

The Happiness Indicator

Combination of a
self-help website and a scientific follow-up study

<http://www.happinessindicator.com>

Prospectus 2021

What it involves

For what purposes it can be used

How you can join

A project lead by:

Dr. [Martijn Burger](#) and Prof. Dr. [Ruut Veenhoven](#)

Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization EHERO

Contact: veenhoven@ese.eur.nl



Summary

The Happiness Indicator is a self-help website as well as a scientific follow-up study. Participants record periodically how happy they feel and how they spend their time. Every year they report on major changes in their life.

Benefits for participants

The website offers its users instant feedback on their happiness. Participants can:

- Accurately assess how happy they feel most of the time
- Compare their happiness with similar people
- Track their happiness over time
- Chart how much they enjoy daily activities using the happiness diary
- Compare with similar people who use their time differently

Scientific uses

The website provides longitudinal data on a lot of people at low cost. The instrument can be used to assess:

- How people really spend their time
- How happy particular people feel during particular activities
- How interventions such as of trainings or organizational change work out on happiness, both in the short-run and on the long-term
- How life-choices, such as early retirement, work-out on the happiness of particular kinds of people.

The Happiness Diary allows within-person comparisons and as such provides a better view on causal effects than current cross-sectional studies.

Use for practitioners

Practitioners can use the Happiness Indicator for assessing the effects of their interventions on happiness.

Origin

The Happiness Indicator started as a joint project of Erasmus University Rotterdam and insurance company VGZ in The Netherlands. The project started in 2010 and monitor has now attracted more than 100.000 participants.

Effect on happiness

A first effect study in 2014 among 5000 participants who had used the Happiness Diary at least twice observed an upward change in average happiness. This study is reported in 2020 in an article in the International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology (5, 153-187) entitled [Raise of Happiness Following Raised Awareness of How Happy One Feels: A Follow-Up of Repeated Users of the Happiness Indicator Website.](#)

Satellite projects

Now that the system is developed, we can host parallel projects in other countries and variants that focus on specific purposes, such as effect studies. Satellite projects can draw on a common database and will also contribute to its enlargement. This prospectus describes the options and costs.

Contents

1) Aim: Greater happiness for a greater number	5
2) The kind of happiness addressed	6
3) Use for participants : Tools for getting happier	7
• Happiness Comparer	8
• Happiness History	9
• Happiness Diary	10
• Further self-help tools	15
4) Use for researchers	18
5) Use for practitioners	19
6) How to join	20
7) Standard contract	22

Aim of the Happiness Indicator

Greater happiness for a greater number

The prime aim of this project is to foster happiness. It does so in two ways. In the *short-term* it provides people a better view on their own happiness, which will be helpful in seeking a more satisfying way of life. On the *long-term* the project generates information about the effects of major life-choices on happiness, which information can be used in evidence-based happiness education.

The short-term goal feeds the long-term ambition. By providing people instant feedback on their happiness, the website attracts a lot of regular participants. Over the years their responses have created the large database which helps to see how different ways of life pan out on the happiness of particular kinds of people.

This approach to greater happiness has parallels in health promotion. The short-term aim of informing people about their own happiness is akin to raising *health conscience*. The long-term goal of charting effects of life-choices is akin to evidence-based *health education* about the effects of lifestyle.

The Happiness Indicator can also be used by policy makers for getting a view on conditions for happiness, both of people in general and for particular kinds of people, such as employees in a firm or pupils in a school.

Approach

Self-help website that generates instant feedback

Particular features of the website are 1) instant feedback using comparison with participants in a similar life situation, and 2) yearly follow-up of major life choices.

Participants

Participants are recruited in various ways, such as using advertisements and media exposure. The project does not aim at representativeness for the general population. Its aim is to generate information for people seeking ways to a more satisfying life.

After online registration, users get an e-mail every month with the invitation to rate their happiness again. Monthly reminders via email are default, but participants have the opportunity change the frequency of getting such reminders (either, daily, weekly, monthly, half yearly, or yearly).

The e-mail contains a link to the Happiness Indicator website. On that site participants provide some profile information and can then use the 'tools' for working on their happiness.

Kind of happiness addressed

How well one feels

The focus of this Happiness Indicator is on how happy people FEEL, that is, on the affective component of happiness, which is also referred to as 'hedonic level of affect'. This focus on how one feels appears both in the wording of the questions (How happy do you feel), in the use of smiley's and in the sequence of questions (first 'How do you feel today').

This focus on affective experience has several reasons. One reason is to bypass the various distortions that may be involved in the cognitive evaluation of how successful one is in meeting standards of the good life. Since the tool is to provide a better view on one's happiness, people should know how they really feel most of the time. Another reason is that affective experience appears to be the more important when it comes to consequences of happiness, such as the positive effect on health.

Start page Happiness Indicator



The screenshot shows the start page of the Happiness Indicator website. The browser address bar displays <http://www.gelukswijzer.nl/hiv/>. The page features a navigation menu with links for home, research, team, news, faq, project, and toolbox. The main content area includes a large image of a diverse group of people standing together. Overlaid on this image is a blue box with the text "How happy are you? understand your happiness". Below the image, there are three main sections: "Happiness Comparer" (with a heart icon), "Happiness History" (with a book icon), and "Happiness Diary" (with a book icon). Each section has a brief description and a "More information" button. To the right of these sections are "Log in" and "Register" buttons. The footer of the page shows the Windows taskbar with various application icons and the system clock displaying 15:39 on 5-6-2016.

Use for participants

Tools in the Happiness Indicator

Many people seek ways to get happier than they are, and this quest reflects an increasing stream of self-help books and advisory websites. These tools focus typically on self-reflection: what kind of person you are, what you really want in life and what inner restrictions keep you from doing that. They also encourage reframing: count your blessing and see that the glass is half full rather than half empty.

This Happiness Indicator follows a different approach and focuses on facts about one's happiness. How happy do you feel most of the time? Could you be happier than you are now? What changes in your way of life are likely to make you feel better?

The main tools are depicted on the navigation page of the Happiness Indicator, the *Happiness Comparer* and the *Happiness Diary*.

