



Book Wellbeing

The Five Essential Elements

Tom Rath and Jim Harter
Gallup Press, 2010
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Recommendation

Gallup Inc., the world’s most experienced polling organization, set out to determine what makes people happy. In this book, Tom Rath and Jim Harter, two Gallup professionals, dissect the organization’s complex research findings. Real well-being depends on a blend of satisfaction in five distinct areas: work, money, health, social life and community. For entirely practical reasons, not everyone can follow Rath and Harter’s advice, no matter how sound it may be. For those who can adhere to its precepts, this is a solid, revealing and useful text on happiness. *BooksInShort* recommends the authors’ all-inclusive philosophy of well-being and notes that this book comes with another bonus: special access codes to Gallup’s online “Well-being Finder,” which readers can use to measure their leadership strengths and track their well-being quotient.

Take-Aways

- Total well-being derives from combining earnings, physical fitness, an active social life, a good job and strong community ties.
- Individuals who try to improve only one or two of these areas can’t achieve happiness.
- Only 7% of people have optimized their lives in all aspects of well-being.
- People often opt for short-term satisfaction instead of long-term well-being.
- Develop constructive routines – “positive default” positions – so your immediate actions offer benefits over the long haul.
- Career satisfaction has the greatest impact on your happiness.
- Good social relationships help you endure psychological stress.
- Your body does not function well without proper food, drink, exercise and sleep.
- Doing things for others increases your confidence in your ability to change your life.
- A loving relationship makes you stronger and healthier.

Summary

The Secret to Happiness

Do you experience a strong sense of well-being every day? Such contentment depends on more than just financial security, physical health or some other beneficial attribute. If you work to improve in one or two areas, but ignore the others, you will not be happy.

“Much of what we think will improve our well-being is either misguided or just plain wrong.”

Yet people commonly take a shortsighted approach. They buy books or purchase videos with the specific goals of getting rich, becoming thin, finding love, gaining respect or building relationships. Faithfully following the rules these guides lay out for them, they make concerted efforts to improve their lives in discrete areas. Then they give up, because having an exclusive focus on one or two of life's aspects interferes with its other important elements.

“The single biggest threat to our own well-being tends to be ourselves.”

People are not just money accumulators or health builders or romance finders; they are all these things, and more. Money alone will not increase your sense of well-being; research studies show that an annual increase of \$10,000 in salary produced only a 2% increase in happiness in return.

Gallup Inc.'s research, conducted around the world and over many decades – including recent findings – indicates that people must optimize “five essential elements” of their lives to be truly happy:

- **“Career well-being”** – How you prioritize your work time.
- **“Social well-being”** – How you find and maintain love and strong social relationships.
- **“Financial well-being”** – How you manage your money.
- **“Physical well-being”** – How you maintain your health.
- **“Community well-being”** – How you integrate with the people around you.

“With so many options to satisfy ourselves at the moment, it can be difficult to make the right long-term decisions.”

Unfortunately, Gallup research indicates that only 7% of people do well in all five areas.

Most folks opt for immediate happiness (eat those potato chips, buy that new TV) instead of long-range well-being (get thin and fit, save for retirement). You escape this quick-fix thinking by developing “short-term incentives” that serve your “long-term objectives.” For example, contemplating the future dangers of obesity may not make you forego vanilla ice cream right now. However, if you know how poorly your “high-fat hangover” will make you feel for the rest of the day, perhaps you will find the fortitude to resist. Similarly, you may decide to exercise this morning because you know that even 20 minutes of physical activity can make you feel good for the next 12 hours. Such smart thinking, known as “a positive default” position, can motivate you to do the right thing when temptation strikes. You can then orient your day-to-day activities to line up with your long-range well-being goals. Of course, this will require hard work, discipline and personal accountability. But the result – a vibrant, happy life – is certainly worth it.

