

What Makes the Elderly Happy

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Abstract:

The present study was conducted to find out factors affecting happiness among the non-institutionalized elderly. A qualitative research was conducted in which a sample of 160 elderly, aged sixty to seventy were taken (80 males and 80 females). Data was collected using an open-ended question in which participants were asked about factors influencing their happiness. Thematic analysis of the data collected was done. Findings of the study revealed that family, children, grandchildren, spirituality and health were important factors determining happiness for both male and female elderly. For female elderly, food, entertainment, travelling and being close to nature were other factors that played an important role in determining their happiness, while hobbies, entertainment and friends were the other major factors that determined happiness in elderly males. There was commonality in factors affecting happiness in the two gender groups.

Keywords: *Happiness, Non institutionalized Elderly*

1. Introduction

Happiness is described as a state of well-being that encompasses living a good life, one with a sense of meaning and deep contentment. Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007) has defined happiness as, "the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile." Thus, one can say that happiness is a feeling of contentment that life is just as it should be, which comes when one feels satisfied and fulfilled.

According to Ryan & Deci (2001), hedonic enjoyment is a state whereby an individual feels relaxed, has a sense of distance from their problems and can be said to feel 'happy'. Hedonists usually define pleasure and pain broadly, such that both physical and mental phenomena are included.

The hedonic psychologists are of the belief that happiness can include the preferences and pleasures of the mind, as well as the body (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Kahneman (1999) defined hedonic psychology as the study of "what makes experiences and life pleasant and unpleasant". Hedonic psychology explains wellbeing in terms of pleasure versus pain, and it, therefore, becomes the center of much research and also interventions that principally aim to enhance human happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In the Aristotelian view, we are driven to pursue our potential, to be the best versions of ourselves that we can be. The eudemonic life is to be had whenever we aim at fulfilling our potential, so that we find more meaning and purpose in life.

The emotional state view departs from hedonism in a different way: instead of identifying happiness with pleasant experience, it identifies happiness with an agent's emotional condition as a whole.

Barbara Fredrickson (2002) developed the broaden and-build theory of positive emotions to explain how positive affective experiences not only signal personal well-being but also contribute to personal growth and development. Many negative emotions such as anxiety or anger narrow people's

momentary thought action repertoires, so that they are ready to act in a particular self-protective way. Positive emotions, in contrast, broaden momentary thought-action repertoire. Empirical evidence from clinical and laboratory studies offers substantial support for the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2002). There is good evidence that positive mood states broaden thought-action repertoires.

Most studies say that people are equally happy at all ages. Some say that there is decline in wellbeing as one ages. Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen,1992; Carstensen and Charles,2003; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles,1999) predicts no age-related decline in wellbeing. Carstensen has given a number of reasons for believing that emotional wellbeing could increase with age. Older people shift their priorities from future to their present circumstances and activities. This results as a consequence of their increased awareness of the diminished time remaining in their lives. Unlike the youth who are oriented towards future, the elderly focus on increasing life satisfaction in the present. The older adults express this changed focus by investing in the things and people that are most important for them and matter most to them, and also by unplugging from the" rat race" and constant worry about impressing others and getting ahead.

As a result of their bounded views of the future, older people give priorities to maximizing positive emotional experiences and minimizing negative ones. Thus, they tend to avoid situations that could result in negative emotions and choose to pay attention to the situations that they enjoy. Research shows that elderly often structure their environment to avoid negative interactions with others (Carstensen, Gross & Fung, 1998) and become more adept at regulating their emotions. There is a general shift towards establishing stronger relationships within a smaller social support network. Their spouse, children, gran children and close friends become more important than expanding social relationships by meeting new people.

Carstensen argues that people's perception of how much time they have left in life exerts a powerful influence over the goals they chose to pursue. Young people have an expensive perception of time because most of their lives lie ahead of them. Elderly individuals tend to perceive time as limited because most of their lives lie behind them. Time may be viewed as running out. Perception of personal time available as limited or expansive has a determining effect on goals we choose to pursue. Goals in turn have a determining effect on the dominant activities in a person's life. Goals direct and energize behavior. When we get older and time is limited we are less likely to change or give up our enjoyable activities, everyday routines or significant relationships for the possibility of future gains. We are more focused on emotional satisfaction in the present.

Researchers have found small positive correlations between happiness and religious involvement, and moderate to strong connections between religion and physical health (Argyle, 2001; George, Ellison & Larsen, 2002; Hill and Pargament, 2003).

