Impact of well being in relationships .

Relationships and Well-being.

The relationships we cultivate in our lives are essential to our well-being—namely, happiness and health. Why is that so? We begin to answer this question by exploring the types of relationships—family, friends, colleagues, and lovers—we have in our lives and how they are measured. We also explore the different aspects of happiness and health, and show how the quantity and quality of relationships can affect our happiness and health.

Introduction

In Daniel Defoe’s classic novel Robinson Crusoe (1719), the main character is shipwrecked. For years he lives alone, creating a shelter for himself and marking the passage of time on a wooden calendar. It is a lonely existence, and Crusoe describes climbing a hilltop in the hopes of seeing a passing ship and possible rescue. He scans the horizon until, in his own words, he is “almost blind.” Then, without hope, he sits and weeps.

Although it is a work of fiction, Robinson Crusoe contains themes we can all relate to. One of these is the idea of loneliness. Humans are social animals and we prefer living together in groups. We cluster in families, in cities, and in groups of friends. In fact, most people spend relatively few of their waking hours alone. Even introverts report feeling happier when they are with others! Yes, being surrounded by people and feeling connected to others appears to be a natural impulse.

In this module we will discuss relationships in the context of well-being. We will begin by defining well-being and then presenting research about different types of relationships. We will explore how both the quantity and quality of our relationships affect us, as well as take a look at a few popular conceptions (or misconceptions) about relationships and happiness.

The Importance of Relationships

If you were to reflect on the best moments of your life, chances are they involved other people. We feel good sharing our experiences with others, and our desire for high quality relationships may be connected to a deep-seated psychological impulse: the need to belong . Aristotle commented that humans are fundamentally social in nature. Modern society is full of evidence that Aristotle was right. For instance, people often hold strong opinions about single child families—usually concerning what are often viewed as problematic “only child” characteristics—and most parents choose to have multiple kids. People join book clubs to make a solitary activity—reading—into a social activity. Prisons often punish offenders by putting them in solitary confinement, depriving them of the company of others. Perhaps the most obvious expression of the need to belong in contemporary life is the prevalence of social media. We live in an era when, for the first time in history, people effectively have two overlapping sets of social relationships: those in the real world and those in the virtual world.

It may seem intuitive that our strong urge to connect with others has to do with the boost we receive to our own well-being from relationships. After all, we derive considerable meaning from our relational bonds—as seen in the joy a newborn brings to its parents, the happiness of a wedding, and the good feelings of having reliable, supportive friendships. In fact, this intuition is borne out by research suggesting that relationships can be sources of intimacy and closeness , comfort and relief from stress and accountability—all of which help toward achieving better health outcomes. Indeed, scholars have long considered social relationships to be fundamental to happiness and well-being . If the people in our lives are as important to our happiness as the research suggests, it only makes sense to investigate how relationships affect us.

The Question of Measurement

Despite the intuitive appeal of the idea that good relationships translate to more happiness, researchers must collect and analyze data to arrive at reliable conclusions. This is particularly difficult with the concepts of relationships and happiness, because both can be difficult to define. What counts as a relationship? A pet? An old friend from childhood you haven’t seen in ten years? Similarly, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what qualifies as happiness. It is vital to define these terms, because their definitions serve as the guidelines by which they can be measured, a process called operationalization. Scientifically speaking, the two major questions any researcher needs to answer before he or she can begin to understand how relationships and well-being interact are, “How do I best measure relationships?” and “How do I best measure well-being?”

Presence and Quality of Relationships and Well-Being

If you wanted to investigate the connection between social relationships and well-being, where would you start? Would you focus on teenagers? Married couples? Would you interview religious people who have taken a vow of silence? These are the types of considerations well-being researchers face. It is impossible for a single study to look at all types of relationships across all age groups and cultures. Instead, researchers narrow their focus to specific variables. They tend to consider two major elements: the presence of relationships, and the quality of relationships.

Presence of relationships

The first consideration when trying to understand how relationships influence well-being is the presence of relationships. Simply put, researchers need to know whether or not people have relationships. Are they married? Do they have many friends? Are they a member of a club? Finding this out can be accomplished by looking at objective social variables, such as the size of a person’s social network, or the number of friends they have. Researchers have discovered that the more social relationships people have, in general, the more positively their sense of well-being is impacted (Lucas, Dyrenforth, & Diener 2008). In one study of more than 200 undergraduate students, psychologists Ed Diener and Martin Seligman (2002) compared the happiest 10% to the unhappiest 10%. The researchers were curious to see what differentiated these two groups. Was it gender? Exercise habits? Religion? The answer turned out to be relationships! The happiest students were much more satisfied with their relationships, including with close friends, family, and romantic partnerships, than the unhappiest. They also spent less time alone.

Some people might be inclined to dismiss the research findings above because they focused primarily on college students. However, in a worldwide study of people of all ages from 123 nations, results showed that having even a few high quality social relationships was consistently linked with subjective well-being . This is an important finding because it means that a person doesn’t have to be a social butterfly in order to be happy. Happiness doesn’t depend necessarily on having dozens of friends, but rather on having at least a few close connections.

