

## EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

*the ability to research and reflect on the roots of emotional wellbeing*

**Morgan Phillips, Becoming Green**

---

What do we want learners to become? Do we want them to be shallow, individualistic, infantilised, anxiety ridden, status obsessed, selfish consumers? Or do we want them to have fulfilling and meaningful lives, characterised by generosity, intelligence, community spirit, stable levels of self-esteem and maturity? If our educational, political, societal and cultural systems continue to foster learners who will become the former, sustainability may well remain, as John Foster (2008) describes it, a 'mirage'. If sustainability is to become a reality, we need learners to become the latter. Education has a very important role to play in realising this.

This chapter will discuss the importance of understanding emotional wellbeing. It will argue that learners need to critique their own understandings of the 'good life' and the foundations of happiness. The chapter is built on a core argument (explored in depth by James 2008) that our current ways of pursuing happiness (through the accumulation of material wealth) benefit only an elite few, whilst failing to bring long-term emotional wellbeing to the majority. Failings are not only evident in many individuals: society, the environment and the economy are also chronically failing. Our misdirected pursuit of happiness therefore seems to be a major barrier to sustainability. Unless we are more literate in our understandings of emotional wellbeing, we will ultimately continue on a path of unsustainable development as a society shaped by consumerist values.

A consumer economy built around the idea that material wealth equals happiness is, at the very least, a hindrance to sustainable development and at worst a complete sustainability show stopper. At present we are over-consuming the world's resources, causing huge ecological damage. We consume so much because we want, or feel that we need, the things that natural resources are turned into. To put it bluntly we want too many things, or just lots of varieties and the latest versions of the same things. But why? The answer to this question is not straightforward and even if we do find it and understand it, behaviour change may still remain unappealing or insignificant. As many environmentally conscious people have found, behaviour change is far from simple, even when the prescribed change is entirely rational from an environmental or sustainability perspective.

The problem for environmentalists is that the environment is just one factor that we consider in our decision-making. While it is true that we can strengthen the influence of our environmental conscience, our behaviour is often simultaneously driven by other, competing, factors. In our materialistic consumer society it is often the case that the things we want to do are contradictory to our environmental beliefs. For the sake of the environment we know we should not fly to a nice hot country, we know we should not have an energy intensive flat screen TV, we know we should not leave our computers on all day and we know we should

not shop in supermarkets. The list is long and probably endless. The broad reason why we do all of those things and more is because in some way we believe that they will make us happy, improve our emotional and physical wellbeing, or simply make our life easier. We **act** as if we believe that material wealth equals happiness, even if, on deeper reflection, we do not really believe it. We live in a consumerist society.

It is, however, possible that consumerism is built on sand. Work by Barber (2008), James (2008), McKibben (2008), Adam Curtis (2002) and the New Economics Foundation (NEF) are examples of a growing body of research by concerned economists, environmentalists, psychologists and sociologists who have recognised the shaky foundations of a consumer led economy. Consumerism has caused the blurring of the needs/wants boundary; it is based on the (usually hollow) promise of a better life. A better life if only you had *this*, if only you lived *here*, if only you could afford *this holiday*, if only you could be *this attractive*. This supposed better life is repeatedly flaunted in the media, most conspicuously by celebrities. They have the cars, houses, lifestyles, clothes, parties and so on that we all (especially the young and/or immature) supposedly aspire to (see *Optimisation, this volume*). At the very least, we are actively encouraged to aspire to this better life when immersed in consumer culture. Over the last six or seven decades consumerism has been the chief stimulator of economic growth, but, as Layard (2005) argues, it appears to have struggled to improve people's subjective well-being, that is, how happy they *feel* that they are.

In the modern western world we are too easily persuaded that emotional (and often physical) wellbeing will result from the purchase of gadgets, services, holidays, education, 'green' products and so on (see *Advertising Awareness, this volume*). People, within and beyond environmentalism, are beginning to question consumer culture; they are beginning to opt out of it. They are realising that there are too many false promises and they have decided, or learned, to seek emotional wellbeing in more authentic ways. Happiness for them is not defined as a feeling. Happiness is a steady state of contentment; it is about having control over your own wellbeing, not relying on the approval of others or on external stimuli as sources of happiness.

