

## Introduction by the Editors

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## Abstract:

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It is a pleasure to bring to you the eHandbook of Subjective Well-Being, the science of when and why people experience and evaluate their lives in positive ways, including aspects such as positive feelings, life satisfaction, and optimism. There are chapters in this eHandbook on the philosophy and history of well-being, as well as reviews of empirical research on the ways to assess well-being, the circumstances that predict it, the outcomes that it produces, the societal policies that enhance it, and many other social, biological, and cultural processes that help us understand why some people are happy and satisfied with their lives, while others are not. There are also chapters on theories of well-being, such as the baseline or set-point models.

We believe that Open publication is the wave of the future (Jhangiani & Biswas-Diener, 2017). Therefore, we are presenting the handbook in an electronic format so that it is widely available to everyone around the world. The handbook is entirely open and free – anyone can read and use it without cost. This is important to us as we desire to lower knowledge barriers for individuals and communities, especially because it provides access to students, educators, and scholars who do not have substantial financial resources. We are not certain if this is the first free and open handbook in the behavioral sciences, but hopefully it will not be the last. In the past the prohibitive price of many handbooks have made them available only to scholars or institutions in wealthy nations, and this is unfortunate. We believe scientific scholarship should be available to all.

The field of subjective well-being has grown at rapid pace over the last several decades, and many discoveries have been made. When Ed Diener began his research within the field in 1981 there were about 130 studies published that year on the topic, as shown using a Google Scholar search on “subjective well-being.” Eighteen years later when Shigehiro Oishi earned his Ph.D. in 2000 there were 1,640 publications that year on the topic, and when Louis Tay was awarded a Ph.D. in 2011 there were 10,400 publications about subjective well-being. Finally, in 2016 there were 18,300 publications – in that single year alone! In other words, during the time that Diener has been studying the topic, scholarship on subjective well-being has grown over 100-fold!

It is not merely the number of published studies that has grown, but there have been enormous leaps forward in our understanding. In the 1980s, there were questions about the reliability and validity of subjective well-being assessments, and the components that underlie it. One notable advance is our understanding and measurement of well-being. We now know a great deal about the validity of self-report measures, as well as the core evaluative and affective components that make up subjective well-being. Further, scholars have a much greater understanding of the processes by which people report their subjective well-being, and various biases or artifacts that may influence these reports. In 1982 many studies were focused on demographic factors such as income, sex, and age that were correlated with subjective well-being. By 2016 we understood much more about temperament and other internal factors that influence happiness, as well as some of the outcomes in behavior that subjective well-being helps produce (e.g., income, performance, physical health, longevity).

In the 1980s, researchers assumed that people adapt to almost any life event, and that different life events only have a short-term effect on subjective well-being. A number of large-scale longitudinal studies later showed that that is not the case. By now we know what kinds of life events affect our subjective well-being, how much, and for roughly how long. In the 1980s researchers believed that economic growth would not increase the happiness of a given nation. Now we know when economic growth tends to increase the happiness of a given nation. Additionally, we know much more about the biology of subjective well-being, and an enormous amount more about culture and well-being, a field that was almost nonexistent in 1982.

With the advent of positive psychology, we are also beginning to examine practices and interventions that can raise subjective well-being. Given the broad interest in subjective well-being in multiple fields like psychology, economics, political science, and sociology, there have been important developments made toward understanding how societies differ in well-being. This understanding led to the development of national accounts of well-being – societies using well-being measures to help inform policy deliberations. This advance changes the focus of governments away from a narrow emphasis on economic development to a broader view which sees government policies as designed to raise human well-being.

We were fortunate to have so many leading scholars of subjective well-being and related topics contribute to this volume. We might be slightly biased but most of the chapters in this eHandbook are truly superb. Not only do they provide a broad coverage of a large number of areas, but many of the chapters present new ways of thinking about these areas. Below is a brief overview of each of the sections in this volume:

In Section 1 we begin the volume with chapters on philosophical, historical, and religious thinking on well-being through the ages. Next, we cover the methods and measures used in the scientific study of well-being.

Section 2 is devoted to theories of well-being such as the top-down theory, activity theory, goal theory, self-determination theory, and evolutionary theory.

Section 3 covers the personality, genetics, hormones, and neuroscience of well-being. Then, demographic factors such as age, gender, race, religion, and marital status are discussed.

Section 4 is devoted to how domains of life – such as work, finance, close relationships, and leisure – are related to overall subjective well-being.

Section 5 covers the various outcomes of subjective well-being, ranging from work outcomes, to cognitive outcomes, to health, and finally relationship outcomes.

Section 6 covers interventions to increase subjective well-being.

Finally, Section 7 is devoted to cultural, geographical, and historical variations in subjective well-being. This eHandbook presents the most up-to-date and comprehensive understanding of subjective well-being – and it is freely available to all!

The editors would like to extend their thanks to several individuals who have been critical to the success of the handbook. First, our gratitude is immense toward Chris Wiese, Keya Biswas-Diener, and Danielle Geerling, who organized and kept the entire venture on track. Their hard work and organizational skills were wonderful, and the book would not have been possible without them. Second, we extend our thanks to the Diener Education Fund, a charitable organization devoted to education that in part made this project possible. In particular we express deep gratitude to Mary Alice and Frank Diener. Not only did their help make this eHandbook possible, but their lives stood as shining examples of the way to pursue well-being!

## References

Jhangiani, R. S., & Biswas-Diener, R. (Eds.) (2017). *Open: The philosophy and practices that are revolutionizing psychological science and education*. London: Ubiquity Press.



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