

The What, Why, When, and How of Teaching the Science of Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract

The field of subjective well-being (SWB), or happiness, has become a thriving area of science, with over 10,000 publications per year on the topic in recent years. Discoveries about the causes and processes involved in SWB range widely, from culture to biology to circumstances, providing instructors an opportunity to draw broadly on concepts from psychology. New research shows that high SWB not only feels good but is also good for one's health and social relationships. In addition to providing a platform for discussions about what constitutes a life well-lived, teaching about SWB is an excellent opportunity to emphasize scientific research and to dispel misconceptions. Besides traditional lectures, the area offers opportunities for learning exercises and self-exploration.

Keywords

happiness, subjective well-being, introductory psychology

What is Happiness?

“Happiness” means different things to different people, but most often, people use it synonymously with its scientific term, subjective well-being (SWB), which refers to people's evaluations of their lives—how they appraise their lives in thoughts and feelings. These evaluations may be about what is happening right now (e.g., “I am enjoying myself”), or they may entail a longer-term perspective (e.g., “My life is good.”). Variables such as life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, low levels of depression and anger, and high levels of enjoyment and interest are all of interest to SWB researchers (Diener, 1984). There are scholarly reviews of the area (e.g., Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Eid & Larsen, 2008) as well as more popular readings that are appropriate for students (e.g., Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Lyubomirsky, 2013; Myers, 1992; see Appendix). Although philosophers have discussed happiness for millennia (McMahon, 2008), only in the past half century have psychologists empirically studied SWB.

Why Study SWB?

There are a number of important reasons why students should learn about the science of SWB. First, most people want to be happy. In a survey across 47 diverse nations (Diener, 2000), college students rated happiness as the most important and valued domain, even ahead of love and health (see Table 1, where 1 = *not at all important*, and 9 = *extraordinarily important*). Students also valued wealth and getting into heaven, but

these also lagged behind happiness. Inglehart, Foa, Peterson, and Welzel (2008) argued that in post-materialistic societies, material values fade in importance, and values such as freedom and personal happiness become more important. Moreover, most people around the world value happiness, and as societies around the world continue to develop, the importance of happiness is likely to rise.

Of course, valuing happiness and understanding how to increase SWB are two different topics. Thus, the second reason for studying happiness is to understand ways to become happier that are based on scientific research. Unlike other areas in life, happiness is one topic that invites frequent commentary and advice from just about everybody. At the same time, public interest in happiness has grown, fueling a booming happiness industry with over 30,000 books on the topic and advice supplied from scientists and nonscientists alike. In fact, a Google search of “how to be happy” will generate approximately 1.8 million hits. In short, there is no shortage of people who have an opinion on how to be happy. With so many so-called experts on the subject, it is difficult for young people to know what theories are sound and what advice to follow. Was

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Table 1. Mean Importance Ratings of Values Among College Students in 47 Societies.

Value	Importance Rating
Happiness	8.0
Love	7.9
Health	7.9
Wealth	6.8
Getting into heaven	6.7

Note. Scale was from 1 (not important at all) to 9 (extraordinarily important).

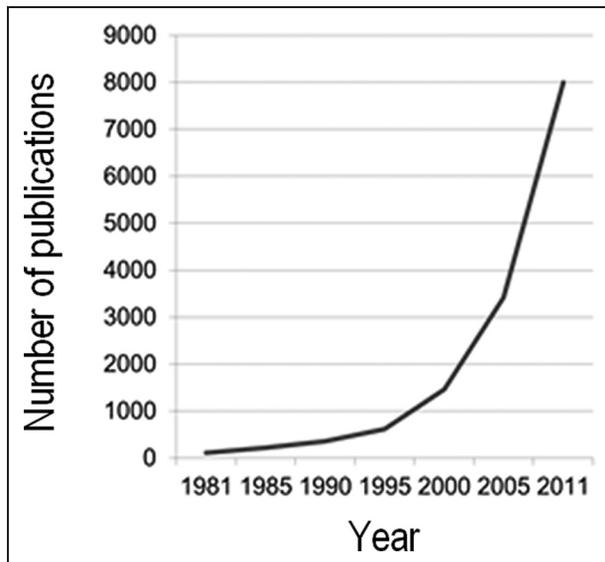


Figure 1. The number of publications per year on subjective well-being in PsycINFO.

grandma right after all? Is that pithy saying stitched onto her cute pillow worth anything? This is where science plays an important role. Science can help people determine what is sound and not sound advice. Science can provide information on what does and does not work. Teaching about the science of SWB is therefore an excellent opportunity to dispel myths.