It is not enough to chastise our current predicament, we need to move beyond it; we need solutions. The New Economics Foundation persistently and progressively promote the idea of a wellbeing led economy. Through regular publications and public events they explore and advance ideas of how we could convert to an environmentally and emotionally less detrimental way of living. Theirs is an example worth following.

For most people, healthy emotional wellbeing comes second only to healthy physical wellbeing. Indeed, for many, it may be true that if they feel free from immediate threats to their physical wellbeing they will concentrate most avidly on their emotional wellbeing. Questions of what brings emotional wellbeing are, however, not simple to answer and have troubled many of history's greatest thinkers. Its inherent complexity means that it is extremely improbable that anyone will ever lay out a formula for emotional wellbeing that will be applicable to every different person in every different circumstance. However, the subject can be explored through a rich literature that stretches from contemporary examinations of wellbeing by, for example, Mark Vernon (2008), back to the musings of esteemed thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato. There is also empirical evidence of what brings about emotional wellbeing that has been gathered by ecopsychologists and other wellbeing scientists (see

Pretty 2007). The New Economics Forum (NEF 2009) distil a wide range of research into five evidence-based actions which can lead to emotional wellbeing, none of which requires a dependence on consumerism. They are:

*Connect:* With the people around you. With family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, work, school or in your local community...

*Be active:* Go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle. Play a game. Garden. Dance...

*Take notice:* Be curious. Catch sight of the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether you are on a train, eating lunch or talking to friends...

*Keep learning:* Try something new. Rediscover an old interest. Sign up for that course. Take on a different responsibility at work. Fix a bike. Learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favourite food...

*Give:* Do something nice for a friend, or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer your time. Join a community group. Look out, as well as in.

The conclusions that can be drawn from the science of wellbeing are necessarily generalisations, but learners can gain more specific insight into what makes them personally happy through intuitive reflection. They can reflect, for example, on the times in their lives that they felt the strongest sense of well-being, and try to find out patterns and causes that led to those times.

An excellent starting point for learners to begin exploring emotional wellbeing is to consider the difference between happiness as feeling and happiness as authenticity. Arguably feeling good, being happy - and being seen to be so - is the main game in our society. We constantly aspire to have exotic holidays, celebrity lifestyles, fashionable clothes, food from trendy restaurants, fast cars, and everything else that advertisements associate with smiling faces. The ubiquitous use of sexual imagery in advertising and the heavy marketing of alcohol by big corporations pushes people into a meaningless search for temporary pleasures through binge drinking and casual sex. Consumer culture imbues us with these hedonistic values, makes us feel we are inadequate and/or missing out on things, then sells us what we are conditioned to crave. As a result we are tied to jobs we do not like, mortgages, wage-slavery and huge credit card bills.

This is not to say that good feelings are a bad thing, there is no doubt that happiness or feeling good is desirable. However if hedonistic values are the only ones we hold we get locked onto a hedonic treadmill on which we are constantly searching for new sources of pleasure as the rewards from our last holiday or purchase wear off. The key thing here is that our happiness is determined by external forces and societal rewards. When this is the case we become puppets jerked around by social controls. The alternative is to, as far as possible, maintain control over our sources of happiness. This is happiness as authenticity.

A person can be said to behaving authentically when their observable behaviour is consistent with their internal values, innate talents and desires. Consistent authentic behaviour reinforces and develops the values and talents that underpin it. Aristotle argued that happiness, or wellbeing, is inseparable from well-doing (Hallam *et. al.*, 2006). The endurance of this idea in subsequent works by many other authors, suggests that it holds a strong degree of truth. When ethical values such as generosity, patience, tolerance, courage and kindness underpin behaviour, that behaviour is more likely to be beneficial to other living organisms as well as the non-organic world. As NEF (2009) show, most people experience a sense of wellbeing when they engage in well-doing. This is a result of their behaviour being consistent with their innate possession of ethical values; it is happiness as authenticity. *Selfless*, ethical, values are in opposition to the *selfish* values associated with the accumulation of vast material wealth and hedonistic pleasure seeking. Kasser (2002) and James (2007, 2008) would argue that people who behave materialistically are also behaving authentically in that they are being consistent with their materialistic and hedonistic value systems. They would, however, also argue that these people are likely to suffer violent mood swings as they sway between hedonistic highs (happiness as a feeling) and hangover-like lows.