Career Well-being

The essence of career well-being is attaining joy from your daily activities. Most adults spend much of the day at work. When you are there, can you do the things you love? When your work is enjoyable, it ceases to be work. Many supposed workaholics spend so much time at their jobs because nothing else gives them as much pleasure. Unfortunately, only one out of five people like their jobs. Disliking your work negatively impacts your happiness, because career well-being is the most significant of the five happiness elements. A Swedish study confirmed a direct proportion between contempt for a boss and increased worker heart attacks.

“People usually underestimate the influence of their career[s] on their overall well-being.”

Many people suffer emotional tailspins when they become unemployed. Research published in *The Economic Journal* indicates that even after five years, most people are unable to completely recover after losing their jobs. No other life event has the same negative impact. Unemployment especially affects men. But take heart: You don't need a good job to achieve career well-being. You can be out of work and still attain happiness. Spend your time on something that brings you pleasure. This could involve bringing up children or doing volunteer work, such as tutoring.

“Our well-being actually recovers more rapidly from the death of a spouse than it does from a sustained period of unemployment.”

In 1958, George Gallup's research showed that career well-being is a major factor that helps people stay hearty and healthy into their 90s. Gallup interviewed hundreds of people aged 95 or older. At that time, most men retired around age 65, but the men who reached 95 did not quit their jobs “until they were 80 years old.” A whopping majority of them (86%) reported that working was fun. Work is enjoyable when you can employ your personal strengths on a daily basis. People who utilize such strengths find six times as much job enjoyment as other workers. Career well-being helps you find purpose in your life. “People with high Career Well-being are more than twice as likely to be thriving in their lives overall.”

Social Well-being

Most people do not realize how much their social connections mean to their emotional and physical health and well-being. Those with friends, family and significant others derive great benefit from their social networks. You quickly transmit your emotions to those around you. And when those around you care about you, your emotions, like a battery, will be in a constant state of positive charge.

“People who have at least three or four very close friendships are healthier, have higher well-being and are more engaged in their jobs.”

Humans “synchronize [their] moods” with those around them. Your emotions influence the feelings of others, and their emotional states influence your own. Harvard University research covering 12,000 subjects over a period of more than 30 years found that if someone in your social network is happy, the chances that you will feel happy rise by a factor of 15%. “Even your friend's friend's friend influences your well-being.”

“Experimental research suggests that creating sustainable change may be two to three times as likely to happen in the context of a group, company or community organization.”

Positive relationships with others enable people to ride out the rough spots with less physiological stress. Those who keep to themselves are twice as likely to die of

heart disease. In an experiment to measure the healing power of loving social relationships, researchers inflicted small wounds on the arms of 42 married couples. The wounds of those experiencing tension and hostility in their relationships healed 50% more slowly than the injuries of happier couples.

“The best moments – and most agonizing ones – occur at the intersection between two people.”

To achieve well-being, people need to socialize six hours daily. Each hour that you spend with other people decreases the likelihood that you will experience a bad day. Your social well-being depends on having one good friend, at a minimum; three or four are better.

Financial Well-being

How much money you have correlates to your well-being. Gallup research conducted in 132 countries clearly shows a direct relationship “between well-being and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita.” Some 56% of people with little or no money, such as those who live in developing countries, sometimes go hungry. Additionally, poor people often cannot afford the medicines they need to alleviate discomfort. Obviously, you cannot experience well-being if you are hungry or in pain.

“Emotions spread quickly from one person to the next.”

If you have money, your feelings of happiness increase when you spend it to benefit others. When people feel bad, the chances increase that they will squander their money. Paying for an enjoyable social experience, such as dinner in a restaurant or a vacation, makes individuals feel better. As incomes go up, money spent on “experiential purchases” adds to feelings of well-being by a factor of 200% to 300%, compared to purchases made for material possessions.

“If your spouse becomes obese, the odds of your becoming obese go up by 30%.”

