Evidence to Action: Inspiring Ideas for Happier Communities

CIFAR researchers and community leaders came together to discuss the latest research in happiness, and how it can be used to build happier communities. It was the second in CIFAR’s Changemaker series of ideas exchanges, held April 21 at the Museum of Vancouver in Vancouver, B.C., in conjunction with the exhibition Stefan Sagmeister: The Happy Show. The symposium was in partnership with the Museum of Vancouver, the BC Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, and BC Partners for Social Impact.

Social innovator and author Al Etmanski served as moderator for three speakers; Meik Wiking, chief executive officer of The Happiness Research Institute in Denmark; Grant Schellenberg, a CIFAR associate fellow; and John Helliwell, a CIFAR senior fellow.

Why Talk About Happiness?

Happiness is gaining currency as a subject for academic study. The first World Happiness Report was released in 2013 and was hailed as a landmark survey of the state of global happiness. It demonstrated that well-being and happiness are critical indicators of a nation’s economic and social development, and should be a key aim of policy.

By the time the second report was issued in 2015, interested researchers and readers could keep up with developments in the field via the Journal of Happiness Studies; scholars in diverse fields such as economics, psychology and sociology were publishing papers about happiness; and progressive jurisdictions were factoring happiness into their measures of population well-being. (Vancouver, with its Healthy Cities Strategy, is one example.)

Grant Schellenberg - State of Happiness in Canada

Grant Schellenberg, CIFAR associate fellow and acting director of the Social Analysis Division at Statistics Canada, brought forward key insights on the state of happiness in Canadian communities. StatsCan first collected information on whether people were satisfied with their lives in 1985, made a more concerted effort in 2003, then followed with the Canadian Community Health Survey in 2009. There is now a rich and growing evidence base about well-being in Canada, and satisfaction can now be compared across a broad range of survey contexts.

Between 2009 and 20013, StatsCan looked at results from 340,000 Canadians. The average life satisfaction is just below 8 on a scale of 1 to 10 and the results are consistent with the World Happiness Report.

• Thirty-eight per cent of Canadians indicated satisfaction at 9 or 10.
• Seventy per cent indicated a satisfaction level of 8, 9 or 10.
• Fourteen per cent indicated a level of 6 or less.

To compare cities, Statistics Canada looked at Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs):
• **Smaller cities have greater happiness.** People in smaller cities of 250,000 to 1 million, such as Trois-Rivières and St. John’s, indicated a satisfaction level of 8.2. Residents of larger cities with populations more than 1 million, such as Toronto, Vancouver and Windsor, had a satisfaction level of 7.8.

• **Differences in urban spaces matter.** There is variation between cities. In Toronto, 65 per cent of people indicated a satisfaction level between 8 and 10, while in Montreal it was 71 or 72 per cent, and in Barrie and Guelph, it was 65 to 66 per cent.

**In exploring happiness, there are a number of considerations to take into account,** including sex (men are slightly happier than women), love (married people are slightly happier than those who are divorced or separated), work (unemployment has a negative effect on happiness) and a sense of place (immigrants aren’t as happy as native-born Canadians).

### John Helliwell - Happiness Research Supporting Happier Communities

John Helliwell, CIFAR Senior Fellow, Professor Emeritus at the University of British Columbia, and co-editor of The Happiness Report 2015, noted that people recognize two kinds of happiness, and that these two types are mutually supportive. The first is emotional (how do I feel now?) and the second is cognitive or rational (how do I feel about my life as a whole?).

**For a happy life, the presence of positives is much more important than the absence of negatives.**

Often, when people stop negative thoughts they end up blocking positive ones too. In order to experience happiness, it is vital to roll back a climate of fear and take risks. Additionally, research tells us that the three secrets to happiness are trust, generosity, and collaboration.

Helliwell identified three levels where efforts must be made for cities to be happier places:

- **Individual**
- **Workplace**
- **Government**

**Small acts of kindness make an immediate difference,** such as smiling at people on the street, paying it forward by buying someone else coffee or inviting others to join them in walking the children to school. Improving workplaces and governments will require a more co-ordinated effort.

### Meik Wiking - The Happy City – A Danish Case Study

Meik Wiking, Chief Executive Officer of The Happiness Research Institute, Denmark, shared some of the Institute’s research findings into why Denmark ranks among the happiest countries in the world. The 2013 World Happiness Report identified Denmark as the happiest country in the world, and the 2015 rankings list it as third worldwide.

**Quantifying happiness points to social relationships and a sense of community.**

In 2014, the Institute tried to quantify happiness in a Danish town, Dragør, an affluent suburb of Copenhagen with about 14,000 people. Findings included:

- Sixty-five per cent of the population rated themselves between 8 to 10 on a 10-point scale of happiness. The average level was 7.8, with a lot of people feeling joy and happiness daily.
- Those who felt their lives had meaning were inclined to take part in community work.
- Satisfaction with social relationships is one of the best predictors of happiness levels.
- One major concern was that 1 in 10 people didn’t see an overall purpose to their lives. The number may actually be higher.
- Isolation and feelings of loneliness are drivers of unhappiness and were widespread as 15 per cent of the people were lonely in everyday life.
- One in 10 had no one to rely on in times of need and no one to discuss personal issues with.
The Happiness Research Institute identified a number of practices which can be applied elsewhere, including:

- **Eliminate fees for the local community centre** as those with low incomes find it to be a barrier.
- **Establish more community gardens**; they are beautiful and are an easy initiative for the lonely to join. There is no social stigma.
- **Create a group of youth volunteers to take seniors around town** to see the sites that have meaning to them, e.g., the schools they attended as youngsters.
- **Make sure there are activities at the times of year that loneliness is worst: spring and summer.** This is when lonely people can see the rest of the community flourishing.
- The Netherlands holds a National Neighbours Day.
- In Bristol, U.K., **friendly citizen points** are given out for doing something nice; they can be used to buy coffee.

**Looking for more?**
Videos from each session are available at changemakers.cifar.ca/videos/, and links to relevant research relevant can be found at http://www.cifar.ca/change-makers/

**Are you a Change Maker working to harness happiness to improve your community?**
Send us an email and introduce yourself – ideasexchange@cifar.ca