Navigation page 'Your toolbox'

The screenshot shows the 'Your Toolbox' page with the following content:

- Tools:**
 - Happiness Comparer:** Last time completed: 01-06-2016. Includes a 'To the comparer' button.
 - Happiness Diary:** Last time completed: 01-06-2016. Includes a 'To the diary' button.
 - Further tools:** Includes a 'Work orientation' button.
- Questions addressed:**
 - How happy did you feel the last month?** Better or worse than other people? (view results)
 - Did you get happier?** More or less than other people? (view results)
 - How do you use your time?** Do you differ from other people? (view results)
 - Which activities do you enjoy most?** Do you differ from other people? (view results)
 - How about your work?** Answer 62 questions, which will take some 15 minutes. You will see what type you are and how you differ from the average worker. (Check your previous results (22-05-2016))
- Presentation:**
 - Your score on the Happiness Comparer: You (orange bar), Others (blue bar).
 - Your happiness over time: A line graph showing scores from 8 to 10 for You (orange) and Others (blue).
 - Bar chart of activities: Eating, Clubs, In transit, Care, Work, Relax.
 - Work addiction, Work engagement, Burnout: Horizontal bar chart.

Happiness Comparer: Could I be happier than I am now?

You answer two simple questions: How happy they feel today and how happy they have felt during the last month. They record their answers on a 0 to 10 numerical scale marked with smiley's. See screenshot 2 below. This task takes less than a minute.

How happy do you feel?

Rate your happiness on these 0 to 10 scales:

Question	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
How happy do you feel today?	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>						
How happy did you feel over the last month?	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>					

Buttons: [Back to your Toolbox](#) [Compare with others](#) [Compare with previous](#)

Footer: [Your privacy](#) [Disclaimer](#) [Contact](#) [Links](#) [Logout](#)

What kind of person are you?

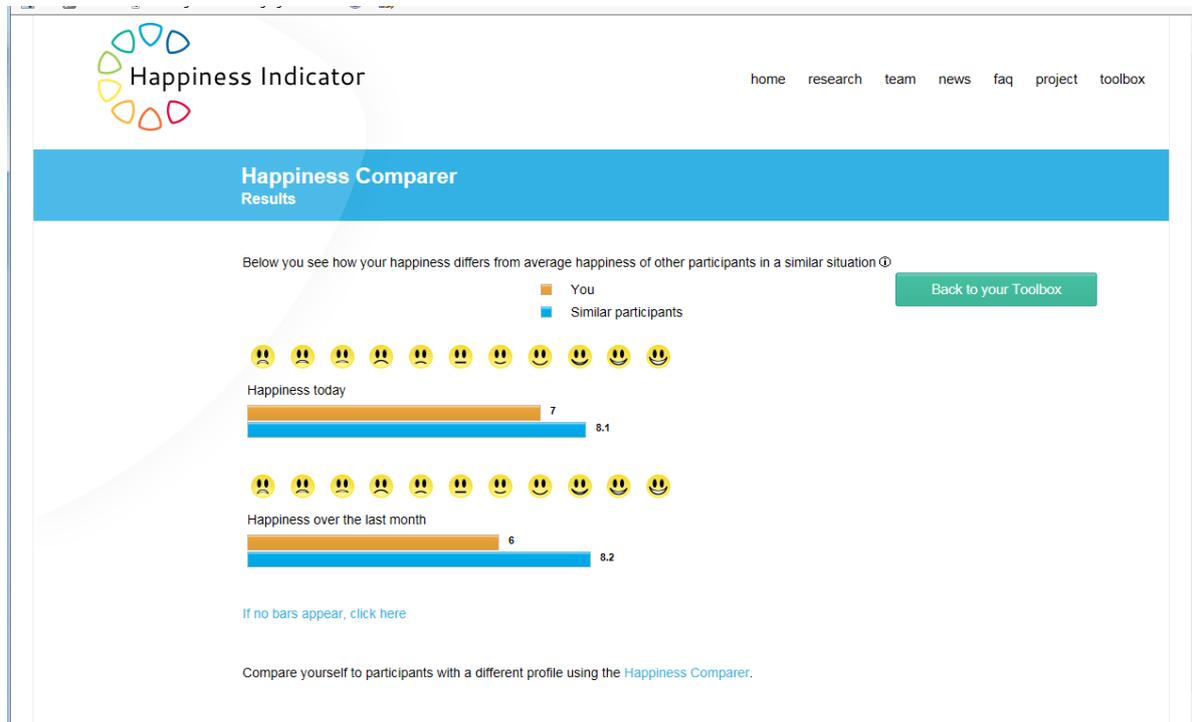
When participating for the first time, users also answer some questions about the following personal characteristics:

- age
- sex
- education
- marital status
- employment
- health

This takes about two minutes. The resulting *profile* is used for later comparison with people in a similar life situation.

Comparison with similar people

Once you have entered how happy you feel currently, the program provides instant feedback in the form of a comparison with the average happiness of other participants with a similar profile. See the screenshot below.



This simple tool provides you a better view on your own happiness in the first place. The questions focus attention on how you actually feel and distinguish between how you feel at the moment and how you usually feel. Though we have typically an idea of how happy we are, these notions are mostly less precise; we tend to remember extremes better than average affect.