Fortunately, the science of SWB has grown tremendously in recent years, and there is now a solid and reliable pool of important findings. Figure 1 presents the growth in the number of publications that have touched on SWB over the past three decades. As is evident in the figure, this once-tiny area of science has exploded into a major force that now produces about 9,000 studies a year. Not only is the quantity of studies large, but the quality of the science is also often excellent, with large samples, surveys that last over decades, and experimental as well as correlational studies. In teaching a course on SWB, there is certainly no shortage of material.

Another reason for students to study SWB is that national accounts of SWB are on the horizon. Diener (2000) proposed that nations track SWB to help shed light on various policy debates, much as they track economic indicators such as employment rate and gross domestic product (GDP). Surprisingly, the idea has gained traction quickly. The prime minister

of the United Kingdom announced that his nation would track several measures of SWB to help policy makers (Stratton, 2010), and other nations such as Mexico and Chile are following suit. In 2010, Bhutan famously began tracking gross national happiness in addition to GDP. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tracks SWB in certain of its large samples. Importantly, in 2013, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) issued guidelines for nations to measure SWB. These guidelines are positive and are bound to influence many statistical offices because the OECD is a major source that helps coordinate statistics between nations.

Ultimately, the national accounts of SWB represent for psychology an opportunity to have a greater impact on national policy making, as many of the phenomena psychologists' studies tend to influence SWB. Students can discuss whether nations should track SWB or whether they should limit their focus to economic indicators. In short, SWB is of interest not only to psychology majors but also to policy scholars. In fact, the second author once taught an SWB course in both a psychology program and a public policy program and invited a senior public official to discuss with students the topic of happiness. Students gave brief presentations about the importance of SWB to a society, including the health benefits of SWB, and debated with the guest about whether SWB should be a policy goal or better left to individuals. The class learned about the challenges of communicating scientific evidence to policy makers.

The Benefits of SWB

Perhaps the most important reason for students to study SWB is that high SWB contributes to good health and effective functioning (Diener, 2012; De Neve, Diener, Tay, & Xuereb, 2013). Not only does happiness feel good, but it is also good for you. For example, happier individuals tend to be healthier and tend to live longer (e.g., Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Diener & Chan, 2011; Steptoe & Wardle, 2011). Moreover, not only do happy people tend to perform more healthy behaviors (Goudie, Mukherjee, DeNeve, Oswald, & Wu, in press; Kubzansky, Gilthorpe, & Goodman, 2012), they also have healthier cardiovascular systems and stronger immune functioning. In fact, positive feelings provide a boost to health and longevity even after controlling for negative feelings such as stress, anger, and depression.

One famous study showed that, on average, happy nuns outlived unhappy nuns by about 10 years (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001). Specifically, in that study, researchers determined the happiness of each nun while she was in her 20s by examining an autobiographical narrative she wrote when she joined the order. This measure then predicted longevity decades later. Naturally, audiences enjoy hearing about studies involving unusual samples such as nuns, but the nun study also addressed important methodological issues as well. First, mortality is arguably the ultimate health indicator, one that cannot be faked nor is subject to personal interpretation

such as reports of one's own physical symptoms. Second, the observed differences in life span among the nuns were unlikely due to differences in lifestyle (e.g., smoking or heavy drinking), lending further support to direct mechanisms from happiness to longevity.

Ultimately, large longitudinal studies in this area can provide a jumping-off point for discussions about causal inferences (e.g., Koopmans, Geleijnse, Zitman, & Giltay, 2010; Shirai et al., 2009; Xu & Roberts, 2010). Intervention studies on happiness and health also provide compelling evidence. For example, Cohen, Doyle, Turner, Alper, and Skoner (2003) injected people with the cold virus and found that happy people were less likely to develop illness. In addition, even if they did get sick, they often experienced less severe symptoms and for fewer days than unhappy people (see Diener & Chan, 2011, for a succinct summary of the health and SWB literature).

Research shows that happier individuals also have better social lives. Although it is easy to imagine how good social relationships might cause happiness, longitudinal data also support causality in the other direction. For instance, happy people are more likely to get married and stay married (Harker & Keltner, 2001; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). Happy individuals also have more friends, who, in turn, report liking the happy people more. In the workplace, happy people are more helpful to other workers. Indeed, businesses with satisfied and happy workers have higher productivity (Edmans, 2012; Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, & Kilham, 2010; Oishi, 2012). Although short-lived negative states can sometimes be functional in some situations (e.g., Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011), there is no evidence that people who are chronically unhappy function well. Instead, unhappy individuals fare more poorly in many areas of life (Diener, Oishi, & Suh, 2012).

