Satisfaction is obtained when a drive achieves its aim. Reduction of drive tension is felt as pleasure. Attempts to reproduce experiences of drive satisfaction start the processes of hallucinatory wish-fulfilment, reality testing, thought, and purposeful activity. The mental apparatus develops out of the ever-continuing need for drive satisfaction.

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Life satisfaction (i.e., cognitive evaluation of one’s life based on self-selected standards) is one of the key components of happiness. The concept of happiness has shaped the thinking of some of the most influential writers. Philosophical, religious, and political treatises such as Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, Augustine’s *The Happy Life*, and even the United States’ *Declaration of Independence* contend that the pursuit of happiness is the ultimate goal of human existence, with the attainment of any other goal merely a means to this end. However, in spite of its prominence in the lay literature, scientific study of the nature and determinants of happiness has only recently begun.

Collectively, research indicates that happiness is not a unidimensional entity, but rather consists of frequent positive affect (emotions), infrequent negative affect and life satisfaction. Given that the affective and cognitive elements are related, albeit separable, researchers prefer the term *subjective well-being* rather than the more colloquially derived term “happiness” to reflect its multidimensional nature. It is also recommended that the components of subjective well-being be investigated separately because they have different correlates.

Life satisfaction reports incorporate objective standards such as relative income, employment status, and availability of environmental resources with more subjective impressions such as current mood states, attitudes, goals and expectations. Given the multiple standards that may be used by individuals, most studies have examined life satisfaction from a global perspective. This perspective assumes a “top-down” approach in which mean global scores presumably reflect individuals’ perceptions of their life quality after taking all relevant life domains into account (e.g., relations with others, quality of living environment, etc.).

A number of important characteristics are related to life satisfaction. For example, life satisfaction judgments appear to be relatively stable, yet sensitive to change, thus facilitating researchers’ abilities to monitor differences over time and in response to various life events. Further, and perhaps most important, life satisfaction is not simply a by-product of life events, but influences important life outcomes. For example, life satisfaction has been shown to predict interpersonal, educational, and vocational success as well as mental and physical health among adults. Life satisfaction has also been
shown to be negatively associated with multiple risk behaviors in adolescence, including alcohol and drug use, sexual risk taking, aggressive behavior, victimization, and unhealthy eating and exercise behavior. Although differentiated from measures of psychopathology, levels of life satisfaction predict how some individuals respond to psychosocial interventions, suggesting that the construct, traditionally of interest primarily to basic science researchers, may be of import to clinical professionals (e.g., applied psychologists) as well.

Life satisfaction assessments have been used as part of the evaluation process across a variety of psychosocial, educational, and medical settings. Two of the most frequently administered measures in this regard are the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), which contains five items is appropriate for adults, and the Students’ Life Satisfaction Scale (SSLS), which contains seven items and is appropriate for school-age children and adolescents. Both of these global measures yield strong psychometric properties, including high internal consistency and solid evidence of construct validity. However, global reports only partially explain variance within specific life domains. Thus, recent studies have incorporated domain-specific measures, which assume a “bottom-up” approach in which analyses of specific domains provide a differentiated analysis of factors that contribute to an individual’s overall or general sense of satisfaction. Domains have been chosen based upon the age of the respondents, weightings of their importance, and the nature of the research questions. Examples of multidimensional life satisfaction measures for adults and youth can be found in works by Robert Cummins, Michael Frisch, and the current authors. As with global measures, multidimensional life satisfaction measures have demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity across a variety of ages and populations.

Correlates of Life Satisfaction

The origins of individual differences in life satisfaction have traditionally been studied by examining objective indicators such as income level, marriage status, gender, and nation of origin. Nevertheless, objective indicators together account for less than 20% of the variance attributed to life satisfaction. For example, level of income appears most strongly related to life satisfaction among countries suffering from exceedingly high rates of poverty and/or violence, but becomes less salient as per capita income increases. Based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, it may be that once basic needs are met through stronger purchasing power and increased modernization, the effects of additional income become negligible, at least insofar as comparisons across nations are concerned. Nevertheless, within group analyses also reveals similar findings. Life satisfaction ratings also appear invariant as a function of gender and age, although the relative importance attributed to specific life domains differs depending on the age of the respondent.

