



The Happiness and Happiness Index Hoax

People are leaving Pakistan in droves. [In 2022 alone, more than 800,000 Pakistanis left their country in search of greener pastures abroad.](#) It's not only political instability and economic insecurity that are contributing to this mass exodus, but also the notion that emigrating to a Western country will somehow make us happier. The annual results of the Happiness Index further push this narrative, as Western countries are obviously leading the rankings. What if this is just a mirage? This article sets out to explain what happiness actually means and also deconstructs the Happiness Index.

Happiness is a subjective experience. Because of this, there's been a lot of debate and criticism over its various definitions and methods of measurement. Such debate and criticism also extend to the Happiness Index, which is a survey-poll-based measure of national happiness across the globe and is published annually as country rankings. The index relies on the self-reported scores of those polled on what is called a Cantril ladder, assigning their happiness levels a score of 1 to 10. The most recent to be released was in 2023 when Finland topped the charts for a record-breaking sixth time. The whole media hype demands that the concept of happiness be understood within one's own worldview, which, of course, for Muslims should be the Islamic one.

Happiness could be defined simply as a state of subjective contentment. For Western secular societies, that subjective contentment is invariably tied to enjoying the optimum level of sensual pleasures. As is the case with any subjective experience, happiness also depends on one's cultural influences, personal values, and expectations. We live in a hyper-connected world that is moving towards a single culture and one specific set of values that govern one's expectations. People's likes and dislikes are more and more influenced by the dominant culture and values, which are Western. Globally, this has led to a pronounced preference for:

- Individualism over Collectivism
- Materialism over Simplicity
- Personal Achievement over Familial Duties
- Secularism over Religious Devotion
- Gender Equality over Traditional Gender Roles
- Consumerism over Sustainability

What this means is that people would think they were happier if they had more of the left-hand side of the bullet points above, even if that came at the expense of the right-hand side. Does that imply that a person can be tricked into thinking they are happy when they are not? Yes, indeed! Consider the straightforward example of a drug addict to comprehend this. While under the influence of drugs, he would rate his happiness as perfect. By his own subjective standards, he would have led a happy life if he had stayed high for the rest of his life. We, as observers, are aware that such a life is dull and meaningless. The lives and expectations of people in the West are similar to this example. They are limited in their ability to see past certain egotistical and selfish goals.

The following illustration will help you understand another issue with such self-reporting: Someone who recently won a million dollars in the lottery would undoubtedly rate their level of happiness as extremely high. However, winning a million dollars in the lottery can make you momentarily forget the death of a loved one, the suffering of an ailing parent, or the trauma of a breakup, but that doesn't mean the impact of that loss has gone away. Contrarily, people will eventually come to understand that material wealth cannot replace the 'loss'. Thoughts of depression and anxiety could accompany this realization. Regardless of the triviality of the former or the profundity of the latter, humans frequently display a propensity to pursue immediate gratification while ignoring more important, long-term goals, especially when influenced by liberal, secular Western ideology. This is made abundantly clear by the happiness scores, which favor WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) countries. According to studies, a country's happiness index rises the WEIRDer it is. A truly representative measure of happiness should aim to be independent of a nation's WEIRDness.

Now bringing Islam into the discussion changes the perspective on happiness even further—that too, drastically. Muslims conduct all of their actions in accordance with Allah's commands and prohibitions because they alone should govern all of society's affairs. The only way to bring happiness and tranquility to a Muslim is to conduct oneself in accordance with Allah's commands and prohibitions. Thus, true happiness is sought not through sensual pleasures, but through attaining Allah's pleasure while not ignoring any organic or instinctual needs.

