

Research identifies key drivers of life satisfaction and happiness

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How someone feels about their personal appearance or attractiveness can significantly affect their level of life satisfaction, according to a new study out of York University, which looked at a broad range of factors

and their contribution to happiness.

The importance physical appearance plays in determining someone's level of life satisfaction was one of the more surprising findings, says York University Associate Professor James Chowhan of the School of Human Resources Management, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, and lead author of the study.

Although others may rate someone highly attractive, what matters more is how satisfied a person is with their own appearance, something that could be more difficult today in a world of social influencers and [social media](#) in which appearance has an outsized role.

Published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, "[Life Satisfaction and the Roles of Work, Family, and Social Factors in a Social Production Function Framework](#)" looked at family, work, education, social interests, social class and at how immigrants were faring, among other things, to determine which variables lead to the highest degree of life satisfaction.

Chowhan, along with York Visting Associate Hossein Samavatyan, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Isfahan in Iran, and York Assistant Professor Farimah HakemZadeh, included working and non-working adults ages 25 to 64 in their study—students, caregivers, retired people and those with long-term illness—using data from the Canadian 2016 General Social Survey.

"We wanted to look at several factors that could influence life satisfaction, not just one factor, like income, work or [family life](#), independent of the other influences," says Chowhan. "Our study is unique in its comprehensiveness, but also that it looks at non-working adults alongside working adults without treating them as a niche category."

Another surprise was how high on the life satisfaction scale people rated family time, being part of a community outside of work, and having people to depend upon—affecting an individual's overall resiliency—compared to work variables, which received lower ratings, including [social relationships](#) at the workplace.

Chowhan points out that although income definitely plays a role, it's certainly not the only factor or even the most important one.

"Often in the literature, we see income is really important, or your work is really important, but it was really these family social factors that had the higher magnitudes of importance. In our study, we found that work gets a low value relative to family and social outcomes. It's not that all aspects of work rated poorly, but overall family and community dominated."

Social class, however, is another substantial determinant of how satisfied people are with their lives. While a lot of studies will examine income or education, rarely do they look at both those factors along with social class, says Chowhan. "Our study does all three, so we have a unique data set."

Social class is a distinct variable in understanding life satisfaction and one of the major contributors, he says. How people perceive their social class is connected to income but also depends on other factors such as family size and where people live. The cost of living in a small town in Nova Scotia is a lot different than in cities like Toronto or Vancouver.

"You could be making what would be considered a great salary or wage anywhere else in the country, but in these big cities, you feel like you're only middle class," says Chowhan. "The higher you rate yourself in terms of [social class](#), the higher your life satisfaction, but also, the gap between the lowest class and upper class is huge. If you move from the

lowest class to the upper class, that's just a massive jump in life satisfaction."

Regardless of income, stress, whether from work, family pressures, or [poor health](#), had a moderately negative effect, while quality of health played a larger role. "The extent to which you rate your overall health as excellent really contributes to your life satisfaction," says Chowhan.

In addition, being married or living common law is a plus on the life satisfaction scale compared to being widowed, separated or single. Recent immigrants to Canada also rated their life satisfaction as higher than those born in Canada; however, being a member of a visible minority has the opposite effect. More work needs to be done to tease that last finding out, says Chowhan, as many immigrants today are also part of a visible minority.

And, if you're female, you are also likely to be more satisfied with life than if you are male. Best case scenario for the highest [life satisfaction](#)? You are married, happy with your [personal appearance](#), have good family and community support, have excellent health, and consider yourself upper class.

More information: James Chowhan et al, Life Satisfaction and the Roles of Work, Family, and Social Factors in a Social Production Function Framework, *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s10902-024-00739-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-024-00739-6)

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