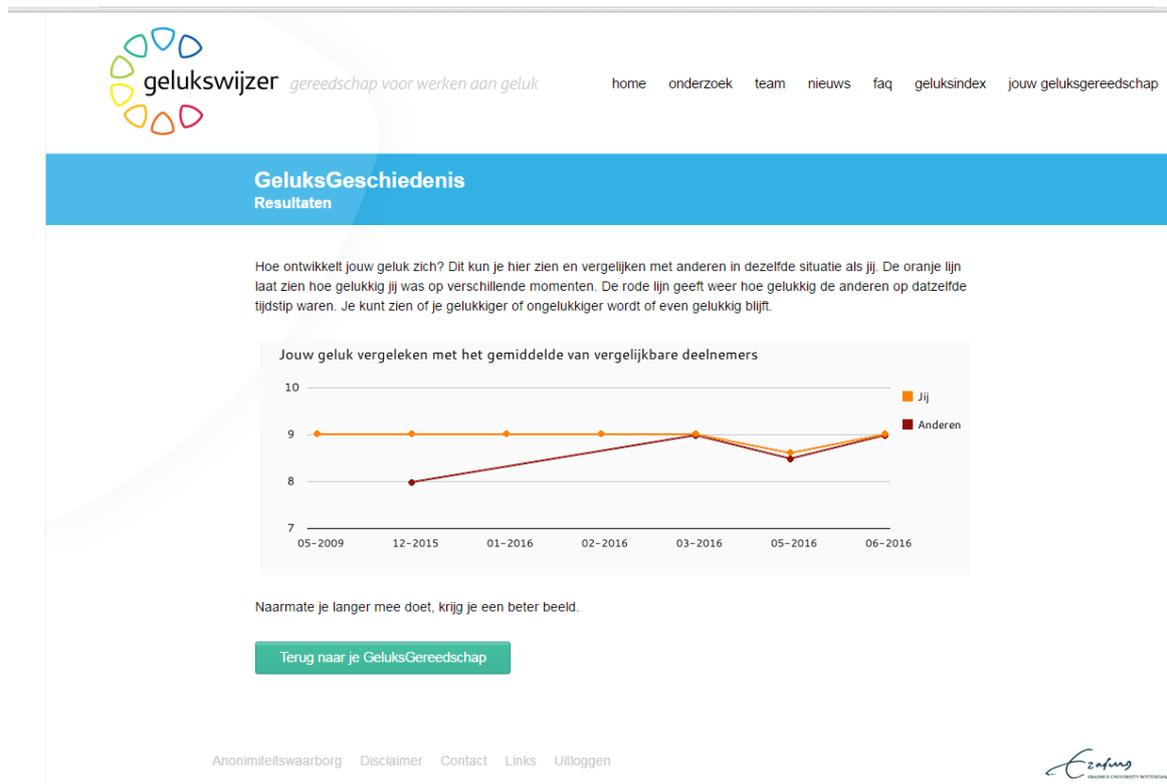
The comparison with similar people is helpful for estimating the chances of getting happier. Chances are small if you score 9 while the average score of similar people is 7. Yet chances are better if you score 7 while the average person like you scores 9. In that case greater happiness is apparently possible in conditions like yours.

The standard comparison is with people of the same age, sex, marital status, income and health. Additionally, you can refine the comparison, such as by adding education. You can also compare with different people, such as with people of your age and education who work less. Such a comparison will be helpful if you consider to reduce your working hours.

Happiness History: Track your happiness through time

After recording your happiness three times or more, the system automatically generates your happiness history and displays that in a time graph. The Happiness History page also shows how similar people have fared during the same period. This informs you on how well you are doing relatively.

How happiness has changed over time. Comparison with similar people¹



The Happiness History provides more accurate information about how happy you have felt in the past than your memory typically does. Research has shown that we tend to remember how we have felt in particular situations, but that we are bad in recollecting how we felt most of the time. An accurate view on how you have felt enables a better estimate of why you have felt so. The trend line further indicates whether you are on the right way or not.

The comparison with similar people further informs you on whether you are doing better or worse. If the happiness of all people like us goes down, there is probably an external factor involved that is probably beyond your control. If the happiness of similar people goes up, but your happiness goes down there is probably something going on in your particular situation, which you can possibly change.

¹ This picture is taken from the version in Dutch since historical data is not yet available for the new international version.

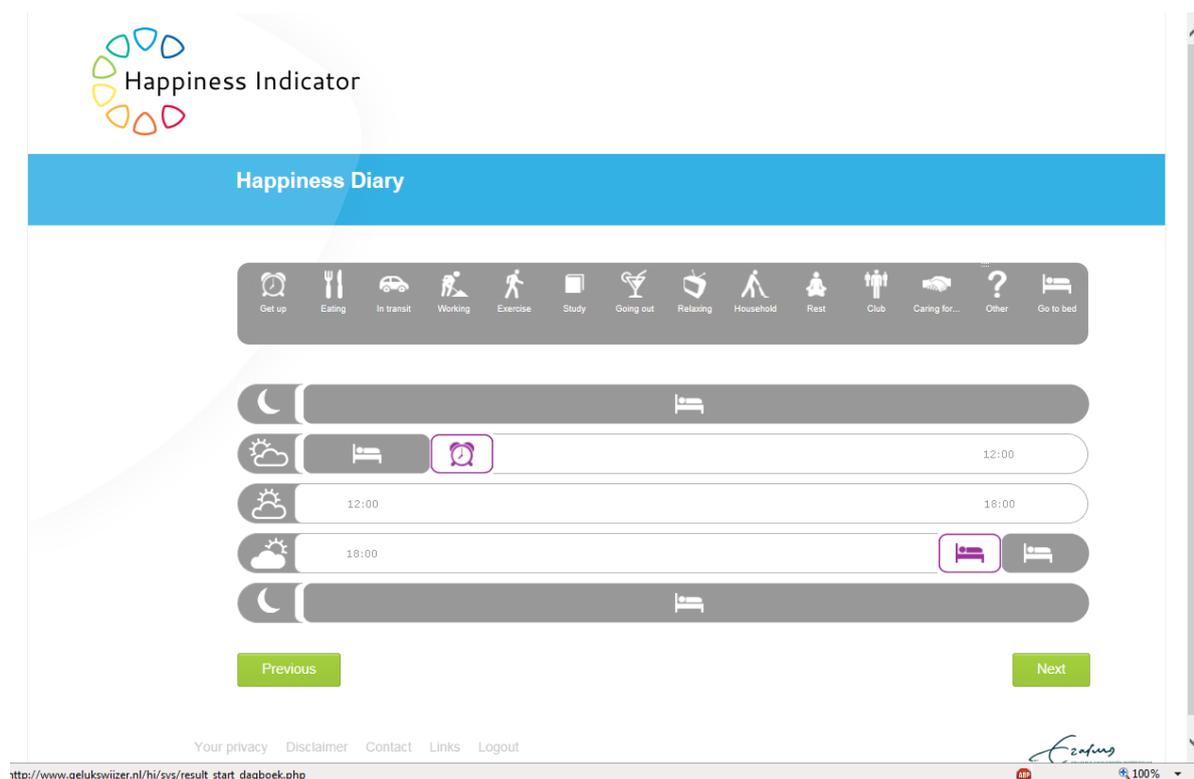
Happiness Diary: What you did and how you felt yesterday