The Qur'an and Sunnah have used different forms of the word 'sa'adah' which is literally translated to happiness, but mostly the more formal word 'felicitous' is used in translations. It is mentioned twice in the Qur'an, both in Surah Hud, as follows: ﴿يَوْمَ يَأْتِ﴾ **“The day it comes, no one shall speak except by His leave. [On that day,] some of them will be wretched and [some] felicitous”**. [Surah Hud:105] ﴿وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ سَعِدُوا فَفِي الْجَنَّةِ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا مَا دَامَتِ السَّمَاوَاتُ وَالْأَرْضُ إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ رَبُّكَ عَطَاءٌ﴾ **“As for the felicitous, they will be in paradise. They will remain in it for as long as the heavens and the earth endure—except what your Lord may wish—an endless bounty.”** [Surah Hud:108]

Interestingly, both mentions of happiness are in the context of the Hereafter, which brings us to the main difference between the concept of happiness in Western and Islamic traditions. For Muslims, true and eternal happiness is found in the Hereafter. Moreover, any opportunity, however difficult, to achieve that eternal happiness, will also make Muslims happy in this life. This means, hardships, tests, and trials will always have this silver lining of reminding one of eternal bliss and thereby contributing to overall happiness, or at least lessening the suffering.

While referring to the Sunnah, it further elaborates the concept. The following Hadith very clearly defines happiness: Sa'd reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, ﴿مِنْ سَعَادَةِ ابْنِ آدَمَ رِضَاهُ بِمَا قَضَى اللَّهُ لَهُ وَمِنْ شَقَاوَةِ ابْنِ آدَمَ تَرْكُهُ﴾ **“Among the happiness of the son of Adam is contentment with what Allah has decreed for him. Among the misery of the son of Adam is to abandon asking Allah for guidance, and among the misery of the son of Adam is displeasure with what Allah has decreed for him.”** [Sunan at-Tirmidhi]

The hadith tells us that finding contentment with what one possesses can contribute to happiness. Today, accepting reality can be extremely difficult for many people. People frequently want to change their circumstances rather than adapt to them, which can cause them to be unhappy. This dissatisfaction may be a result of societal messaging, which frequently reinforces the false notion that one can get what one wants exactly how one wants it.

Let us go back to the Happiness Index, where Finland topped the rankings for a remarkable sixth consecutive year. Let us take a closer look at Finland and some of its most prevalent issues.

With 5.6% of its population clinically depressed, Finland is the [eighth-most depressed nation in the world](#). In terms of suicide rates, which stand at [14.2 per 100,000 people](#), it is ranked the same (8th) globally. The Finnish Partnership for Mental Health, which consists of 34 mental-health organizations, recently put together a report for the members of the Finnish parliament. It revealed that mental health problems are the biggest reason for early retirement in cases of reduced ability to work. It added that mental-health issues cost the government almost \$13 billion a year. In July 2021, the National Crisis Helpline set a record when more than 28,000 people called for help in just that one month, in a country with a total population of just over 5.5 million. [Helsinkimissio](#) is a social-work organization based on voluntary work. It was founded in 1883. Since then, the organization's goal has been to decrease loneliness. However, appeals for help increased by 30 percent in 2020. The biggest reason for contacting Helsinkimissio was the same for young and old people: loneliness. How would you make sense out of these statistics? What can explain the happiest country struggling with loneliness and ranking among the top 10 in suicide rates and depression other than a faulty understanding of happiness?

Does this imply that Muslim societies are without problems? Absolutely not; we face a variety of challenges, the majority of which are economic in nature. However, a closer examination of our societies will quickly reveal that our problems are the result of the West's historic and ongoing plundering of our resources. Historically, it was through [British colonialism](#), and it continues to this day in a more subtle form: [institutional colonialism](#). It would not be incorrect to assert that whatever happiness, right or wrong, many Western countries are experiencing today comes at the expense of developing countries due to a world order rigged against them. This, however, is a topic for another article.

In conclusion, the concept of happiness is subjective and influenced by cultural values and personal expectations. The Western focus on individualism and materialism may lead to a skewed understanding of happiness. Islam offers a different perspective, emphasizing eternal happiness in the Hereafter and attaining Allah's pleasure by fulfilling organic or instinctual needs in accordance with Allah's commands. The Happiness Index, while flawed, measures self-reported scores that may not capture true happiness. The example of Finland, a top-ranking country on the index but facing high rates of depression and suicide, highlights the limitations of relying solely on external indicators. True happiness is found in accepting reality, respecting Allah's boundaries, and seeking contentment with what He (swt) has decreed.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Dr. Abdul Baseer Qazi – Wilayah Pakistan**