

In Pursuit of Well-Being and Happiness

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The report just published by thinktank, The Resolution Foundation, *Covid Comparisons, How household finances have been hit across the UK, France and Germany*, suggests British households suffered more than their counterparts in two of the largest EU countries. Greater income inequality and welfare support less generous than that available to citizens in Germany and France are offered as explanation.

That the poorest in society are those with least ability to protect themselves and their families from the effects of a health crisis that's proven to be the worst in a century will not come as a shock. Inequality and poverty were already well-known in this country even before the pandemic.

The challenge is in how it will be possible to implement remedies to reduce inequality and end poverty. Sadly, these are aspirations which, if not impossible, can only be achieved with a level of investment and over such a long period as to make meaningful results unattainable in the remainder of this parliament.

What the pandemic has achieved is to highlight how important the issues of well-being and happiness are. There are certain things positively contributing to what makes us feel good; health, family, friendship, doing good deeds for others.

It also important for us to believe the state is interested in our health and well-being.

Use of lockdowns, though not universally popular, has been a way government claims to have protected health. However, for most people, well-being is based on returning to normality swiftly. Roll-out of the vaccine has been something the government is claiming credit for.

Once the crisis does eventually abate, there's the question of whether, once the feeling of excitement and euphoria dissipates, whether we'll feel any happier having survived the pandemic. Obviously, much will depend on whether loved ones have been affected by the virus as well as the state of finances which, among some families, as The Resolution Foundation reports, will have taken a serious hit.

Though happiness and well-being are notoriously subjective, and what we personally experience is intrinsic, there are attempts to capture the feeling nationally. [The Office for National Statistics](#) (ONS) have been collecting data on happiness and well-being for the last decade and produced their last major report in 2019.

[Measuring national well-being in the UK: international comparisons, 2019](#) was published when the UK's departure from the EU was uncertain and causing political upheaval. When considered in the context of experiencing the impact of covid-19, the worst health crisis for a century, this report could be argued as having been carried out during a period of relative tranquillity.

The ONS report is based on comparison with other member states of the European Union (EU) and countries in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). By utilising the National Well-being Programme it established in 2010 as part of its "Beyond GDP" initiative, it's possible to explore the way in which economic growth has a particular impact on different groups in society.

Included in the contents of this report are key issues contributing to UK societal well-being and, logically, happiness. This includes what the authors, Chris Randall, Abbie Cochrane, Rhian Jones and Silvia Mancloss admit is the “subjective assessment” of personal well-being, how people feel about their own lives. As is explained, the measures of personal well-being “focus on overall satisfaction with life, the extent to which we feel the things we do are worthwhile and daily emotions such as happiness and anxiety.”

There are some fascinating insights into how we were believed to have collectively felt two years ago. Obviously, this was prior to the impact of the worst health crisis to affect the world’s population since ‘Spanish Flu’ a century ago which hit the UK hard in terms of health and economically.

Measuring national well-being in the UK: international comparisons, 2019 indicated that data showed personal well-being levels had improved in the UK. It was believed to be significant that “mental well-being scores” for the UK had increased by 4.6% between 2011 and 2016 to stand at 63.2% which was not far of the EU-28 average of 64.0%. Also interesting is that data measuring the number of people who feel closer “to those in their neighbourhood” had increased between 2011 and 2016 by 3.6% to stand at 62.0% which was one per cent behind the EU-28 average which had decreased by 4% to 63%.

This survey included income and finances. That 14.1% of those included in the data set were “struggling to make ends meet in 2017”, below the EU-28 average of 21.6% would hardly seem a revelation. However, that 20.0% of people expressed “satisfaction with their household financial situation”, compared to an EU-28 average of only 12.0%, does appear surprising.

In 2019, according to the ONS report, what mattered most to UK citizens in 2018, when data was collected, were health and social security (33.0%) and housing (22.0%). In the EU-28 the two top issues were unemployment (25.0%) and health and social security (23.0%).

