

RESEARCH FOR THE WORLD

Can we be happier?

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Happiness and wellbeing should be at the heart of the policy agenda, but a major rethink of the role of government is required if they are to truly take centre stage, argue **Richard Layard** and **George Ward**.

In these dark days, it is more important than ever to focus on the things that really matter to us. We need it, if we are to cope with the coronavirus crisis. But we also need it for when the crisis is over, to provide a clear vision of what kind of society we really want.

The answer is surely that we want a society where people are as happy as possible with their lives. This great idea – that we judge a society by the happiness of the people – goes back to the 18th Century Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment, and is surely the most important idea of the modern age.

It was this idea that inspired the work of the Webbs, co-founders of LSE, and it was also the central belief of LSE's director, William Beveridge. It is increasingly the view of policy-makers worldwide.



Humans are social animals. Loneliness is a major problem in modern society. 

Why should happiness influence policy?

In our new book, *Can We Be Happier? Evidence and Ethics*, we describe how new evidence on what causes and fosters happiness can shape public policy and improve our jobs and private lives.

So what causes the huge variation in people's life satisfaction? For Britain, the biggest single factor is mental health – whether you have ever been diagnosed with depression or an anxiety disorder. Next comes human relationships, including the quality of your work and your private life, as well as physical health.

In the book, we describe the key requirements for a happier society: professionals with the right goals and tools; government with the right objectives; and individuals with better life skills and more compassion.

The cycle of life

We can start with teachers. Children's wellbeing should clearly be a major goal for every school, and schools should be measuring their wellbeing on a yearly basis. The weekly teaching of life skills, using evidence-based materials, can help here.



Our personal aim should be to create as much happiness as we can in the world (including, of course, our own). ”

After school, young people enter the world of work. In this environment, research shows that the worst time in the week is when workers are with their boss. This is shocking, and it is clear that many workplaces need a quite different management philosophy. A trial led from MIT and elsewhere shows that when workers are involved more closely in decision-making, their job satisfaction rises by more than 10 per cent.

But while good schools and workplaces can do much for mental health, at least a fifth of people will still experience serious anxiety disorders or depression. When this happens, evidence-based psychological therapies (above all, cognitive behavioural therapy), can help at least 50 per cent of patients to recover and, because mental illness stops so many people working, these therapies save more public money than they cost.

Humans are also social animals, and loneliness is a major problem in modern society, especially in lockdowns. Town planners and community organisations can do much to promote social connections.

Judge policies by the amount of happiness they produce

Making all this happen requires a major rethink of the role of government. First, governments have to judge policies by the amount of happiness they produce per dollar of expenditure. Second, the state should strive not only to help people to be better workers, but also to support them in becoming better parents, partners and citizens.

At least as important as public policy is what each of us does of our own accord. So what kind of culture do we want? The dominant culture of today urges us to strive to be more successful than other people. But this means for every winner, there is a loser. That is not great for the losers, and it can also be very stressful for the winners. This needs to change. There needs to be a revolution not only in political philosophy but also in moral philosophy. Our personal aim should be to create as much happiness as we can in the world (including, of course, our own).

Mindfulness and other meditative techniques are enabling millions to achieve greater contentment with their lives. But for cultures to flourish, they need to be embedded in organisations where people meet regularly to feel supported and inspired. One such organisation is Action for Happiness – its eight-week course,



This is an edited extract of a piece which appeared in the Spring 2020 edition of **CentrePiece** the magazine of the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) at LSE.

In November 2020, Lord Richard Layard was presented with a **lifetime achievement award by the Economic and Social Research Council** for his work in economics, which spans more than 50 years

Watch the accompanying short film **Can we be happier?** and hear Richard Layard in the LSEIQ podcast episode **What's the secret to happiness?**

Can we be Happier? Evidence and Ethics by Richard Layard with George Ward is published by Pelican Books.

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"Exploring What Matters", has been independently evaluated and shown to have a bigger impact on participants' happiness than finding a partner or a job.

Better public policy means better lives

So we now have two powerful and converging trends, decision-makers who are paying much more attention to the outcome that really matters – how people feel about their lives – and millions of people refocused on happiness. In our view, this is an unstoppable force towards better public policy and better lives.

The COVID-19 crisis will surely accelerate these changes. Let's hope that LSE will have played a major role in this. Perhaps LSE needs a new motto: not "to know the causes of things", but "to know the causes of happiness". ■