You don’t have to be rich to enjoy financial well-being. But you do need to set positive default behaviors regarding your money. For example, Linda, a mail worker, does not earn a huge salary. But she manages her money so well that she is able to bank 50% of her monthly earnings. She doesn’t have to think about saving this money. It takes place automatically. The belief that you have sufficient money to meet your needs has a positive impact on your well-being.

Physical Well-being

Every day you make numerous choices about what to eat and drink. They are either positive (fruits, vegetables, plenty of water) or negative (junk food, candy, caloric drinks), or both. Good choices (“salmon with a side of broccoli”) make you feel better during the day (short-term) and reduce potentially negative physical consequences, such as cancer or heart disease (long-term).

“If we use our money to buy pleasant experiences, we get the benefit of looking forward to the event, the actual experience and, in some cases, decades of fond memories.”

When you eat a meal that contains saturated fat, your arteries cannot move sufficient blood throughout your body or to your brain. The result is a high-fat hangover that slows you down physically and mentally. Eat enough fatty fish (salmon is a good choice) weekly and you can reduce your chances of getting kidney cancer by 74%.

“We learn to remember and make connections more effectively when we are asleep than we do when we are awake.”

Your body works best when you eat and drink properly, get sufficient sleep and exercise every day. The phenomenon of “epigenetic inheritance” shows that how you eat can affect your offspring and their offspring as well. If you suffer improper nourishment, there is a stronger chance that diabetes and heart disease will strike your children and grandchildren. Eat bad foods (with high carbohydrate and sugar counts) and your “appetite-control cells” signal your brain to eat more.

“Changing our daily routine a little can have a big impact on the quality of each day.”

Foods with unsaturated fats (for example, nuts, olive oil and avocados) signal the brain to tell your body to stop consuming. Your image of your body, right or wrong, significantly influences your psychological well-being. Your body image can be more credible to you than objective data, such as your body mass index (BMI). If you know you are doing good things for your body, your body image will improve, and this will encourage you to continue healthy behavior.

The best foods are vegetables and fruits “that have darker tones of red, green and blue,” such as apples (red), broccoli (green) and cabbage (blue). Avoid food extras such as “toppings, dressings, snacks and drinks” because they often are high in calories, sugar and fat. Plan in advance to make the right diet choices. Buy only good foods at the supermarket. Stay out of places like fast food restaurants that offer primarily unhealthy meals.

Exercise at least 30 minutes daily, five days a week. You should exercise when you feel tired because exercise reduces fatigue. Get the sleep you need. Doctors recommend seven to eight hours nightly. Too little sleep (less than six hours) and too much sleep (more than nine hours) are equally bad for you: Both “short-duration” sleepers and “long-duration” sleepers are prone to substantial weight gain.

Community Well-being

Community well-being depends in large part on where you live. It must be a stable, safe place that ideally matches your “personality, family, interests, and other pursuits,” and a place that you find aesthetically pleasing. But living in an attractive environment is not enough. You must become active in your community and make a positive contribution.

Community volunteerism is altruistic, but you also benefit. Volunteer for an organization in your community and you’re likely to develop a strong emotional attachment to that club, charitable group or public facility. When you do something good for your organization, you feel worthy and useful, and you gain contentment. Committing to helping others reinforces your sense of being able to affect positive outcomes, and that empowers you to change your own life.

Think Holistically

Having the money you need is great, and so is being fit, spending your time at something you love, having an active social life and being involved with your community. To attain those goals, start making smarter decisions in the here and now. The choices you make today – the foods you eat, the exercise you get, the friendships you develop, the community work you perform, and so on – will help or harm your well-being now and in the future. Create positive defaults in your life. The best way to establish complete well-being is to make sure that your “short-term self” supports your “long-term self.”

About the Authors

Tom Rath directs workplace research and leadership consulting activities for Gallup, Inc., where **Jim Harter**, PhD, is chief scientist for international workplace management and well-being.