In the Happiness Diary you note what you have done during the previous day and how happy you have felt during each of the activities. This tool is an internet application of the 'Day Reconstruction Method' (DRM), developed by Nobel Laureate Daniël Kahneman and his co-workers (2004) as an affordable alternative for experience sampling. Yesterday's Happiness Diary works as follows:

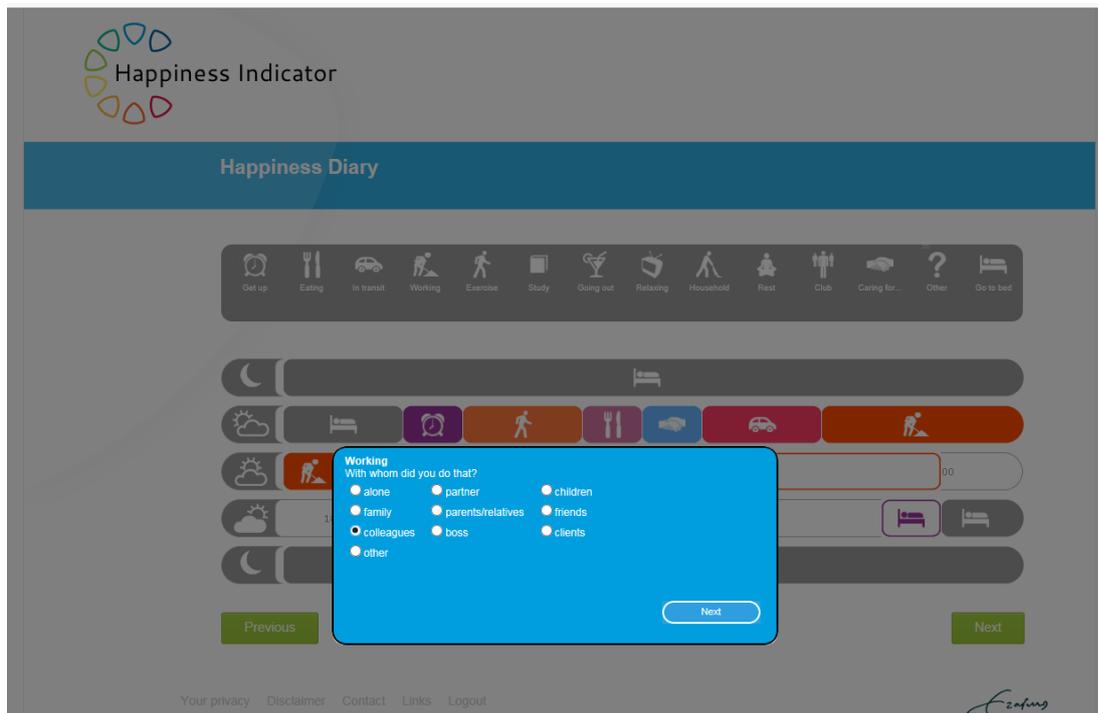
You first 'reconstruct' the previous day, recording your activities from rising in the morning until going to bed at night. You record activities that lasted for 30 minutes or more. Some of the main activity categories are predefined (e.g. eating, commuting, working, exercise, studying, going out, relaxation, household, rest, religious or political activity, self- and other care). You can also define unique activities per timeslot.

For every activity, you also answer questions about where they were (e.g. at work, at home or elsewhere) and with whom (e.g. alone, family, friends, colleagues, boss).

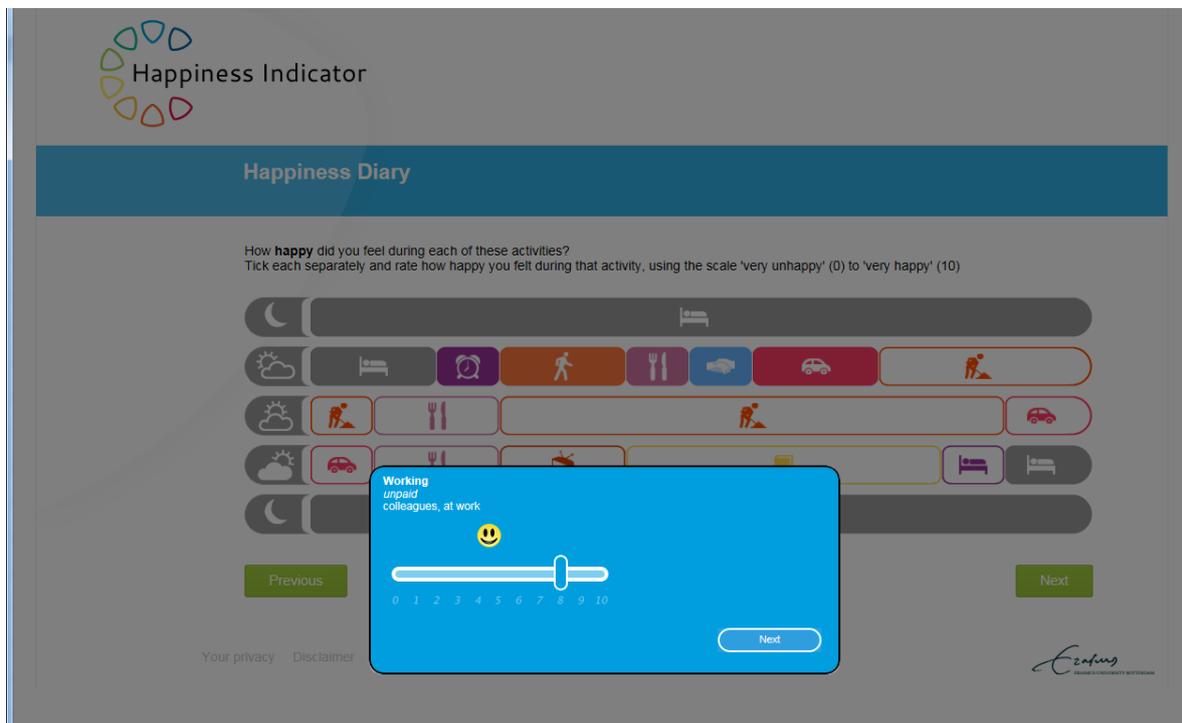
Start screen of Yesterday's Happiness Diary