In short, some of the factors that people typically assume are the causes of happiness—good health and marriage—can actually be consequences of happiness as well. There is even evidence that happiness may cause people to earn more money (Diener, Nickerson, Lucas, & Sandvik, 2002).

When Are People Happy?

When people hear that we (people with PhDs) study happiness for a living, some of the first questions they usually ask are, “Isn't happiness elusive?” “Isn't it something different for each person?” and “How can you measure something like that, much less study it?” That is why it is important to teach about the measurement of SWB. At first glance, measurement can sound boring, but a closer look reveals the complexity of a construct such as SWB.

Scientists have developed various ways to assess and measure SWB, but the major method entails simply asking people about their level of life satisfaction or about the frequency of their positive feelings. Participants in these studies of SWB (e.g., Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996) report their responses on numbered scales (examples of SWB scales are available on Ed Diener's personal website: <http://internal.psychology.illinois.edu/~ediener/>). Although the self-report scales of SWB

are imperfect—they can be biased and influenced by current mood, for example—they tend to be reasonably valid. In fact, we have found that life satisfaction scales contain a substantial amount of valid variance (Diener, Tay, & Ingelhart, 2013).

Sometimes people are not satisfied when they learn that scientists use self-reports to measure SWB. “But that is subjective!” they cry. Well, yes. But at this point, it is a good idea to remind them that the construct is called *subjective* well-being not objective well-being. A couple of thought exercises can also help students appreciate that subjective is not the same as meaningless. First, the teacher can ask students to imagine a friend who comes to them and says how depressed he or she is, how life is miserable and worthless, and how he or she cannot bear to go on living any more (Myers, 1992). Following this, the teacher can ask students to consider whether they would respond to the friend by saying, “Oh, you don't know what it means to be depressed. Stop fooling yourself!” Of course nobody would respond in this way, but the statements from the friend are nothing more than self-reports. With SWB, we take what people say at face value. As David Myers (1992) puts it, “If someone says he/she is happy, that is enough to be happy.” Another example of the value of subjective evaluations comes from Dan Gilbert (Morse, 2012). He pointed out that when people visit the eye doctor and are getting fitted for glasses, the doctor relies on subjective evaluation (“Is A or B better?”). Once students consider these two scenarios, it helps them to appreciate that subjective evaluations are meaningful.

When are people happy, and when are they unhappy? One answer, of course, is that people tend to be happy when good things happen to them and unhappy when bad things happen to them. But it turns out that this answer is overly simple. For one thing, people tend to adapt to events and circumstances, so that they become accustomed to good and bad things, and these circumstances thereafter exert a lot less influence on their SWB. For this reason, the predictors of long-term SWB are not always the same as the factors that make a person's moods swing up and down over the course of a day or a week. For example, Figure 2 shows the daily moods of a student who had cancer. We'll call him “Harry” (not his real name). During the time Randy Larsen and Ed Diener studied Harry's moods, Harry learned that his cancer was in remission. His mood that day shot up (the highest peak on the graph), but then within several days, Harry's moods were back down as he adapted to the good news. Remission from cancer is about as good of news as a person can receive, which suggests that people can adapt to many things. But it is also evident that Harry's moods did not fully adapt—they seem on average a bit higher after he got the good news. So it seems that people adapt to events but perhaps not fully.

Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) famously asserted that people adapt even to extreme events such as winning the lottery or becoming paraplegic. Our longitudinal work (e.g., Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006) suggests that people indeed adapt to some extent to events but often not fully. For example, research shows that the severely disabled do, on average, have a bit lower life satisfaction (Lucas, 2007) and that