Hinduism emphasizes the practice of virtues and a contented state of mind as key ingredients of a good life. Virtue should take place in the context of an individual's yearning for transcendence from the material world. The end state of salvation is an egoless state with a limitless compassion for the rest of creation. Throughout the journey to salvation, experiential knowledge and intuition are privileged over rationality and intellect. Happiness understood in the Buddhist way is not necessarily incompatible with suffering, sadness, and tragedy (Ricard 2011), considering that the Buddhist version of happiness is not premised on hedonic balance. A Buddhist should try to grasp the true essence of happiness and sadness (Ricard 2011) not to favor one and avoid the other. Indeed, this doctrine maintains that suffering can be beneficial. In Taoism contentment and peace of mind are highly valued in Taoism (Lee et al. 2013). This state of mind is thought to be a result of an experiential knowledge of basic Taoist principles. This can be achieved if one follows Tao, by not favoring one pole (e.g., happiness) over the other one (e.g., suffering), and by accepting the pattern of

change, which leads to the idea that the positive is hidden in the negative and vice versa. These principles together with that of non-action are thought to lead to a sense of inner peace and contentment. It is reported that, by following these principles, an individual can embrace non-judgmentally their negative feelings and negative sides of their personality and life (Chen 2006). Happiness and contentment can be achieved where no vice (e.g., greed, hatred, fear) exists, and thus they are value-based concepts in Taoism. One should not directly pursue these ideal states. In Confucianism, a happy life is not differentiated from a good life (Zhang and Veenhoven, 2008). In Confucianism, a high value is attached to social relationships particularly family relationships.

2. Factors Affecting Happiness

It is not simple to identify factors that contribute to happiness, as pleasure and the pursuit of pleasure may sometimes, but not always, lead to happiness (Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 1999). Nevertheless, the factors that can affect the happiness of an individual are discussed follow.

Personality studies of happiness show that happy and unhappy people have distinctive personality profiles (Diener et al., 1999). In western cultures happy people are extraverted, optimistic and have high self-esteem and an internal locus of control. In contrast, unhappy people tend to have high levels of neuroticism.

Cultural factors partially determine the types of personality factors associated with happiness. In western individualistic cultures such as the USA, self-esteem and acting in a consistent way that is congruent with one's personal beliefs are personality factors associated with high levels of subjective well-being. However, subjective well-being is not correlated with these factors in eastern collectivist societies. So cultural values partially determine personality traits that affect subjective well-being, probably because these traits are associated with achieving culturally valued goals (Triandis, 2000).

It has been found that maintaining a few close confiding relationships correlate with happiness and subjective well-being (Argyle, 2001, 2000). For example, in a study of the happiest 10 per cent of a group of 222 college students, Diener and Seligman (2002) found that their most distinctive attribute was their rich and fulfilling social life. These students spent a significant amount of their time socializing with friends and were rated by themselves and their friends at being outstanding in making and maintaining close friendships. Confiding relationships are probably associated with happiness for three reasons. First, happy people may be more often selected as friends and confidants, because they are more attractive companions than miserable people. They also help others more than depressed people who are self-focused and less altruistic. Second, confiding relationships meet needs for affiliation and so make us feel happy and satisfied. Third, close friendships provide social support.

Moderate correlations have been found between happiness and involvement in religious activity in North American studies (Myers, 2000). First, religion provides a coherent belief system that allows people to find meaning in life and hope for the future (Seligman, 2002). Religious belief systems allow some of us to make sense of the adversities, stresses and inevitable losses which occur over the course of the lifecycle and to be optimistic about an afterlife in which these difficulties will be resolved. Second, involvement in routine attendance at religious services and being part of a religious community provides people with social support. Third, involvement in religion is often associated with a physically and psychologically healthier lifestyle characterized by marital fidelity; prosocial altruistic behavior. Meditation, which for some is a spiritual practice, has also been found to be associated with better personal well-being.

Ed Diener (2000) found that people in economically disadvantaged nations have lower set-points for happiness. It has been found that happiness rates are low in Russia and Turkey, and high in Ireland, Canada, Denmark and Switzerland. This is probably because people in poorer countries are

dissatisfied that they have not got the luxuries which they know from the media are available in the more affluent countries.

There is a growing body of evidence which shows that happiness may influence our health via its effects on the immune system. The immune systems of happy people work more effectively than those of unhappy people (Kamen-Siegel et al., 1991; Segerstrom et al., 1998; Stone et al, 1994).

It has been found that short-term exercise induces positive mood states and long-term regular exercise leads to greater happiness (Argyle, 2001; Sarafino, 2002).

Employment status is related to happiness, with employed people being happier than those who are unemployed, and people in professional and skilled jobs being happier than those in unskilled jobs (Argyle, 2001). People report greater happiness on days when they achieve highly valued goals than on days when they achieve less valued goals (Diener et al., 1999).