Reconstruction of activities in the previous day: an example



Rating of happiness during each of these activities

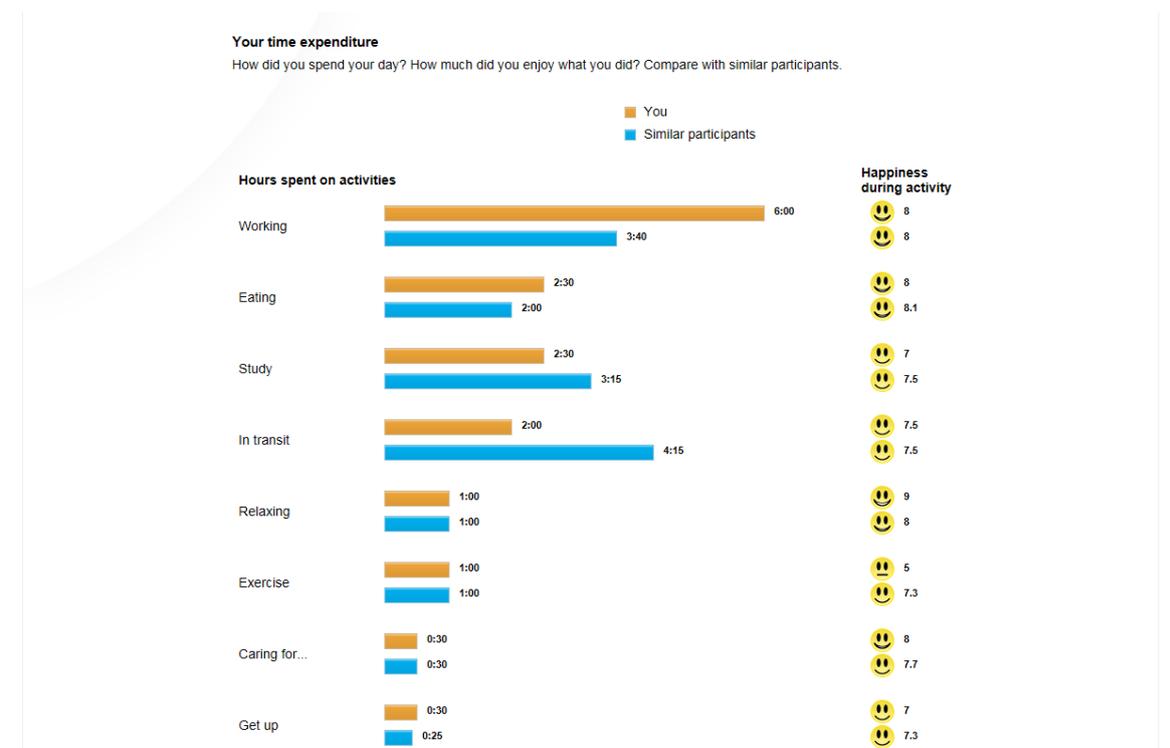


The system then computes average happiness during the different kinds of activities and presents these in a bar-chart.

Estimates of how happy you typically feel can be inaccurate, even if that estimate concerns the recent past. For that reason, it is worth double checking your estimates. The Happiness Diary provides such a double check since it automatically computes a time weighted average of happiness during all activities of the previous day. If that computed average differs substantially from your global self estimates on the Happiness Comparer, there is reason to reconsider.

