

A DATA BRIEFING FROM DT LINUX

SAMPLE PREVIEW

What Really Makes People Happy? The Data May Surprise You

Six data points on what actually drives happiness, from an 80-year Harvard study on relationships to a famous number about money that turned out to be only half true

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DT LINUX

This is a free preview. The full report contains complete analysis of all six cases, full sourcing, and an interactive data dashboard.

What's inside this report

The full report walks through six real, sourced data points on what actually drives happiness, from a five-dollar experiment to an 80-year Harvard study, organized into three tiers: The Mood, The Evaluation, and The Myth.

No.	Context	Tier	Why it's on the list
1	Giving a little away beats spending more on yourself	The Mood	Across 136 countries and 234,917 people, spending on others predicted greater happiness in 90% of them. In a lab test, people given \$5 to give away were happier by evening than people given \$20 to keep.
2	Exercise helps, until it doesn't	The Mood	Across 1.2 million people, the sweet spot was about 45 minutes, 3 to 5 times a week. More than 3 hours a day was linked to worse mental health than not exercising at all.
3	The 80-year study that keeps finding the same thing	The Evaluation	Relationship satisfaction at 50 predicted physical health at 80 better than cholesterol did, in a study following some of its subjects since 1938.
4	The commute you're underpaying yourself for	The Evaluation	An extra hour of daily commuting costs about as much life satisfaction as a real pay cut, yet people routinely accept longer commutes for smaller trade-offs.
5	The \$75,000 number everyone remembers	The Myth	A famous 2010 finding that happiness plateaus at \$75k was both wrong and right: a 2023 reconciliation found the plateau only holds for an unhappy minority.
6	What a 1978 lottery study actually found	The Myth	The famous "you return to baseline" finding is real, but the mechanism is stranger: winners enjoyed everyday moments less, and injury survivors idealized their own past.

The full report also includes an interactive, filterable dashboard version of this comparison, and a related-topics and keyword brief for further reading.

EXCERPT

The clearest case: why giving five dollars away beat keeping twenty

In 2008, psychologists Elizabeth Dunn, Lara Aknin, and Michael Norton published a set of three studies in *Science* that all pointed the same direction. First, a national survey of 632 Americans found that how much people spent on themselves each month, on average \$1,713.91, had no measurable relationship with their happiness. How much they spent on others or gave to charity, a much smaller \$145.96 a month on average, did: more prosocial spending predicted significantly greater happiness, even after accounting for income.

A second study followed 16 employees before and after a profit-sharing bonus averaging \$4,918.64. The size of the bonus did not predict how much happier people felt weeks later. The share of it they spent on others did, and it was the only significant predictor in the data. The cleanest evidence came from a third study: 46 participants were given either \$5 or \$20 and told, at random, to spend it on themselves or on someone else by the end of the day.

People told to spend on someone else reported measurably greater happiness that evening than people told to spend on themselves, regardless of whether they'd been given \$5 or \$20. The amount barely mattered. Who it was spent on did.

A finding built on 46 college students could easily be a fluke of one campus, one country, one year. It isn't. A later analysis using Gallup World Poll data from 234,917 people across 136 countries found the same relationship, holding up in about 90% of the world's countries, rich and poor alike...

Continue reading in the full report →

Get the full report

This sample covers the opening case. The complete report walks through all six data points in full, with the same standard of sourcing throughout.

- **Full analysis of all six cases**, including the exercise dose-response curve, the Harvard Study of Adult Development, the commuting paradox, and both myths this report fact-checks against the original research
- **The complete "caveat that matters most" section**, tying all six cases together into one running argument about what actually moves the needle on happiness
- **A full, cited source list** covering every study and data set used
- **An interactive data dashboard** with filterable charts, a downloadable schema, and API access details
- **A related-topics and keyword brief** for teams researching wellbeing and behavior further

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