Keith, Rebecca and Singh (2014) in a study which aimed to explore the relationship of students' happiness, stress, and emotional closeness to others to help move towards found that students are least happy about their financial situation, at work, and at school. Perceived happiness differed significantly based on stress levels and emotional closeness to others. Those who reported low perceived happiness reported higher stress levels and lower emotional closeness to others.

Research investigating the connection between demographic variables and happiness may tell more about what does not, rather than what does make us happy. Knowing what is not related to happiness is important, in part because it raises the intriguing possibility that people may look for happiness in the wrong place.

3. Method

The present study aimed at assessing the factors affecting happiness among the non-institutionalized elderly. They were told to list five factors that make them happy. They were asked the following question "What makes you happy? Write five of them. They do not have to be in any order"

4. Sample

The sample of the study consisted of 160 participants, all residents of New Delhi. Out of these, 160 non institutionalized elderly, aged 60 -70, (80 males and 80 females). The data was collected through convenience sampling. The primary criterion for selecting cases was that they are easy to reach, convenient, or readily available.

5. Research Design

The present study was qualitative and exploratory in nature and focused on understanding a research query with a humanistic or idealistic approach. It served the purpose of understanding people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions and focused on the generation of non-numerical data. It was exploratory because the subject is relatively new and has not been much explored or studied especially in the Indian context. The goal was to formulate more precise questions that can be addressed in future research. As a first stage of inquiry, the study wanted to conclude enough to be able to design and execute a second, more systematic and extensive study.

The Thematic Analysis method was used to analyze the collected data. The purpose of Thematic Analysis was to identify patterns (themes) of meaning across the dataset that provide an answer to the research question being addressed, which in this study is, "What makes you happy?". Under this approach, patterns are identified through a rigorous process of data familiarization, data coding, theme development and revision. The different versions of Thematic Analysis tend to share some degree of

theoretical flexibility, but can differ enormously in terms of both underlying philosophy and procedures for producing themes.

6. Rationale of The Study

Since the pursuit of happiness is a central goal in everyone's life, the study aimed to explore what really are the factors that elderly feel makes them happy so as to further explore and enhance these factors in further researches and interventions. The study also wanted to see how different the causes of happiness for the elderly males and females.

7. Results and Discussion

The present study was conducted to find out the factors that make people happy on a sample of 160 non institutionalized elderly males and females. The data was collected using convenient sampling technique. Answers were subjective as respondents were interviewed by the researcher individually. These responses were analyzed to make themes. There was a total of 400 responses for males and 400 for females. Frequency of responses for each theme has been shown graphically.

8. Elderly Males

For the analysis of data collected from elderly males the results have been displayed in the form of a table, a bar graph and a pie chart that shows the major themes of factors affecting happiness of elderly males.

Table 1. Different themes and subthemes of different factors affecting happiness for elderly males

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Themes	Subthemes
Family	Spending time with them, their welfare and growth
Children	Spending time with children and grandchildren; their welfare and growth,
	telling them stories, giving them gifts
Spirituality	Prayer, god, religion, temples, meditation, yoga
Hobbies	Gardening, drives, playing cards or chess, reading, cooking, sleeping, shopping, teaching
Health	Staying fit, exercise, Cycling, evening and morning walks
Friends	Peers
Movies/TV	Old movies, sports
Travelling	Visit to hill stations
Old memories	Seeing old photographs, going to my hometown, songs
Working	Chores, routine, job
Food	Sweets, tea
Socialization	Visiting others, talking to new people, company, party
Reading news	Staying updated
Helping others	Volunteering, social work
Nature	Pleasant atmosphere, going to park
Others	Discussions (Politics, stories), pets, poetry, beautiful things, sitting by self, being valued, buying properties, free thinking, freedom from fear, honesty, psychology, simple life, stock market

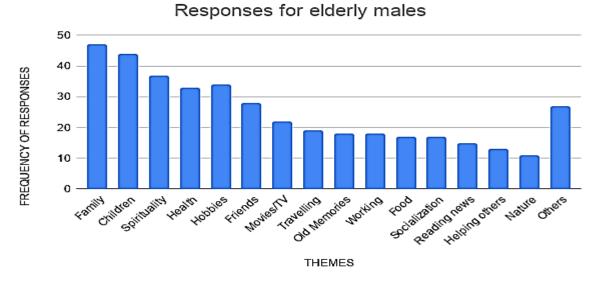


Fig 1. Frequency of responses for the various themes of factors affecting happiness for elderly males

