

Scientists crack secret of a good day

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Time limit: New research suggests that socialising for more than 30 minutes a day makes most of us happy but anything over two hours has very little extra benefit.

But can we really measure happiness? Studies and apps that track the pleasure of each daily activity might miss the secret of true contentment.

What's happening?

Scientists are trying to understand what creates the perfect day. Tracking the time people spend on daily activities, they found that socialising for more than 30 minutes lifted everyone's spirits, while spending time with friends had an "almost boundlessly" positive effect.

Other results were more surprising: six hours of work had no impact on happiness, while a 15-minute commute to work can actually improve people's mood.

Another group of researchers is relying on an app that asks participants for a mood rating several times a day. The app promises to help users understand what makes them happy, as well as helping spot mental health problems early.

Find out more

Scientists already know what makes people happy, claims Robert Waldinger, director of the longest scientific study on happiness ever

conducted. His study shows that people who "kept prioritising connections" with others are happier and healthier than those who do not.

Some research even suggests that social isolation is as bad for a person's health as smoking cigarettes.

Happiness tracking helps people understand their emotional patterns, but cannot measure the sense of purpose or fulfilment that brings long-term contentment.

But can we really measure happiness?

Some say

Yes! Modern technology allows scientists to track people's levels of contentment at every moment. Happiness can be measured like fitness and other health markers.

Others think

No! Studies that focus on moment-to-moment happiness miss deeper sources of contentment. Focusing on relationships, rather than our mood, makes life worthwhile.

"Happiness is like a cloud, if you stare at it long enough, it evaporates."

Sarah McLachlan (1968 –), Canadian singer

What do you think?

1. Connect

How do you feel about this story? - On balance, do you feel more happiness or unhappiness during the day? Do you know which activities bring you most pleasure, and which bring the least?

2. Wonder

What questions do you have? - For example: Do people's average happiness levels change according to the country they live in, or the time of year, or their stage of life?

3. Investigate

What are the facts? - Pick out one thing we know for certain about this story and one thing we cannot say for sure.

4. Construct

What is your point of view? - Imagine that everyone in your school had to track their mood and record their happiness each hour. Do you think this would be a helpful exercise, or a waste of time?

5. Express

What do others believe? - In groups, come up with three easy activities that people can do each day to improve their mood.

6. Reflect

What might happen next? - Imagine that the government announced a new goal to make the country 10% happier in 10 years' time. Write a pamphlet that the government could hand out to people, explaining how to become happier.