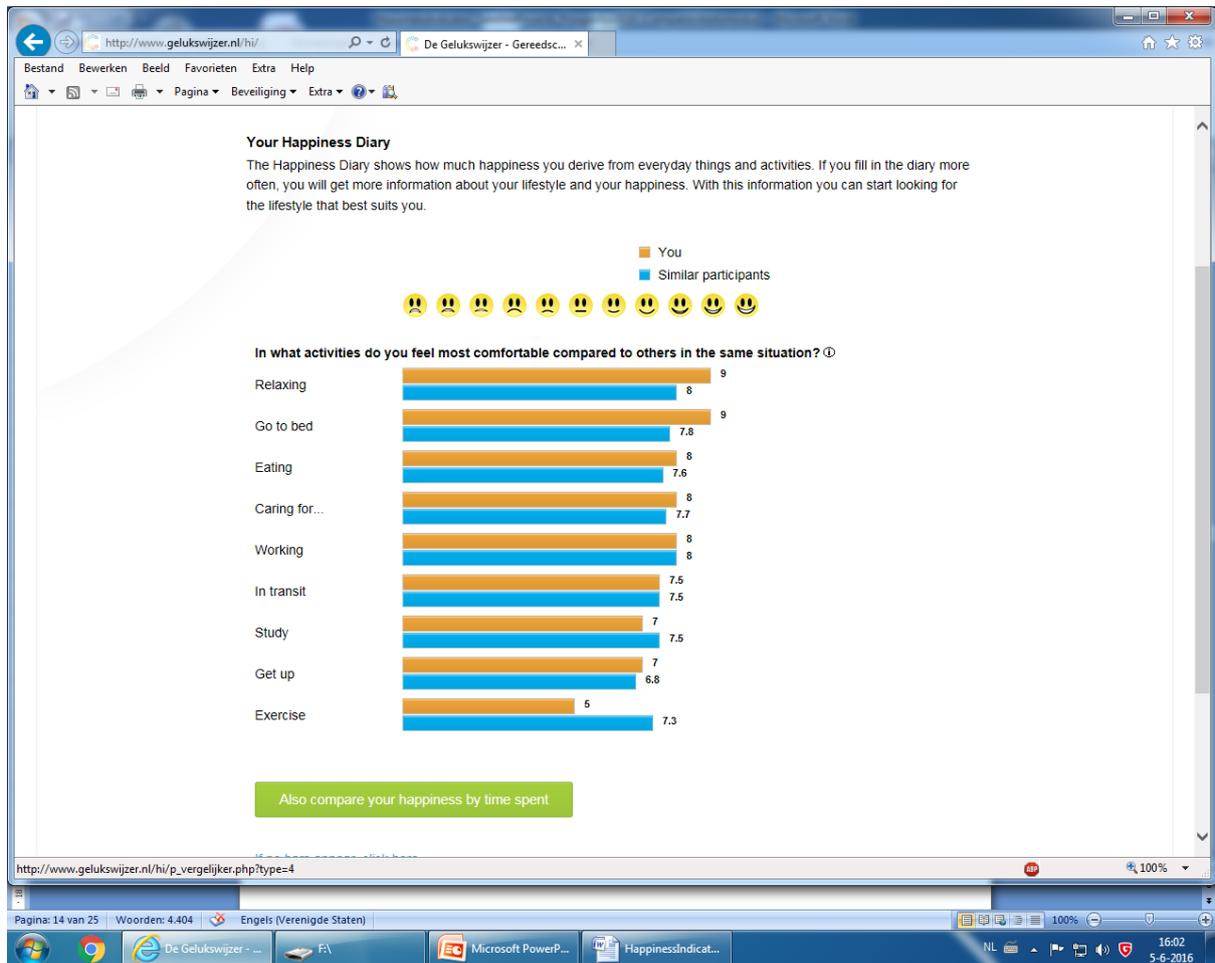
Again you can compare with comparable people. If these differ less, that is another reason to have a second look at your global estimate.

How happy one felt during different kinds of activities. Example of a profile



Though we have mostly an idea of what activities we enjoy most and least, these notions are often inaccurate. For instance, we tend to overestimate our enjoyment of the time spend with children and underestimate how good we feel at rest. This tool provides a more precise view and is as such helpful in seeking ways of life that fit us better.

Comparison with how similar people feel during these kind of activities



Again, the tool allows comparison with similar people and that also enables more informed decisions.

An example: One of the decisions we face is whether switch to another job or not. That question is fueled by the fact that we typically feel less happy at work than during leisure, only academics enjoy work and leisure equally much. In that context we estimate the chance that we will feel better in another job, but such estimates are difficult to make and we easily fall prey to the tendency of seeing greener grass far away. In that context it is useful knowing how much people like you enjoy their working hours and whether the difference with how they feel during leisure activities is equally big.

Likewise, you may think that your sex life falls short and consider an extra marital affair. In that context it is worth having a view on the sex life of people like you. Do they have sex more often and do they enjoy bedtime with their spouse more? This tool provides also an impartial answer to that sensitive question.

Further Self-help Tools

Next to these three tools the website provides also access to the following online sources for improving your happiness.

Personality test

You can complete a personality questionnaire that covers the big five personality dimensions, that is, altruism, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism and openness. Your scores on these traits are compared to the average scores in the general population, for the time being scores in the Netherlands.

Example of how your personality differs from the average person

The screenshot shows the 'Personality test' results page on the Happiness Indicator website. The page title is 'Personality test' with the subtitle 'Your last results'. It displays the results for five personality traits: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Altruism, and Conscientiousness. Each trait is represented by a horizontal bar chart showing the user's score relative to the Dutch population average. The scale ranges from 'Very low' to 'Very high'. Below the charts, there is a detailed description for the 'Neuroticism (vs Emotional Stability)' trait, indicating a 'Low' score.

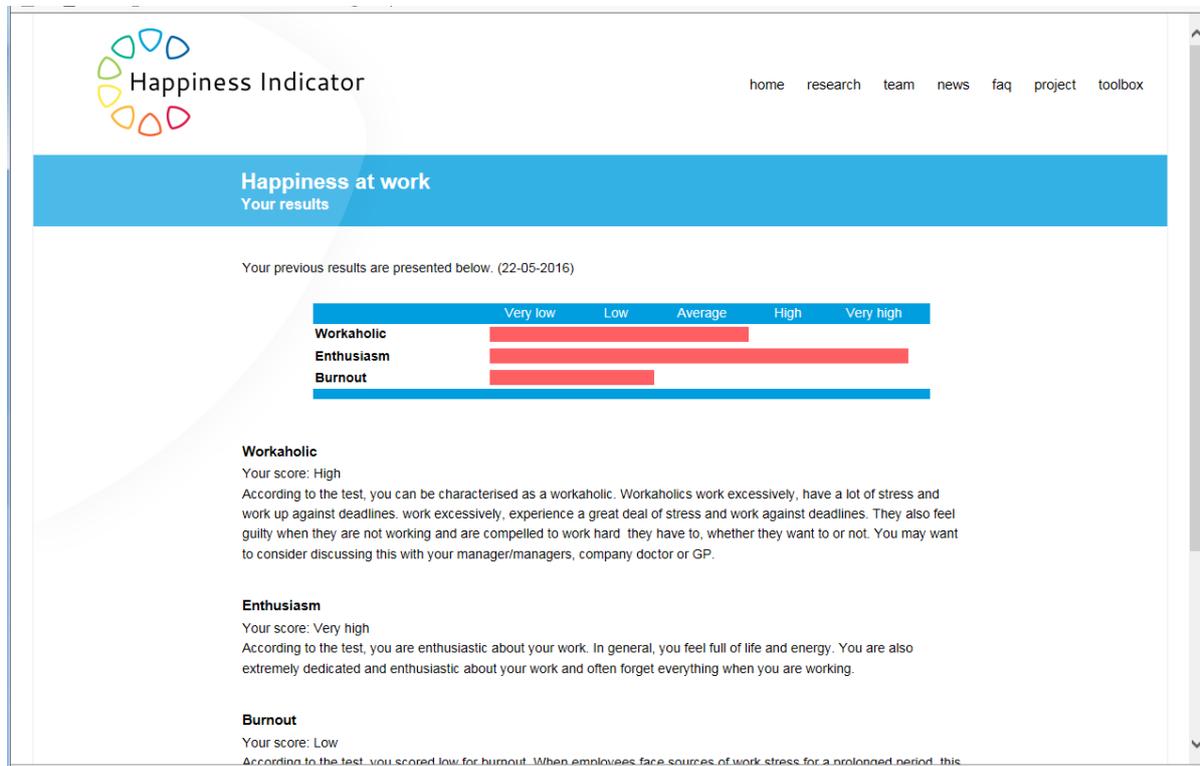
Trait	Very low	Low	Average	High	Very high
Neuroticism	[Bar extending to Low]				
Extraversion	[Bar extending to High]				
Openness	[Bar extending to Average]				
Altruism	[Bar extending to High]				
Conscientiousness	[Bar extending to High]				