RESPONSES FOR ELDERLY MALES

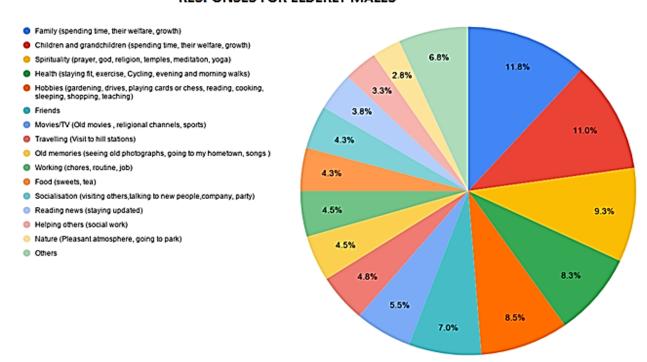


Fig 2. Percentage of responses for the various themes of factors affecting happiness for elderly males

The results of the study reported that the most important factors of happiness for elderly males were family, children and grandchildren. Out of a total of 400, 47 (18.8%) responses from elderly males were related to family. This not only included spending time with their spouses and immediate family but also their welfare and growth. It has also been empirically found that Indian elderly find happiness in terms of family bonds. (Thomas and Chambers, 1989). Forty-four responses (11%) from elderly males were, 'children and grandchildren' as a reason for their happiness. This was in sync to findings of Jopp and Rott (2006). We can also explain these findings in terms of Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992) Out of 80, 37 (9.3% responses) elderly males gave spirituality as

a reason for happiness. Spirituality included god, religion, meditation and yoga. Studies have shown that religiosity /spirituality increase with age.

The next most popular reason was 'Health' accounting for 33 responses (8.3%), health included staying fit, exercising, and evening and morning walks. Next reason given was watching TV, stated by 22 out of 80 elderly males, which included watching movies, religion channels, old movies and sports. 34 out of 80, elderly males gave hobbies as a reason of their happiness. Hobbies included driving, gardening, playing cards or chess, reading and cooking. 19 out of 80 elderly males gave travelling as the reason for happiness. After that, 18 out of 80 stated old memories as a reason for their happiness. Old memories included seeing old photograph, remembering old memories, going to their hometown, listening to old songs. We have seen how the elderly focus more on familiar things rather than trying new goals (Carstensen,1992). Bryant et al. (2005) also found that recalling and remembering old memories increases the level of happiness in people. Working was also one of the reasons given by 18 out of 80 elderly males. Working included both having a job as well as doing household chores. 17 out of 80 elderly males gave food as their reason for happiness. Only 14 out of 80 of the elderly males said socialization, for instance visiting others, talking to new people, having company or partying as a reason of happiness. 15 out of 80 elderly male said reading news gave them happiness. It could be because they wanted to be updated with the world around them. 13 out of 80 elderly, said helping others also gave them happiness. In the end, 11 out of 80 elderly males stated nature gives them happiness. Nature included sitting in a pleasant atmosphere, going to park, animals, etc. Apart from these, there were various other reasons that only a few people gave as a reason for their happiness. All those reasons are clubbed together as miscellaneous. This involved a wide range of activities and reasons like feeling valued, buying properties, festive season, freedom, being honest, reading and knowing about psychology, leading a simple life, following the stock market, using social media, enjoying aesthetics, pest, discussions about politics and spending some alone, 'me' time.

9. Elderly Females

For the analysis of data collected from elderly females the results have been shown in the form of a table, a bar graph and a pie chart, that shows the major themes of factors affecting happiness of elderly females.

Table 2. Different themes and subthemes of factors affecting happiness for elderly females

Themes	Subthemes
Family	family, grandchildren, pets
Spirituality	all forms of prayers
Food	eating, cooking, serving
Social	old and new friends, going to parties and clubs, memories of positive and
interaction	negative experiences
Nature	travelling in nature, gardening and peace of mind
Health	morning walk, good health, sleep, park, yoga and discipline
Entertainment	TV, reading and shopping
Work	cleaning, volunteering, stitching, teaching and social work
Others	Being alone, respect from others, having no debts to pay, dressing up everyday

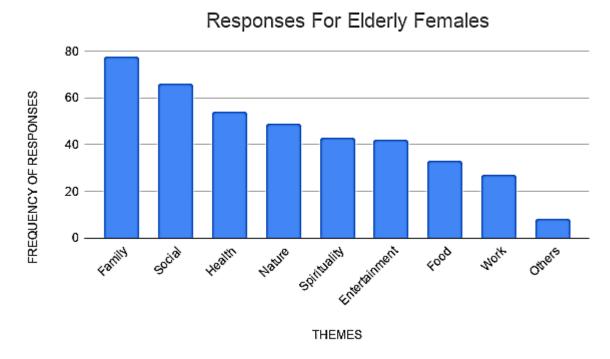


Fig 3. Frequency of responses for the various themes of factors affecting happiness for elderly females

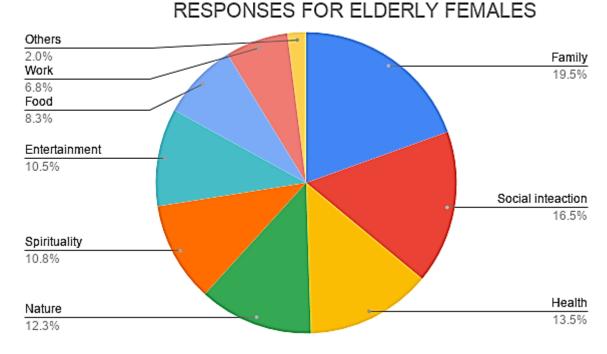


Fig 4. Percentage of responses for the various themes of factors affecting happiness for elderly females

The findings report that 19.5% of responses for the elderly females was family and close social relations. It was found to be a very significant factor in contributing to happiness in old age. It includes spending time with children and grandchildren which received 72 out of 400 responses. There were five participants who responded that pets made them happy and they considered them family, therefore pets were included in the family theme. In addition to family connections, social activities keep seniors engaged and happy (Carstensen,1992)

Social Interaction is another factor which determines happiness in elderly females. 66 out of 400 responses collected was around the theme of social interaction. Pie chart shows that 16.5% of total responses were for the theme of social interaction. This included going out to parties, meeting old and new friends, and cherishing experiences.

Another factor that was found to determine happiness in Elderly Females was Health. Fifty four out of 400 responses collected were regarding Health which includes several aspects such as maintaining good health by going to parks for morning walks, getting sound sleep, doing yoga and meditation, etc. From the pie-chart, we can see that 13.5% of total responses were regarding health. According to a study conducted in 2009, subjective health measures are better predictors of happiness than objective measures are, except for conditions that disrupt daily functioning or are associated with social stigma. Furthermore, Nature plays an essential role in the life of an individual. Being around nature helps one unwind from daily hassles and attain a peaceful state of mind. Traveling to places with natural scenic beauty is one of the factors that helps one be around nature since most of the participants live in the city and the only way, they can be around nature is through traveling. In our study 49 responses out of 400, stated traveling through natural scenic routes as the cause of their happiness, 8 for nature and 10 for gardening and 10 for the overall peace in nature. Thus, nature and traveling plays a big role in the overall happiness the elderly women.

Spirituality was also one of the major factors which determines happiness in elderly females. 43 out of 400 responses collected was around the theme of spirituality. If we look at the pie chart 10.8% of total response was for spirituality. In the present study the theme of spirituality includes all forms of praying. 42 out of 400 responses collected from Elderly Females were regarding Entertainment which includes various activities such as shopping, reading, watching T.V., listening to music, etc. As the pie-chart depicts, 10.5% of total response for factors that determine happiness were regarding the themes of Entertainment.

Furthermore, the theme for work included cleaning, volunteering, stitching, teaching and social work as sub-themes in the present study. According to a research by. Argyle, 2001, work is associated with a number of critical benefits that promote well-being. A critical factor in the relationship between work and happiness is job satisfaction, and job satisfaction is strongly correlated with life satisfaction. Researchers believe that causal direction of relationship goes both ways. Happy people find satisfaction in their work and a satisfying job contributes to individual happiness. In a similar vein, stress, boredom, and interpersonal conflict at work are sources of dissatisfaction and unhappiness in general (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004). Spillover effects have been shown in many studies. For example, a good day at work can contribute to less conflict at home and the opposite can be true of a bad workday (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

Moreover, another theme is Food. This theme includes eating different kinds of food, cooking and serving food to others. Pie chart shows that 8.3% of total responses are for the theme food. We can also say that 33 responses out of 400 were for food where 1 response was for eating food and rest 32 was for cooking and serving food to others.8 out of 400 responses were grouped together under Miscellaneous.

10. Conclusion

This study was conducted to understand the factors that lead to happiness in elderly males and female. It was seen that there is not much of gender difference exists. Children and grandchildren and family played a significant role in contributing to their happiness supporting the Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory. Spirituality was one factor leading to happiness among the elderly. Health was also a very important factor for the elderly. In old age when the health becomes fragile one starts to understand the importance of health. During youthful days one tends to take good health for granted. Most of the factors leading to happiness in both genders are quite overlapping.

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