The course that can make you happier than getting married or finding a job

New research launched today [1] has found that taking a happiness course in your local area can raise your life satisfaction by more than getting a long-term partner or finding employment.

The “Exploring What Matters” course developed by the UK charity Action for Happiness - and backed by the Dalai Lama - has been evaluated by a randomised controlled trial (RCT) carried out by academic experts from the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, the Wellbeing Research Centre at Oxford University and University College London as part of the evidence programme of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing.

The course is led by volunteers and takes place face-to-face in local communities over eight weekly sessions. It is offered on a donation-basis - so it remains accessible to everyone - and has already been run in hundreds of locations across the UK.

Nancy Hey, director of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, said: “Britain faces an important challenge around mental health issues and loneliness, but surprisingly little research has been done previously to evaluate ways to improve wellbeing for the general population, especially in local communities. The Action for Happiness course takes a unique, evidence-informed approach and the results of this research are extremely promising. Running these courses more broadly across the UK could potentially make a really big difference in improving people’s lives and increasing national wellbeing.”

Dr Mark Williamson, chief executive of Action for Happiness, said: “This course brings people together face-to-face in a supportive local group to explore what really matters in life. There’s no magic formula for happiness, but the course helps people feel more connected to others, discover a greater sense of purpose and identify simple actions they can take to be happier and to help others. This new research backs up what hundreds of people have already told us - taking part in these groups is life-changing.”

The trial was led by Dr Christian Krekel (LSE) and Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve (Oxford and LSE) with additional support from Dr Daisy Fancourt (UCL). It found that, relative to a control group, the course provides large and statistically significant benefits in three areas: personal wellbeing, mental health and pro-sociality.

In terms of personal wellbeing, life satisfaction increases by around one whole point on the 0-10 scale, from an average of 6.4 out of 10 before the course to 7.4 after the course. This increase (+1.0) is greater than those from other major life events such as being partnered as opposed to single (+0.59) or being employed as opposed to unemployed (+0.7), when compared with findings from other cross-sectional studies of wellbeing in the UK [2].
In terms of mental health, the trial found the course significantly decreased depression by about 50 per cent of a standard deviation, and decreased anxiety by 42 per cent. Prior to the course, participants reported average scores corresponding to a clinical symptomatology of mild depression and anxiety. After the course, these scores reduced to a symptomatology of minimal depression and anxiety, the lowest category for both measures.

In terms of pro-sociality, the trial found that participating in the course can make participants more likely to act in ways which help others, with large and statistically significant increases in levels of compassion and social trust.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, of Oxford University and an associate of the Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, said: “We wanted to investigate whether this course actually makes a difference to people’s lives. So we subjected it to a full randomised controlled trial which is the ‘Gold Standard’ in terms of evaluation. The results were really impressive: the course delivers large and statistically significant improvements in wellbeing and reductions in mental health symptoms. Although further research is needed to understand the long term implications, it is clear that this intervention has huge potential and really does work”.

The eight-week “Exploring What Matters” course is volunteer-led and has already been attended by 6,000 people in more than 250 locations. The content is based on the findings of hundreds of scientific studies relating to happiness and mental wellbeing. Participants learn how to cultivate happiness by taking action in their daily lives, exploring themes such as how to cope with difficult times and be more resilient, how to have good relationships, how to find meaning at work and how to create happier and stronger communities.

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**Notes to Editors**

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The full academic study can be found here:
http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1671.pdf

Action for Happiness is a UK Charity with 175,000 members and over a million online followers. Its patron is the Dalai Lama. It has no commercial, political or religious affiliations.

Action for Happiness promotes the Ten Keys to Happier Living that are underpinned by the latest research in positive psychology. It also provides daily actions people can take to be happier and kinder through its app and online calendar, which is used by millions of people.

Its flagship 8-week Exploring What Matters course has been run in over 250 locations and attended by thousands of people. It also hosts regular public events, supports a network of Happy Cafes and provides resources for schools and organisations.

The Centre for Economic Performance was established at LSE in 1990. CEP is one of Europe’s leading economic research centres. CEP research focuses on the links between globalisation, technology, the educational system and the labour market and the impact of these on productivity, inequality, employment, stability and wellbeing.

References