When the ONS report again, it will be intriguing to ascertain whether the pandemic has caused any shift in perceptions of UK citizens reported on in 2019. The pandemic has, as we’ve seen so starkly, illuminated deep-seated inequality and endemic poverty in the UK of the sort so regularly reported on many organisations. The continued existence of such issues will undermine potential improvement in collective well-being and happiness.

Nevertheless, there is always more that can be done by every government.

In its most recent survey, [The World Happiness Report](#), a UN sponsored endeavour involving surveys of happiness in 149 countries, Finland, for the fourth year in a row, has been ranked as the happiest place in the world. The other nine countries after Finland were Denmark, Switzerland, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Luxembourg, New Zealand and Austria. The UK, which was 13th last year, had fallen to 17th.

According to the authors of *The World Happiness Report*, Helliwell, Layard, Sachs, De Neve, Aknin, and Wang, “significantly higher frequency of negative emotions” reported by just over a third of countries was probably due to the pandemic. Finland, according to Helliwell et al, “ranked very high on the measures of mutual trust that have helped to protect lives and livelihoods during the pandemic”. Indeed, they continue, an explanation may be that when there is a threat as pervasive and common as Covid-19, the importance of “a greater sense of solidarity and fellow-feeling” becomes crucial.

Well-being and happiness are accepted to be fundamental to the positive development of all societies. Unfortunately, as the history of humanity proves, ability to deal with crises is something

that we've must learn to anticipate. Some commentators suggest we've become complacent in believing modern society will enable us deal with any threat. However, experiencing anxiety during a pandemic as dangerous as Covid-19 is understandable.

In an ONS report, *Coronavirus and anxiety, Great Britain: 3 April 2020 to 10 May 2020*, by Mark Hamilton and Sarah Coate, published last June, it was stated that "factors most strongly associated with high anxiety during lockdown include loneliness, marital status, sex, disability, whether someone feels safe at home or not and work being affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic."

Anxiety is not something we set out to experience, quite the contrary. Perhaps, there must be a recognition that in dealing with crises that confront us we can survive, recover if necessary and, when better times eventually return, appreciate them all the more.

This is a point made by Victoria Burt in her recent *Metro* article, [‘Is constantly striving for happiness making us miserable?’](#) Quoting Counselling Directory member Dee Johnson, Burt suggests that "perma-happiness isn't good for us" and, importantly, trying to maintain satisfaction (happiness) by ever-greater consumption is part of the problem we all tend to undergo.

Instead, Dee Johnson advises, what's important is perspective. We need to reflect carefully on what's really important and what's not. As such our job, salary, status, finances and material possessions should be balanced against the health of us and our family, time spent with loved ones, ability to contemplate and being able to dedicate energy things we enjoy such as sport or leisure.

We're exhorted to want more. Let's face it, government policy is based on encouraging us to spend freely when the pandemic ends to 'save the high street'.

For those who've been caught in the maelstrom associated with the virus, such advice may seem easier to say than do, possibly even patronising. The society we live in, placing emphasis on position in hierarchy as well as ability to purchase 'stuff' freely, hardly assists.

For those whose situation before the pandemic was grim, it's extremely unlikely they'll emerge any better off, probably worse. As a friend once claimed, "there is one group more obsessed by money than the rich....the poor."

Attaining happiness through a greater sense of well-being, particularly in what we achieve, is laudable.

It's to be hoped that the end of the pandemic heralds a reset in our priorities in order to concentrate on what will genuinely make a difference to the lives of others and, as a consequence, enrich our own.

If we collectively do this, we might become more like Finland.

As a collective goal, pursuit of well-being and happiness on this basis would be no bad thing.

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099). His latest co-edited book, *Exploring the Green Economy, Issues, Challenges and Benefits*, will be published in early summer. Additionally, 'AI Promised You a Miracle – Life Under 'Greased Piglet' Johnson', will be included as a chapter in a forthcoming book, *Populism and the Media*, to be published by Abramis Academic Publishing in June.