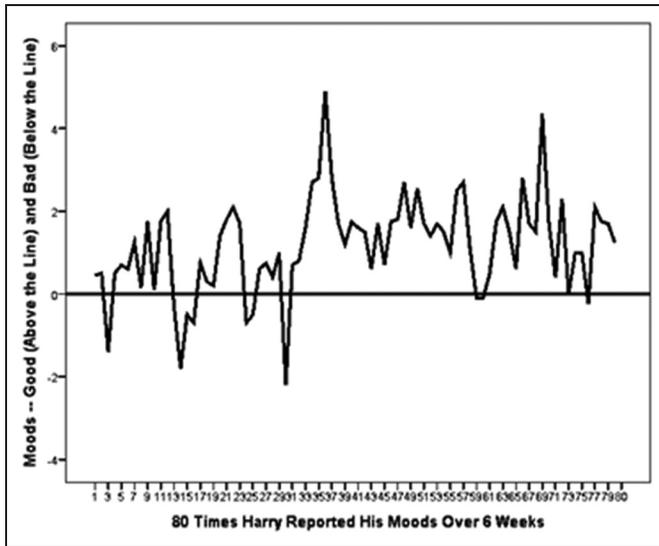


Figure 2. The daily moods of a participant with cancer. The highest peak on the graph marks the day the participant learned his cancer was in remission.

lottery winners are a bit happier (e.g., Gardner & Oswald, 2007). Thus, circumstances can influence our long-term level of SWB, although work on “affective forecasting” by Wilson and Gilbert (2003) suggests that people underestimate adaptation. People believe, for example, that winning the lottery will make them super happy or that they will never recover from being denied tenure. But in reality, people typically bounce back much better than they usually predict.

Because life events do not always have a huge long-term effect on people’s SWB, researchers have also examined the influence of personality. These researchers have found that extroverts tend to experience more positive feelings than introverts and that neurotic individuals experience more negative feelings than nonneurotics (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1980; Watson & Clark, 1992). Furthermore, genes seem to influence SWB (e.g., Lykken & Tellegen, 1996; Tellegen et al., 1988). Thus, a person’s inborn temperament, along with his or her life circumstances, exerts some influence on SWB.

Money and Happiness

One can hardly discuss happiness without discussing money. Scientists have studied extensively the question of whether money or income influences happiness. The discoveries in this area are complex and vary depending on the unit of analysis (e.g., nation level vs. individual level) and the specific component of SWB being measured. For example, when comparing countries around the world, rich nations are generally happier than poor ones, although there are exceptions (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010). However, within a single nation like the United States, higher income does not necessarily translate into more positive feelings beyond a certain level of income (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). But higher income does raise a person’s life satisfaction dollar for dollar.

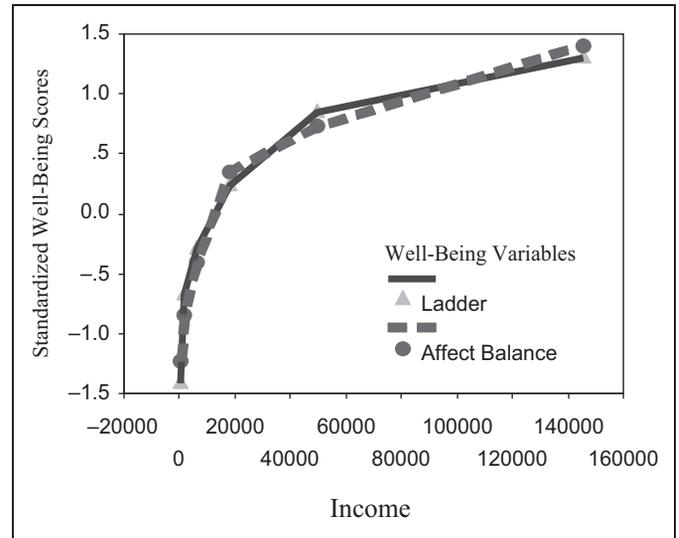


Figure 3. Declining marginal utility of material wealth.

There is also extensive research demonstrating the deleterious influences of materialism on SWB. For example, Figure 3 illustrates a declining marginal utility curve. In other words, getting more and more material wealth has less and less effect on happiness. One exception, however, occurs when one spends money on other people. Dunn and colleagues (Aknin et al., 2013; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008) found that spending money on other people caused increases in happiness, compared to spending money on oneself.

Culture and SWB

Several worldwide data sets have documented large national differences in SWB. In general, inhabitants of wealthy nations report higher SWB than less wealthy nations, although there are some exceptions to this pattern. For example, Latin and South American countries often have higher SWB than East Asian countries, even though GDP in Asian countries is much higher. Consistently, North America, Australia, and the Scandinavian countries top the world happiness charts, whereas African nations are represented at the bottom. These cultural differences are interesting because they show that SWB is influenced by the environment and social circumstances and is not determined solely by genetic endowment (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006), an important point for policy. Cultural differences in SWB also raise the intriguing question of whether some societies are more conducive to happiness than others. For example, personal happiness may be incompatible with other goals in life in societies that are prevention-focused (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000) or other-focused (Wirtz & Scollon, 2012).

Not surprisingly, there are both universal and culture-specific predictors of happiness. For example, in virtually all societies, having one’s basic needs met, having a sense of trust, and feeling respected all correlate strongly with SWB (Tay & Diener, 2011). Social relationships are also another important predictor of SWB around the world. On the other hand, people

in independent societies such as the United States place greater emphasis on self-esteem and personal feelings in their judgments of SWB, whereas people in interdependent societies such as Asia also value social norms (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). In other words, a happy American is likely someone who experiences high self-esteem and frequent pleasant emotions, whereas happy Koreans, in addition to having high self-esteem and frequent positive emotions, need to feel as if they are leading lives that are acceptable to their families. Scollon, Wirtz, and Wei (2013) described a simple classroom demonstration that illustrates how culture influences our conception of the good life. Half the class lists ways in which they are different from their friends and family, an activity that primes the independent self-construal. The other half of the class lists ways in which they are similar to their friends and family, an activity that primes interdependence. Following the priming, students allocate different points to life priorities to create their ideal life (cf. Li, Baily, Kendrick, & Lisenmeier, 2002). Consistent with Suh, Diener, Oishi, and Triandis (1998), students primed with an independent self-construal typically construct an ideal life that is high in self-esteem and pleasant emotions, whereas students primed with an interdependent self-construal desire a life that also meets the approval of their friends and family. The activity can be applied with success even in monocultural settings (see Scollon et al., 2013, for materials).

Another factor in well-being that varies by cultures is the degree of self- and cross-situational consistency. In the United States, where there is a strong belief in the “true self” (“To thy own self be true.”), high SWB is related to high self-consistency (experiencing similar feelings across situations), and low SWB is related to inconsistency. By contrast, in Korea and Singapore, inconsistency is perfectly acceptable and, at times, adaptive (Koh, Scollon, & Wirtz, 2014). Therefore, consistency in emotions across situations is less related to SWB in Asian societies.

How to be Happy

Does marriage cause happiness? Can religion make people happier? College students may be especially interested in the research on marriage and SWB as they begin their search for a lifelong partner. Many college students also report being actively religious and will be naturally curious about the research on religion and SWB.

Both research and anecdotal evidence converge on the general observation that married people are happier than nonmarried people. Does this mean that being married causes happiness? A recent large-scale longitudinal study that tracked the lives of over 18,000 Germans for over 17 years found that, indeed, happy people were more likely to get married (Lucas et al., 2003). Marriage also predicted permanent increases in SWB for about a third of the sample, permanent decreases in SWB in another third, and no change in SWB in another third. Thus, there appears to be a bidirectional association between marriage and SWB, with both variables causing changes in the

other. Ultimately, although several studies have found a relation between marriage and happiness, simple correlational studies limit researchers’ ability to infer causation. Moreover, researchers (for obvious ethical reasons) cannot conduct experimental studies on this topic.

Several studies comparing SWB in religious and nonreligious people have found consistently that religious people are happier than nonreligious people. A recent worldwide study of over 100,000 people found that religion serves as a coping mechanism and that it is most helpful in boosting SWB under difficult circumstances (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011).

Because many students come to the study of SWB with the desire to increase their own SWB, one topic that is sure to be of interest to them concerns interventions designed to change SWB. Students may have heard of some activities such as meditation (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010), exercise (McAuley et al., 2000), and gratitude journaling (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) that have been proven to increase SWB. But students may also hold other beliefs that have not been tested as rigorously. Therefore, this is an excellent opportunity for teachers to emphasize the science of SWB. The topic also lends itself well to in-class demonstrations and out-of-class projects. Lyubomirsky (2008) and Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) provide excellent summaries of evidence-based happiness interventions (see Appendix).

For example, instructors may wish to lead a meditation in class or have students write thank-you letters to important people in their lives. A simple and enjoyable homework assignment that the second author once used in a class required students to spend a nominal amount of money on an experience and the same amount of money on a material good. Students wrote reflections comparing the two experiences and generally reported results consistent with the research showing that spending on experiences brought greater happiness than spending on products (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Similarly, the second author also had students conduct a self-experiment to increase their own SWB (see Christie Scollon’s website for additional teaching resources: www.mysmu.edu.sg/faculty/cscollon/). Students selected their own intervention (e.g., meditation, gratitude journaling) based on the empirical literature and tracked their own SWB using an ABAB-type design. Some students reported an increase in their SWB, whereas others did not. Obviously, from a methodological standpoint, a self-experiment has limitations, but as a teaching tool, it helped students to understand the science behind the research findings as well as gain a bit of self-insight. An added bonus was that no two papers submitted were alike!

Is Happiness All Good?

By the end of a course on happiness, it can be easy to conclude that happiness is the best thing in the world. But is it true that more happiness is necessarily better? Can a person ever be too happy? Oishi, Diener, and Lucas (2007) examined large samples of respondents and found that the people with the highest

achievement and income were not the people who were a 10 out of 10 on a happiness scale but instead were those who were just below the maximum (i.e., 8 or 9 on a 10-point scale of happiness). High, but not extreme SWB, also predicted civic participation. Thus, when it comes to some forms of goal pursuit, more happiness does not necessarily equate to more success. On the other hand, the researchers found no optimal level for SWB when the outcome was relationship quality. When it came to getting along with others, greater happiness predicted greater relationship quality; people with extremely high SWB had the best quality and longest lasting social relationships.

A Lecture, a Week, a Course

There is obviously a lot to cover if teachers try to cover SWB in a single lecture (see Appendix for sample syllabus topics). But teachers can mention additional resources and tell students more about this area of psychology as well as a few of the major findings. For example, we have found that students tend to be interested in the heritability of happiness, the declining marginal utility of money, and certain other highlights that teachers can probably cover in a single lecture. Hopefully, discussing this information will whet students' appetites to find out more on their own. If several lectures are available, it is still a lot to cover, but teachers can cover topics such as income and happiness in a bit more detail. Similarly, a lecture on the benefits of SWB can make for an interesting class. Some teachers may want to offer a semester-long course on SWB. In this case, there will be ample time for exercises, discussions, and thorough lectures on a number of important topics. Thus, a course on SWB can be both scholarly and intellectual. There is no shortage of media articles that teachers can incorporate into such a course. The topic lends itself well to many interesting questions for students to discuss. If anything, instructors will need to exercise a good bit of guidance and planning over discussions because they could easily go on for hours. Discussion questions can also serve as an entry point into student self-exploration, if a teacher is comfortable with this activity. Ultimately, the possibilities are limitless.

Appendix

Resources for Teaching About Subjective Well-Being (SWB)

1. Sample discussion questions
 - a. How does money influence happiness?
 - b. How much happiness is under our control and how much not?
 - c. Do we choose to be happy or not?
 - d. Can we learn ways not to adapt to the good things in our life, to continue to notice and enjoy them?
 - e. Can we be too happy? Is there an optimal level?
 - f. Should governments be in the business of happiness?
2. Sample syllabus topics
 - a. What is SWB?
 - b. Measurement of SWB
 - c. Benefits of SWB
 - d. Money and SWB
 - e. Culture and SWB
 - f. Cognition and SWB (Can you think yourself into being a happier person?)
 - g. Religion and SWB
 - h. Adaptation, personality, and heritability
 - i. SWB interventions
 - j. Is there such a thing as "too happy?"
3. Exercises for enhancing well-being
 - Froh, J. J., & Parks, A. C. (2013). *Activities for teaching positive psychology: A guide for instructors*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
 - Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The how of happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.
4. Review articles
 - De Neve, J.-E., Diener, E., Tay, L., & Xuereb, C. (2013). The objective benefits of subjective well-being. In J. Helliwell, R. Layard, & J. Sachs (Eds.), *World Happiness Report 2013*. New York, NY: UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
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 - Tov, W., & Diener, E. (2007). Culture and subjective well-being. In S. Kitayama & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural psychology*. (pp. 691–713). New York, NY: Guilford.
5. Books
 - Diener, Ed., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2008). *Happiness: Unlocking the mysteries of psychological wealth*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
 - Lyubomirsky, S., (2013). *The myths of happiness: What should make you happy, but doesn't, what shouldn't make you happy, but does*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.
6. Websites
 - Professor Ed Diener <http://internal.psychology.illinois.edu/~ediener/>
 - Associate Professor Christie Scollon www.mysmu.edu.sg/faculty/cscollon/
 - Professor Sonja Lyubomirsky <http://sonjalyubomirsky.com/>
 - Professor Richard Davidson <http://joytrippproject.com/2012/finding-happiness-with-richard-davidson/>
7. Films
 - Happy, a movie documentary <http://www.thehappy.com/>
 - The Emotional Life: Rethinking Happiness, PBS Documentary <http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/series/episodes/3>

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