Another way of gaining an understanding of the presence of relationships is by looking at the absence of relationships. A lack of social connections can lead to loneliness and depression. People lose well-being when social relationships are denied—as in cases of ostracism. In many societies, withholding social relationships is used as a form of punishment. For example, in some Western high schools, people form social groups known as “cliques,” in which people share interests and a sense of identity. Unlike clubs, cliques do not have explicit rules for membership but tend to form organically, as exclusive group friendships. When one member of a clique conflicts with the others, the offending member may be socially rejected.

Quality of relationships

Simply having a relationship is not, in itself, sufficient to produce well-being. We’re all familiar with instances of awful relationships: Cinderella and her step-sisters, loveless marriages, friends who have frequent falling-outs . In order for a relationship to improve well-being it has to be a good one. Researchers have found that higher friendship quality is associated with increased happiness . Friendships aren’t the only relationships that help, though. Researchers have found that high quality relationships between parents and children are associated with increased happiness, both for teenagers and adults .

Finally, an argument can be made for looking at relationships’ effects on each of the distinct components of subjective well-being.Investigated a mix of relationships, including family, friends, and romantic partners. They found that social support and conflict were associated with all three aspects of subjective well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect). Similarly, in a cross-cultural study comparing college students in Iran, Jordan, and the United States, researchers found that social support was linked to higher life satisfaction, higher positive affect, and lower negative affect.

It may seem like common sense that good relationships translate to more happiness. You may be surprised to learn, however, that good relationships also translate to better health. Interestingly, both the quality and quantity of social relationships can affect a person’s health. Research has shown that having a larger social network and high quality relationships can be beneficial for health, whereas having a small social network and poor quality relationships can actually be detrimental to health . Why might it be the case that good relationships are linked to health? One reason is that friends and romantic partners might share health behaviors, such as wearing seat belts, exercising, or abstaining from heavy alcohol consumption. Another reason is that people who experience social support might feel less stress. Stress, it turns out, is associated with a variety of health problems.

Types of Relationships

Intimate relationships

It makes sense to consider the various types of relationships in our lives when trying to determine just how relationships impact our well-being. For example, would you expect a person to derive the exact same happiness from an ex-spouse as from a child or coworker? Among the most important relationships for most people is their long-time romantic partner. Most researchers begin their investigation of this topic by focusing on intimate relationships because they are the closest form of social bond. Intimacy is more than just physical in nature; it also entails psychological closeness. Research findings suggest that having a single confidante—a person with whom you can be authentic and trust not to exploit your secrets and vulnerabilities—is more important to happiness than having a large social network.

Another important aspect of relationships is the distinction between formal and informal. Formal relationships are those that are bound by the rules of politeness. In most cultures, for instance, young people treat older people with formal respect, avoiding profanity and slang when interacting with them. Similarly, workplace relationships tend to be more formal, as do relationships with new acquaintances. Formal connections are generally less relaxed because they require a bit more work, demanding that we exert more self-control. Contrast these connections with informal relationships—friends, lovers, siblings, or others with whom you can relax. We can express our true feelings and opinions in these informal relationships, using the language that comes most naturally to us, and generally being more authentic. Because of this, it makes sense that more intimate relationships—those that are more comfortable and in which you can be more vulnerable—might be the most likely to translate to happiness.

The most common way researchers investigate intimacy is by examining marital status. Although marriage is just one type of intimate relationship, it is by far the most common type. In some research, the well-being of married people is compared to that of people who are single or have never been married, and in other research, married people are compared to people who are divorced or widowed. Researchers have found that the transition from singlehood to marriage brings about an increase in subjective well-being . Research has also shown that progress through the stages of relationship commitment (i.e., from singlehood to dating to marriage) is also associated with an increase in happiness . On the other hand, experiencing divorce, or the death of a spouse, leads to adverse effects on subjective well-being and happiness, and these effects are stronger than the positive effects of being married.

Although research frequently points to marriage being associated with higher rates of happiness, this does not guarantee that getting married will make you happy! The quality of one’s marriage matters greatly. When a person remains in a problematic marriage, it takes an emotional toll. Indeed, a large body of research shows that people’s overall life satisfaction is affected by their satisfaction with their marriage .

Work Relationships and Well-Being

Working adults spend a large part of their waking hours in relationships with coworkers and supervisors. Because these relationships are forced upon us by work, researchers focus less on their presence or absence and instead focus on their quality. High quality work relationships can make jobs enjoyable and less stressful. This is because workers experience mutual trust and support in the workplace to overcome work challenges. Liking the people we work with can also translate to more humor and fun on the job. Research has shown that supervisors who are more supportive have employees who are more likely to thrive at work. On the other hand, poor quality work relationships can make a job feel like drudgery. Everyone knows that horrible bosses can make the workday unpleasant. Supervisors that are sources of stress have a negative impact on the subjective well-being of their employees . Specifically, research has shown that employees who rate their supervisors high on the so-called “dark triad”—psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism—reported greater psychological distress at work, as well as less job satisfaction.

In addition to the direct benefits or costs of work relationships on our well-being, we should also consider how these relationships can impact our job performance. Research has shown that feeling engaged in our work and having a high job performance predicts better health and greater life satisfaction. Given that so many of our waking hours are spent on the job—about ninety thousand hours across a lifetime—it makes sense that we should seek out and invest in positive relationships at work.