Neuroticism (vs Emotional Stability)
 Your score: Low
 You are emotionally stable and do not easily get upset. In general, you are calm and relaxed. You approach stressful situations with a cool head without any substantial degree of agitation or tension. You don't get bogged down for long by negative feelings (e.g. anxiety, guilt, shame or gloominess), and it is easy for you to push these feelings aside.

Work involvement

You can also complete a questionnaire on work and get online feedback on how involved you are in your work and how close you are to burn out. An example of a feedback is presented below

Example of how your work orientation differs from the average person



Links to other tools

In the future the Happiness Indicator will more such additional tools, which will allow you to keep developing your view on yourself. We will also provide links to selected self help sites.

Use for researchers

Though devised as a self-help tool in the first place, the Happiness Indicator can also be used for various scientific purposes.

Technical advantages

Follow-up

The Happiness Indicator generates longitudinal data on a lot of people at low cost.

Within person comparison

The Happiness Diary also allows comparison of how the same person had felt during different activities, e.g. how happy a person feels at home and at work. The difference scores are free of personal characteristics and as such tells a great deal about causality.

Control groups

The project is particularly suited for effect studies, because matched control groups can be selected from the large pool of participants, now already more than 100.000 persons. Scientists can also draw on the available background information such as on personality and time use.

Tailored variants

It is possible to add modules to the standard Happiness Indicator

Examples of studies that used the Happiness Indicator

To date the Happiness Indicator has been used for the following scientific studies.

Effect on happiness

A first effect study among 5000 participants who had used the Happiness Diary at least twice observed an upward change in average happiness. See: [Raise of Happiness Following Raised Awareness of How Happy One Feels: A Follow-Up of Repeated Users of the Happiness Indicator Website](#)

Happiness and activity among elderly

An early version of the Happiness Indicator was used to track changes in the everyday activities of elderly people in the Netherlands. The main question was pattern of activities appears to be most rewarding for what kinds of people, taking personality into consideration. Results are published in [Daily activities and happiness in later life: The role of work status](#)

Recovery from work

The Happiness Diary was used to track daily activity patterns of workers over multiple workdays, and found that workaholics feel better when they engage in

physical activity after work [Workaholism and daily recovery: A day reconstruction study of leisure activities](#)

Happiness in trades

The Happiness indicator was used to assess differences in happiness between employees working in different branches, such as government, education, retail and industry. Teachers appeared to feel best and workers in the hospitality industry least. [Geluk onder docenten](#) (in Dutch)

Happiness at work

The Happiness Diary was also used for assessing the *difference* in enjoyment of time spent working and at home. This difference provides an additional view on the worker's satisfaction with work. It appears to be largely unrelated to responses to common questions on job satisfaction. One of the reasons is that this difference controls trait satisfaction; a trait-unhappy worker may score low on a standard question on job satisfaction but feel nevertheless better at work than at home and behaves accordingly. (Gaucher et al in preparation).

Happiness in regions

The Happiness Indicator has also been used for monitoring happiness in regions in the Netherlands. This application capitalizes on the large number of participants. The study showed that people feel better in the northern provinces of the country than in the south. See [Geluksgevoel in Nederlandse provincies](#) (in Dutch)

Mood during commute

The Happiness Diary was used to assess what pattern of commuting is the least dissatisfying for what kind of persons. People appeared to feel best when commuting by bike and worst when using public transportation, but effects differed markedly across subgroups. [Commuting and happiness: What ways feel best for what people?](#)

The Happiness Indicator provides many more research opportunities, both because of its method and in view of the variables. To date, there are few large-scale studies that combine time use and happiness. To our knowledge there are no datasets at all that provide information of both happiness and life choice.

Facilities for satellite projects

The Happiness Indicator is designed to host parallel projects, both twin projects in other countries and studies that aim at a particular subject. One reason is that this will enlarge the pool of participants, a large pool being required for the long-term goal of charting consequences of life choices. Another reason is that such cooperation is cost efficient. Costs of development are shared with later users.

Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization (EHERO) facilitates use of the Happiness Indicator in the following ways:

- Data collected with the Happiness Indicator will be managed and – on request - available in Excel or SPSS format for you to use and perform your own research.
- We will provide you with an annual descriptive report about the number of participants, the frequency of participation, profile information of participants (e.g. to match census data), and happiness levels within your user population.
- If needed, experts from EHERO can help you to customize your own Happiness indicator to meet the specific demands of your participants, or to answer specific research questions. You will have the opportunity to consult with senior researchers (PhD's), who are trained to guide you in your happiness research and perform complex statistical analyses (e.g. multi-level modeling, structural equation modeling, and so on).

Use for practitioners

Ever more professionals make their living helping people to get happier than they are. This is partly done in the context of psychotherapy, partly in life-coaching and partly in education, adult education in particular. Greater happiness is also a growing issue in organizations and figures in trainings and organizational design.