Life satisfaction is less influenced by acquisition of material goods or social status (e.g., extremely wealthy or moderately comfortable, married vs. single); it is more influenced by persons’ perceptions of their life circumstances. For example, it is not the amount of money that one makes but rather the perception of financial security or control that influences satisfaction; likewise, simply being married has less to do with one’s satisfaction than the perceived quality of the marriage. Such cognitions are often related to dispositional characteristics, such as personality and temperament. For example, extroverted individuals who maintain positive self-efficacy beliefs report higher life satisfaction than individuals who are predisposed to emotional instability (neuroticism) and poor self-efficacy. Research with twins also reveals that a significant portion of life satisfaction may be genetically determined. The extant literature thus suggests that life satisfaction reports are determined by multiple factors, including individual (e.g., genetics, personality, cognitions) and environmental factors (interpersonal relationships,
Cultural differences.

**Current Emphasis on Life Satisfaction: The Homeostatic Set Point**

One of the more recent findings in life satisfaction research is that contrary to public opinions, most people report a moderately high level of satisfaction regardless of nationality, group membership, or life circumstance. These findings, taken together with the genetic studies, suggest evidence for a homeostatic “set point,” which for most individuals is likely located at the positive end (i.e., above the neutral point) of the spectrum. Although much work remains in this area, a positive set point makes evolutionary sense given that it creates a background against which negative events are quickly perceived and addressed. Further, maintaining a positive set point allows the individual not only to be in a position to secure basic (food, shelter) and secondary needs (social support, relationships, etc), but also is fundamental to goal seeking, creativity, and adaptive coping behaviors, all of which are necessary for optimal functioning. Departures from the positive set point thus signal difficulties adapting to life experiences.

Although life satisfaction may in part be genetically determined, it can and does change in response to environmental context. Recent studies have shown that life satisfaction reports vary in response to significant fluctuations in perceived quality of marriage and employment, the amount of time spent in productive activities, and the types of goals that individuals choose to pursue. Should these perceptions or activities change, satisfaction reports change as well—at least in the short run. Indeed, studies of individuals experiencing many different types of negative life events show that life satisfaction reports plunge immediately following the event, but rebound for most individuals, often within a period of a few months. However, studies also show that life satisfaction can remain lower for years after some events, such as being laid off from work, experiencing the death of a spouse, or becoming disabled. Thus, the set point is sensitive to life circumstances rather than fixed, with various intrapersonal (e.g., coping styles, personality characteristics) and interpersonal (e.g., availability of social support) resources moderating the extent of change and time needed to return to baseline levels.

The existence of individual differences in life satisfaction and the variability of life satisfaction reports across time and circumstances suggest research and clinical implications. For example, Diener has argued persuasively for the development of national and international indexes of well-being (including life satisfaction) so that the effects of real time events occurring within and across nations and groups can be monitored. One such ongoing multinational database has provided a number of public policy implications, such as how a nation’s fluctuations in economic, social, and political structures impact perceived livability and life quality among its residents. Life satisfaction research has also yielded promising clinical implications. Research with adults and youth indicates that individuals who maintain very high levels (upper 20% of the distribution of scores) of well-being (including life satisfaction) manifest a number of psychosocial benefits relative to individuals reporting average or low levels. These studies suggest that life satisfaction yields incremental advantages that may not be found even among individuals with average levels, thus serving as a key component of optimal functioning or “flourishing” among adults and youth. These studies also support calls for establishing interventions to enhance the life satisfaction of all individuals, not just those experiencing distress. Although clinical interventions specifically aimed at improving life satisfaction have been sparse, several interventions have yielded promising results. As the study of life satisfaction continues to be of interest to applied psychologists, it is anticipated that additional interventions will be formulated and empirically tested.
Given the wide range of correlates of life satisfaction, the usefulness of life satisfaction is apparent. Life satisfaction measures typically reflect the full range of subjective experiences, for example, from “terrible” through “delighted,” allowing differentiations at the upper levels of the positive range. Researchers also have studied life satisfaction with respect to specific domains, especially satisfaction with work among adults and satisfaction with schooling among children and youth. Studies of the differential antecedents and consequences of life satisfaction differences in various domains are likely to reveal exciting new avenues for research and applications of life satisfaction research. Life satisfaction research thus promises to play an increasingly important role in the evaluation of planned and unplanned personal and environmental changes and their effects upon the quality of life of individuals and groups.

SEE ALSO: ► Diener, Ed ► Positive emotions ► Well-being

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