

Wellbeing is more than about now

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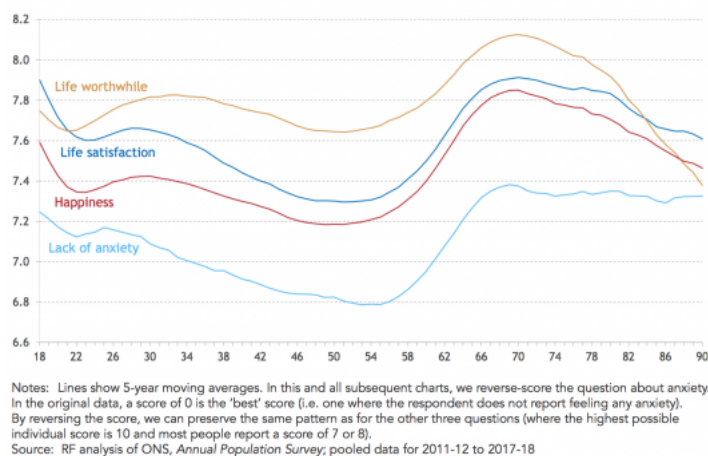
The [FT featured](#) work originally produced by the [Resolution Foundation](#) on well-being this week. It found this slightly surprising trend:

Apparently we are happier now, on average, than we have just about ever been.

That's not all of us, of course. Well-being varies with age:

Figure 1: Subjective well-being falls during adulthood, before rising around retirement

Average subjective well-being by age, 0 = low and 10 = high: UK, 2011-2018



Of course the moral of that one is easy to find: having children might well explain the trend.

It is also true that being in a stable relationship, having higher income, your own home and good health all help generate well being. There's not much surprise there. Nor is there any surprise in the fact that marginal increases in well being resulting from an increase in income decline markedly as earnings rise. But overall the finding looks surprising. Not least because the generation that hates the EU the most (those more elderly in the population) do, for example, appear remarkably happy with their lot. That must be the result, at least in part, from being in the EU. So I looked at the questions asked to underpin this finding. I recognise that the Resolution Foundation use four datasets, but the survey appears dominated by ONS data. They ask just four questions:

- * Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
- * Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
- * Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
- * Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?

The bias within the questions should, I hope, be obvious. Those proposing mindfulness should be happy. What the survey ask is 'are you happy now?'

And I have to say that most of the time I can say 'yes' to that. I have teenage children with exam stress, uncertainty about my own employment / funding, a wife whose health is a cause for concern, and beyond my family a range of issues that some might have noticed cause me considerable concern. But if you ask me right now, most of the time I am happy. Because in the short term there's food on our table, bills are under control, we have a roof over our head and much to laugh about - which happens quite a lot around here - and things to do that appeal to me.

So was the survey of well-being very useful? At one level I can very obviously question that. It might be that all that it shows is that if you ask this question more directly and more often (and both are happening) in a society where, I think, it is becoming easier to express emotion publicly, this is the finding you might expect to get. Correct for those factors and we might be no happier, although I stress, I cannot know for sure (and nor can those doing the survey).

But I don't want to be a cynic. I would like us to be happier. Who wouldn't? But I have real doubts. I think that this survey does not reflect long term concerns well enough, and even if some additional data did include measures of mental ill health I do not think them sufficient either: you can worry about our future without having mental ill health. I think the lesson is that the ONS really do need to look rather more deeply about the future when asking their questions. Wellbeing is not all about now. And work in this area should reflect that fact or false impressions are given.