Though happiness is a prime aim of these practitioners, they seldom assess the effect of their interventions on happiness. As a result, interventions are typically based on theoretical belief rather than on empirical evidence. This hampers the development of these professions and also limits the market for the services. This trade would flourish better if clients could be reasonably sure of getting a bit happier.

For long effect studies were hardly possible in this field, because of the huge costs involved in long term follow up and the absence of control groups.

The Happiness Indicator makes follow-up much easier and cheaper. Practitioners can encourage their clients to participate and can thus monitor their happiness over time. The Happiness Diary also provides a view on behavioral change that reflects in time-use. Changes in happiness and time-use can be compared to changes among similar people selected from the wider pool of participants.

How to join

Costs for satellite projects

How can you setup your own 'twin project' and use the Happiness Indicator in your own country or organization? Below is an overview of costs. All prices are provisional.

Standard

Basic fee

€ 4.250 start fee, excl. VAT. This allows our ICT-experts to setup a:

- Home website address for your Happiness Indicator project (<http://www.happinessindicator.com/uniqueName>)
- A personal page for each user, on which they can access self-help tools and get feedback
- Client-database to receive profile and self-help data from your participants

This set-up will take about two weeks.

Data file

€ 750 for each file with available data, provided on request in SPSS or Excel.

Storage and web maintenance

€ 500 per year after the year of start.

Optional extra's and costs:

Translate website into local language

You can translate the website in your local language. Please present translations in an Excel file. Implementation in your variant of the website will require an extra fee of 1.700 excl. VAT.

Adding questionnaires

You can add additional questions to the profile to be filled out by your respondents. We charge 2.550 excl. VAT to add a maximum of 100 questions to the respondent's profile. You can also add additional questionnaires to the toolbox.

Adjusting activities in Happiness Diary

You can adjust the nature of activities in yesterday's happiness diary at a cost of 4.250 euro (excl. VAT). Please be aware that the diary has a maximum of 14 main activity groups and 6 sub-activities that fall within the main activity groups.

Annual report:

We can manage the data of your clients and provide you with a minimum of one annual download of your client database. Also, we will provide you with a minimum of one annual report. The total costs for data management, including

the annual download and report are 11.250 euro. The download can be provided in either SPSS or Excel. The annual report will contain the following descriptive information regarding your participants:

- Number of participants and frequency of participation
- Demographic characteristics based on participants profile (age, gender, educational level, and so on)
- A timeline based on mean daily and monthly happiness of your participants for that year
- Average time spent and happiness derived from activities as reported in yesterday's happiness diary.

Bi-annual or quarterly reports

In addition to the standard one-year report, you may be interested in receiving reports on a bi-annual or quarterly basis. We will charge an additional 5.200 euro for every report that is ordered in addition to the annual report. The report will have the same setup compared to the annual report. More complex reports and/or more specific analyses can be discussed outside of this contract.

All prices are exclusive of VAT.

Standard Contract

Provider

Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization (EHERO), Erasmus University Rotterdam
Dr. Martijn Burger, academic director
Drs. Guy van Liemt, executive director
Burgemeester Oudlaan 50
3062PA, Rotterdam
The Netherlands

Client [your name and contact details]

Agree to the following:

Article 1: Subject of Agreement

1.1

The default version of the Happiness indicator Website will be made available to the client within one month after signing this contract. Users are free to go to the website and use the Happiness Indicator after this month. The development of extra options for users and their costs will be discussed outside this contract.

1.2

Erasmus University Rotterdam holds the rights to update the default version of the Happiness indicator with questions they deem relevant for scientific research on Happiness and Well-being.

1.3

The specific webpage of the Happiness Indicator will use a secure protocol (HTTPS) to ensure anonymity of users on the web. Data will be downloaded in a secure database, which is only accessible by the ICT department at Erasmus University Rotterdam to ensure the security of the database.

1.4

The Happiness Indicator home site will contain a standardized text stating the joint co-operation between Erasmus University Rotterdam and client.

1.5

Users from client will be labeled with a unique TAG. This TAG will be used to monitor the number of participants from client that use the Happiness indicator, and to produce a minimum of one annual report for client.

1.6

Erasmus University Rotterdam is not responsible for any type of information published by client, based on data collected with the Happiness indicator.

1.7

Erasmus University Rotterdam holds the right to use information from client users for scientific publications on the impact of life choices on happiness. In such publications, anonymity is ensured by not stating any type of personal information that threatens user anonymity in any way.

1.8

Joint publications of client and Erasmus University Rotterdam can be discussed outside of this contract. The discussion will be based on a) the content, b) form (e.g. book chapter, scientific article, other), c) the timing of publication, d) what kind of outlet (e.g. scientific, societal).

Article 2: Start, duration, and end of contract

2.1

This contract will start on DD-MM-YY, with a duration of XX year. This contract will end on DD-MM-YY.

2.2

Before the end-date of this contract, both parties will evaluate the project and state their intentions regarding continuation/non-continuation of this contract.

Article 3: Evaluation

3.2.

After 6 months, both parties will evaluate their cooperation, discuss potential problems, and take action to solve these problems if needed.

Article 4: Secrecy

4.1

Employees of client and Erasmus University Rotterdam that are involved in this contract are bound to secrecy about the subjects discussed in this contract during the execution of this contract, and after ending this contract.

4.2.

Anonymity of users will always be insured in all types of communication.

Article 5: User rights and Ownership

5.1

The models, methods, and other types of self-help tools developed in the Happiness Indicator are the intellectual property of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

5.2

The models, methods, and other tools developed by client will remain the intellectual property of the client.

5.3

The information users from client provide by participating in the Happiness Indicator are the ownership of the researchers performing the Happiness Indicator project at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

5.4

The information users from client provide by participating in the Happiness Indicator are also the ownership of client. It thus concerns a mutual ownership of information of clients by Erasmus University Rotterdam and client.

Signatures:

Provider

Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization
Erasmus University Rotterdam
3062 PA, Rotterdam
The Netherlands

Dr. Martijn Burger
Academic Director

Date:

Drs. Guy van Liemt
Executive director

Date:

Client

.. name..
.. affiliation ..
.. address

Date: