed at night. They indicate that lasted for 30 minutes or more. Some of the main activity categories are predefined (e.g. eating, commuting, working, exercise, studying, going out, relaxation, household, rest, religious or political activity, self- and other care). Participants can also define unique activities per timeslot. For every activity, participants also answer questions about where they were (e.g. at work, at home or elsewhere) and with whom (e.g. alone, family, friends, colleagues, boss).

*Start screen of the Happiness Diary*
Reconstruction of activities in the previous day: an example

From this screen the system generates a list on which the participants can note how happy they have felt during each is these activities.

Rating of happiness during each of these activities.
The system then computes average happiness during the different kinds of activities and presents these in a bar-chart.

*How happy one felt during different kinds of activities. Example of a profile*

Though we have mostly an idea of what activities we enjoy most and least, these notions are often inaccurate. For instance, we tend to overestimate our enjoyment of the time spend with children and underestimate how good we feel at rest. This tool provides a more precise view and is as such helpful in seeking ways of life that fit us better.
Comparison with how similar people feel during these kind of activities

Again the tool allows comparison with similar people and that also enables more informed decisions.

An example: One of the decisions people face is whether switch to another job or not. That question is fueled by the fact that we typically feel less happy at work than during leisure, only academics enjoy work and leisure equally much. In that context we estimate the chance that we will feel better in another job, but such estimates are difficult to make and we easily fall prey to the tendency of seeing greener grass far away. In that context it I useful knowing how much people like you enjoy their working hours and whether the difference with how they feel during leisure activities id equally big.

Likewise, you may think that your sex life falls short and consider an extra marital affair. In that context it is worth having a view on the sex life of people like you. Do they have sex more often and do they enjoy bedtime with their spouse more. This tool provides also an impartial answer to that sensitive question.
Estimates of how happy one feels can be inaccurate, even if that estimate concerns the recent past. For that reason it is worth double checking one’s estimates. The Happiness Diary provides such a double check since it automatically computes a time weighted average of happiness during all activities of the previous day. If that computed average differs substantially from the global self estimates on the Happiness Comparer, there is reason to reconsider.

Again participants can compare with comparable people. If these differ less, that is another reason to have a second look at one’s global estimates.
Further Self-help Tools

Next to these three tools the website provide also access to the following online sources for improving one’s happiness.

*Personality test*
Participants can complete a personality questionnaire that covers the big/5 personality dimensions. Their scores are compared to standard norms, for the time being norms in the Netherlands

*Work involvement*
Participants can also complete a questionnaire on work and get online feedback on how involved they are in their work and how close to burn out.

*Links to other self-help sites*
In the future the Happiness Indicator will also provide links to selected self help sites.
Use for researchers

Though devised as a self help tool in the first place, the Happiness Indicator can also be used for various scientific purposes.

Technical advantages

The Happiness Indicator generates longitudinal data on a lot of people at low cost. The project is particularly suited for effect studies, because matched control groups can be selected from the large pool of participants, now already more than 50,000 participants. Scientists can also draw on the available background information such as on personality and time use.

It is possible to add modules to the standard Happiness Indicator

Examples of studies that used the Happiness Indicator

To data the Happiness Indicator has been used for the following scientific studies.

Happiness and activity among elderly
An early version of the Happiness Indicator was used to track changes in the everyday activities of elderly people in the Netherlands. The main question was pattern of activities appears to be most rewarding for what kinds of people, taking personality into consideration. Results are published in the Journal of Gerontology (Oerlemans, Bakker & Veenhoven, 2011).

Happiness of employees
Recently, the Happiness indicator was used to assess differences in happiness between employees working in different branches, such as government, education, retail and industry. In that study the Happiness Diary was also used for assessing the difference in enjoyment of time spent working and at home. This difference provides a better view on the quality of work than the common questions on job satisfaction do, since it controls trait satisfaction.

Recovery from work
The Happiness Diary was used to track daily activity patterns of workers over multiple workdays, where workers also filled out a trait workaholism and state (daily) recovery questionnaires (Bakker, Oerlemans, Demerouti, & Sonnentag, 2011). Interestingly, results showed that high (vs. low) workaholics recovered more while engaging in physical activities after work, whereas they recovered less when engaging in work-related activities in non-work time. This paper is now under l.

Happiness in regions
The Happiness Indicator has also been used for monitoring happiness in regions in the Netherlands. This application capitalizes on the large number of participants. The study showed that people feel better in the northern provinces of the country than in the south
The Happiness Indicator provides many more research opportunities, both because of its method and in view of the variables. To data there are few large scale studies that combine time use and happiness. To our knowledge there are no datasets at all that provide information of both happiness and life choice.

**Facilities for satellite projects**

The Happiness Indicator is designed to host parallel projects, both twin projects in other countries and studies that aim at a particular subject. One reason is that this will enlarge the pool of participants, a large pool being required for the long term goal of charting consequences of life choices. Another reason is that such cooperation is cost efficient. Costs of development are shared with later users.

Erasmus University facilitates use of the Happiness Indicator in the following ways

- Data collected with the Happiness indicator will be managed and – on request – available in excel or SPSS format for you to use and perform your own research.

- We will provide you with an annual descriptive report about the number of participants, the frequency of participation, profile information of participants (e.g. to match census data), and happiness levels within your user population.

- If needed, experts from Erasmus University can help you to customize your own Happiness indicator in order to meet the specific demands of your participants, or to answer specific research questions. You will have the opportunity to consult with senior researchers (PhD’s), who are trained to guide you in your happiness research and perform complex statistical analyses (e.g. multi-level modeling, structural equation modeling, and so on).
Use for practitioners

Ever more professionals make their living helping people to get happier than they are. This is partly done in the context of psycho-therapy, partly in life-coaching and partly in education, adult education in particular. Greater happiness is also a growing issue in organizations and figures in trainings and organizational design.

Though happiness is a prime aim of these practitioners, they seldom assess the effect of their interventions on happiness. As a result interventions a typically based on theoretical belief rather than on empirical evidence. This hampers the development of these professions and also limits the market for the services. This trade would flourish better if clients could be reasonably sure of getting a bit happier.

For long effect studies were hardly possible in this field, because of the huge costs involved in long term follow up and the absence of control groups.

The Happiness Indicator makes follow-up much easier and cheaper. Practitioners can encourage their clients to participate and can thus monitor their happiness over time. The Happiness Diary also provides a view on behavioral chance that reflects in time-use. Changes in happiness and time-use can be compared to changes among similar people selected from the wider pool of participants.

Practitioners can track the happiness, daily lifestyles, and important life choices of their clients at reduced costs. See low-budget do-it-yourself option in the next section of this paper.
How to join:
Costs and rights for satellite projects

How can you setup your own ‘twin project’ and use the Happiness indicator in your own country or organization? Below is an overview of costs and services for mid-sized projects, that aim at 1000 participants or more. Conditions for smaller do-it-yourself project are mentioned at the end of this section. Conditions for larger project are available on request. All prices are provisional.

Medium size projects

Basic fee
Start fee of 4.250 euro excl. VAT. This allows our ICT-experts to setup a:

- Home website address for your Happiness indicator project (http:\www.happinessindicator.com\uniquename’)
- ‘My happiness’ page for users to access self-help tools and get feedback
- Client-database to receive profile and self-help data from your participants;

We can provide you with a default version of a new Happiness Indicator will take about two weeks.

Data management, data download, and annual report:
We will manage the data of your clients and provide you with a minimum of one annual download of your client database. Also, we will provide you with a minimum of one annual report. The total costs for data management, including the annual download and report are 11.250 euro excl. VAT. The download can be provided in either SPSS or Excel. The annual report will contain the following descriptive information regarding your participants:

- Number of participants and frequency of participation
- Demographic characteristics based on participants profile (age, gender, educational level, and so on)
- A timeline based on mean daily and monthly happiness of your participants for that year
- Average time spent and happiness derived from activities as reported in yesterday’s happiness diary.

Project supervision costs
Expert researchers will supervise your Happiness indicator project. Each of the senior researchers has extensive knowledge on happiness related research projects and quantitative data collection to accurately manage your personal project. The annual project supervision fee will be 3.290 euro excl. VAT.
**Annual fixed costs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Days of work</th>
<th>Total amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registration (only first year)</td>
<td>5 x 850</td>
<td>4.250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data management, Annual data download and report</td>
<td>1x 850</td>
<td>11.250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 x 1.040</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Server maintenance costs</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project supervision costs</td>
<td>2 x 1.645</td>
<td>3.290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>19.790 excl. VAT</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Optional extra’s and costs:**
In addition to the core module provided, there are several options to maximize research output (see Table 2). Each option is described below.

*Translate website into local language*
First of all, we offer the possibility to translate the website in your local language for an extra fee of 1.700 excl. VAT, excl. translation costs. This will be used for programming. Through a format in excel, we will ask you to translate text and questions on the website.

*Adding questionnaires*
We offer to you the opportunity to add questions to be filled out by your respondents. We charge 2.550 excl. VAT to add a maximum of 100 questions to the respondent’s profile. More options are, evidently, possible and can be discussed outside of this contract.

*Adjusting activities in Yesterday’s Happiness Diary*
We offer you the opportunity to adjust the nature of activities in yesterday’s happiness diary at a cost of 4.250 euro exc. VAT. Please be aware that the diary has a maximum of 14 main activity groups and 6 sub-activities that fall within the main activity groups.

*Biannual or quarterly reports*
In addition to the standard one year report, you may be interested in receiving reports on a bi-annual or quarterly basis. We will charge an additional 5.200 euro excl. VAT for every report that is ordered in addition to the annual report. The report will have the same setup compared to the annual report. More complex reports and/or more specific analyses can be discussed outside of this contract.

*Extra downloads*
Extra downloads of your client database can be ordered at an extra cost of 850 euro excl. VAT.
Optional extra’s and costs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extra options</th>
<th>Days of work</th>
<th>Costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Translation Happiness indicator in local language(^1)</td>
<td>2 x 850</td>
<td>1.700 euro excl. VAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adding questionnaires (max. addition of 100 questions)</td>
<td>1 x 850</td>
<td>2.550 euro excl. VAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting activities in yesterday’s happiness diary (max. no. of main activities = 14, subactivities = 6)</td>
<td>5 x 850</td>
<td>4.250 euro excl. VAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra report (per report ordered)</td>
<td>5 x 1.040*</td>
<td>5.200 euro excl. VAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra downloads of client database (per download)</td>
<td>1 x 850</td>
<td>850 euro excl. VAT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Reports will only be calculated and written by researchers that have a PhD in Social Sciences.

Low budget option for small projects

Practitioners can track the happiness, daily lifestyles, and important life choices of their clients. The low cost option for this purpose is €1600 Euro excl. VAT and involves a: setup a login site for your specific clients, b: use the Happiness Indicator to track changes in happiness, daily lifestyles, and important life choices up to a maximally 1000 clients. And c: 1 download in SPSS or Exless per year. Extra down loads costs €400 each.

Statistical support is available on request.

\(^1\) Excluding translation costs
Standard Contract

Provider
Risbo research Institute, Erasmus University Rotterdam
Dr. W.G.M. Oerlemans, Project Leader Happiness Indicator
Burgemeester Oudlaan 50
3062PA, Rotterdam
The Netherlands

Client [your name and contact details]

Agree to the following:

Article 1: Subject of Agreement

1.1
The default version of the Happiness indicator Website will be made available to the client within one month after signing this contract. Users are free to go to the website and use the Happiness indicator after this month. The development of extra options for users and their costs will be discussed outside this contract.

1.2
Erasmus University Rotterdam holds the rights to update the default version of the Happiness indicator with questions they deem relevant for scientific research on Happiness and Well-being.

1.3
The specific webpage of the Happiness indicator will use a secure protocol (HTTPS) to ensure anonymity of users on the web. Data will be downloaded in a secure database, which is only accessible by the ICT department at Erasmus University Rotterdam to ensure the security of the database.

1.4
The Happiness indicator home site will contain a standardized text stating the joint co-operation between Erasmus University Rotterdam and client.

1.5
Users from client will be labeled with a unique TAG. This TAG will be used to monitor the number of participants from client that use the Happiness indicator, and to produce a minimum of one annual report for client.

1.6
Erasmus University Rotterdam is not responsible for any type of information published by client, based on data collected with the Happiness indicator.
1.7 Erasmus University Rotterdam holds the right to use information from client users for scientific publications on the impact of life choices on happiness. In such publications, anonymity is ensured by not stating any type of personal information that threatens user anonymity in any way.

1.8 Joint publications of client and Erasmus University Rotterdam can be discussed outside of this contract. The discussion will be based on a) the content, b) form (e.g. book chapter, scientific article, other), c) the timing of publication, d) what kind of outlet (e.g. scientific, societal).

Article 2: Start, duration, and end of contract

2.1 This contract will start on DD-MM-YY, with a duration of XX year. This contract will end on on DD-MM-YY.

2.2 Before the end-date of this contract, both parties will evaluate the project and state their intentions regarding continuation/non-continuation of this contract.

Article 3: Evaluation

3.2. After 6 months, both parties will evaluate their cooperation, discuss potential problems, and take action to solve these problems if needed.

Article 4: Secrecy

4.1 Employees of client and Erasmus University Rotterdam that are involved in this contract are bound to secrecy about the subjects discussed in this contract during the execution of this contract, and after ending this contract.

4.2. Anonymity of users will always be insured in all types of communication.
Article 5: User rights and Ownership

5.1 The models, methods, and other types of self-help tools developed in the Happiness indicator are the intellectual property of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

5.2 The models, methods, and other tools developed by client will remain the intellectual property of the client.

5.3 The information users from client provide by participating in the Happiness indicator are the ownership of the researchers performing the Happiness indicator project at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

5.4 The information users from client provide by participating in the Happiness indicator are also the ownership of client. It thus concerns a mutual ownership of information of clients by Erasmus University Rotterdam and client.

Signatures:

Dr. Wido G.M. Oerlemans
Project Leader Happiness indicator
Erasmus University Rotterdam
3062 PA, Rotterdam
The Netherlands

Date: XXXXX