

Are we looking for happiness in all the wrong places?

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The difference in mood between people who slept six hours or less, versus seven hours or more, was equivalent to earning \$30,000 a year versus \$90,000 a year, USC Dornsife's Arthur Stone found. Credit: Dennis Lan for USC Dornsife Magazine

If only we could win millions on the lottery—or failing that, at least

convince our boss to give us a massive raise. And then, if we could just meet the love of our life on that new dating app, we could Instagram our perfect, exotic honeymoon pictures to all our friends and followers and then, maybe, just maybe, we could be truly happy.

Scholars who study human happiness might well quibble with those common aspirations. Research shows that [additional income](#), [dating apps](#) and [social media](#) don't necessarily bring us the joy we think they will.

One of the major misconceptions of happiness is [income](#), notes USC Dornsife's Norbert Schwarz, Provost Professor of Psychology and Marketing.

"Everybody wants higher income and is willing to do quite a bit for that. In reality, income makes much less of a difference than we usually expect," Schwarz says. "When you are poor, earning more money is very beneficial, but once needs are met, making more and more adds ever less to one's well-being.

"You don't need a lot of luxury to feel good as you go through your day," he adds. "And many high-income jobs come with long hours and high stress, which makes the day less enjoyable."

In fact, the relationship between income and life satisfaction, he notes, is relatively minor, with income explaining only about 4 percent of the variation in people's evaluation of their life as a whole and even less in how they feel moment to moment.

Sweet Dreams

Other variables play a far greater role in improving day-to-day mood. For instance, one big factor in how you'll feel tomorrow is how well you sleep tonight, Schwarz says. In a 2004 study, Schwarz and USC Dornsife

Professor of Psychology, Economics and Health Policy and Management Arthur Stone found that the difference in mood between people who slept six hours or less, versus seven hours or more, was equivalent to earning \$30,000 a year versus \$90,000 a year.

"If you told most people, 'You can increase your income by \$60,000 if you're willing to drive a bit longer to work, but you'll have to sleep an hour less,' most people would leap at the chance," Schwarz says. "But in terms of how they feel as they go through their day, they would actually be better off getting a good night's sleep."

Happiness Over Time

Indeed, when it comes to income and happiness, it's a mixed picture, says University Professor Emeritus of Economics Richard Easterlin, creator of the so-called Easterlin Paradox.

His paradox states that if we look at any given point of time, on average people who have more income are happier. However, this finding is contradicted by time series data, which follows people's happiness over a length of time as their income increases.

"It's the time series relationship that's relevant to questions like, 'Would more money make me happy?'" Easterlin notes. "Because you're thinking what's going to happen over time as you get more money, will you become happier? And the answer to that is quite consistently 'no.'"

A Question of Comparison

This seems counterintuitive, but Easterlin explains that it's all down to a psychological concept called "social comparison." To illustrate how this works, he would ask students whether they would prefer their income to

increase by \$100,000 or by \$50,000.

Next, Easterlin put two situations to his students. In the first, their income increases by \$100,000, but everybody else's goes up \$200,000. In the second option, their income increases by \$50,000, but everybody else's goes up \$25,000.

"Two thirds of my class, when I used to teach this, would shift to the second option," Easterlin notes. "They opted for less income for themselves if it was more than others were getting."

When we evaluate our happiness, he explains, we have a comparison or reference level, a benchmark against which we judge the amount of income we get.

"We make judgments about our own income based upon what others are getting, and if others are doing a lot better than us, we tend to be less happy," Easterlin says.

So, while it is true that higher income and greater happiness do go together if we drill down to a specific point in time, once we look at the relationship between income and happiness over a period of time, then we see a very different picture—one in which higher income does not bring more happiness.

"Over time, what's happening is that the incomes of others with whom you compare yourself are going up on average to the same extent as your income goes up. So, you're no happier," Easterlin explains. "The increase in your own income by itself will make you happier. The increase in others' incomes by itself, if yours didn't change, would make you less happy. But what happens in practice is that, on average, as your income goes up, everybody else's goes up, and the result is that nobody is happier."

Diminishing Returns

A 2010 study by Nobel laureate and USC Dornsife Presidential Professor of Economics Sir Angus Deaton, co-authored with psychologist and Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, found that emotional well-being increases with money but only up to an income of about \$75,000 per annum—enough to cover the basic necessities. Any amount on top of that won't make a huge difference to happiness. While more money does appear to increase satisfaction with your life, when it comes to improving day-to-day emotional well-being, money generates diminishing returns.



Credit: Dennis Lan for USC Dornsife Magazine

As Deaton and Kahneman wrote in the study, "We conclude that high income buys life satisfaction but not happiness."

Easterlin argues that what we consider to be enough money to live happily changes over time.

"What we would like to have increases with what we're able to have, and what we consider to be the essentials of a decent or good or a happy life is not a fixed amount, it's variable," Easterlin notes.

Easterlin sums up the problem by citing a favorite quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Want is a growing giant whom the coat of Have was never large enough to cover."

However, Easterlin refutes the idea that we're necessarily discontented. Most people are happy, he says. "It's just that where they think that more money will make them even happier, it does not.

Love Not Money?

So, if more money isn't going to make us happier over time, perhaps finding true love could be the answer.

While the joy we find in our relationships has always depended on a whole host of variables, the way we are searching for love has undergone a revolution in the last decade as more and more of us are turning to dating apps in the eternal human quest for love and romance.

USC Dornsife's Julie Albright, a sociologist specializing in digital culture and communications, says the ways we now look for love in the eerie digital world of retouched selfies, "breadcrumbing," "catfishing" and "ghosting" are affecting us more deeply than we realize, impacting our relationships, our health—and, yes—even our well-being.

The Loneliness Paradox

While we may believe that online dating will allow us to banish loneliness once and for all, Albright's book, *Left to Their Own Devices: How Digital Natives are Reshaping the American Dream* (Prometheus Books, 2019), argues that online dating can, in fact, do just the opposite, resulting in increased feelings of isolation.

Dating apps promote the idea that we have endless choice. Why commit, the thinking goes, when someone better might come along? The problem with that approach, Albright argues, is that people who don't choose will end up lonely because they're not committing to building a relationship.

Traditions like marriage or buying a home, she says, provide a guiding North Star by which people can navigate their lives. Now, young digital natives, hyper-attached to digital technologies and no longer choosing commitment and marriage, are unhooking from traditional social structures and are cast adrift—a process Albright, a lecturer in the Department of Psychology, calls "coming untethered."

A young man couldn't try to pick up 300 women in one night at a bar, she says, but by using a dating app, he can easily throw out a thousand hooks and get 300 bites.

"Taking the endgame out of courtship changes the dynamic of what dating is about. If you're just dating in a constant churn, there's no future and no hope on the horizon," she said. "Instead, it becomes all about experience."

This leads to heightened levels of loneliness or anxiety, as paradoxically, instead of becoming more connected, we become increasingly separated from one another by using our devices.

Kicking the Habit

Even if we know [online dating](#) is making us depressed, it's not easy to stop, Albright notes. She compares using dating apps to playing one-armed bandits in Las Vegas. "Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, and that's why you keep going back for more," she says.

And that's not all. Dating apps and social media also fuel a narcissistic desire for attention, satisfying primitive psychological needs for attention, affirmation and validation.

"People can get very hooked on that," she says.

So how do we find true love and happiness in this lonely, addictive digital world?

Albright's advice rings as true as it is simple: Switch off your phone.

"Spend time together, get to know each other, look into each other's eyes and make building that relationship a sacred space," she says, adding: "Just make sure it's without the intrusion of a device."

Provided by University of Southern California

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