Happiness as *authenticity*, as opposed to happiness as *unstable mood swings*, derives from an ability to transfer one's selfless, ethical, values into one's observable behaviour. For many this involves a letting go, or resistance of, materialistic and hedonistic values. Given the social and cultural reinforcement of these selfish values, in what James (2008) calls our selfish-capitalist society, a switch to authentic behaviour underpinned by selfless, ethical, values is unlikely to happen instantaneously. A long term approach is needed. Therefore questions of what we want our learners to be need to be at the centre of pedagogic and curriculum design in schools and universities.

It takes time to understand and accept the emotional and physical benefits of letting go of consumerist values. Fears of alienation from peer groups and the external influence of embedded family, work, community and social values make it a hugely difficult process when done in isolation. Social approval of new behaviours normalises and strengthens them and can be built through representing materially simple lifestyles as not only socially acceptable but even desirable. Gladwell (2000) explains how social epidemics take off when 'early adopters' are joined by increasing numbers of people until a 'tipping point' is reached. A social epidemic can be anything from the mass consumption of a unique style of shoe to an influenza outbreak. When an idea, a fashion trend, or a disease reaches a tipping point it spreads exponentially and comprehensively through society. Kasser (2002) and James (2007) would argue that we are in the midst of an Affluenza epidemic. Social epidemics, by their very nature, must be contagious. In the case of materially simpler, wellbeing-focused lifestyles, this lifestyle needs to be attractive if it is to become contagious. It can become attractive to those who develop a deep understanding of emotional wellbeing.

A solitary tutorial, lecture, seminar or workshop session is insufficient if learners are to explore emotional wellbeing in the depth required for them to become early adopters of wellbeing-focused, materially simple, lifestyles. Months, possibly years, of study, reflection and inquiry are needed during which the value of strong bonds within a community of learners are facilitated, capitalised on and nourished. Exceptional members of such a group may well emerge as the designers and delivers of a wellbeing led economy. The rest may

become inspiring examples to those in their wider communities: the spreaders of a new social epidemic.

If avoiding social and ecological collapse is important, then all education should ultimately be education *for* sustainability as opposed to education *against* it. When consumer culture and its individualistic, infantilising, selfish-capitalist values are left largely unchallenged and indeed championed by educational establishments, it should not come as a surprise that learners become living examples of unsustainability. If consumer culture is left unquestioned, or is accepted as a 'fact of life' by educators, then learners are unlikely to develop sustainability literacy. They will be encouraged to be 'green' but not green to the extent that they might undermine the consumer economy. Rather than asking only the superficial question 'How can we deal with the consequences of consumer culture?', it is time to ask the more fundamental question of 'What lies beyond consumer culture?' Understandings of the true sources of emotional and physical wellbeing should be a central goal of education, and underpin and frame sustainability literacy. Sustainability literacy can then facilitate the materially simple dimension of a life lived to the full.

- 
- Barber, B. (2008) *Consumed*. London: Norton
- Curtis, A. (2002) *Century of the self, episode 1: happiness machines*. BBC documentary
- Foster, J. (2008) *The sustainability mirage*, London: Earthscan
- Gladwell, M. (2000) *The tipping point: how little things can make a big difference*. London: Little, Brown and Company
- Hallam, W., C. Olsson, G. Bowes, and J. Toumbourou (2006) Being true to oneself: the role of authenticity in promoting youth mental health. *Youth Studies Australia*. 25:1:28-32
- James, O. (2007) *Affluenza*. London: Vermilion
- James, O. (2008) *The selfish capitalist: origins of affluenza*. London: Vermilion
- Kasser, T. (2002) *The high price of materialism*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Layard, R. (2005) *Happiness: lessons from a new science*. London: Penguin
- McKibben, B. (2008) *Deep economy*. Oxford: One World Publications
- NEF (2009) *Five ways to wellbeing: a report presented to the Foresight Project on communicating the evidence base for improving people's emotional wellbeing*  
[www.neweconomics.org/gen/z\\_sys\\_publicationdetail.aspx?pid=265](http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_publicationdetail.aspx?pid=265)
- New Economics Foundation. [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org)
- Pretty, J. (2007) *The Earth only endures: on Reconnecting with Nature and Our Place in It*. London: Earthscan
- Vernon, Mark (2008) *Wellbeing: the art of living*. Stocksfield: Acumen