



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong  
**Research Online**

---

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

---

2014

# Government goals and policy get in the way of our happiness

Brian Martin

*University of Wollongong*, [bmartin@uow.edu.au](mailto:bmartin@uow.edu.au)

---

## Publication Details

Martin, B. (2014). Government goals and policy get in the way of our happiness. *The Conversation*, (20 March), 1-4.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

# Government goals and policy get in the way of our happiness

## **Abstract**

Australian government policy and happiness research are pointing in very different directions.

A prime goal of government policy is economic growth. Many Australians go along with this, assuming that more money will make them happier. However, policy and common belief need to confront an increasing body of research that suggests a different approach to improving well-being.

## **Keywords**

goals, way, our, policy, get, happiness, government

## **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Law

## **Publication Details**

Martin, B. (2014). Government goals and policy get in the way of our happiness. *The Conversation*, (20 March), 1-4.

20 March 2014, 6.36am AEST

# Government goals and policy get in the way of our happiness

Author



1.

**Brian Martin**

Professor of Social Sciences at University of Wollongong

## Disclosure Statement

Brian Martin does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

UNIVERSITY OF  
WOLLONGONG



[uow.edu.au](http://uow.edu.au)

Provides funding as a [Member](#) of The Conversation.



Building stronger personal relationships and collective well-being are proven to promote greater happiness. Swamibu/Flickr

Australian government policy and happiness research are pointing in very different directions.

A prime goal of government policy is economic growth. Many Australians go along with this, assuming that more money will make them happier. However, policy and common belief need to confront an increasing body of research that suggests a different approach to improving well-being.

In the past couple of decades, [research on happiness](#) has boomed. The word “happiness” sometimes suggests fleeting pleasures like laughing at a joke or eating an ice cream, so researchers often use terms like well-being, life satisfaction or flourishing to indicate the deeper, more long-lasting aspect of happiness. A typical question asked is:

On a scale of one to ten, how satisfied are you with your life overall?

## **You can't buy happiness**

Like any research field, there are disagreements and uncertainties, but many overall findings are quite robust. The most striking finding is that the material circumstances of people's lives make surprisingly little difference to life satisfaction. For those above poverty level, increased income [doesn't improve average happiness levels very much](#).

In several countries, like Britain, Japan and the US, surveys asking about life satisfaction have been run for several decades. Even though the per-capita standard of living has surged dramatically – going up by a factor of five in Japan – recorded life satisfaction levels have hardly budged. People are richer but not necessarily happier.

Most people continue to believe that more money, bigger houses, newer phones, stylish clothes and other possessions will make them happier - despite evidence to the contrary. Winning the lottery is [not a reliable path to improved life satisfaction](#). Even billionaires are, on average, not much happier than those on the average wage.

Many people, when surveyed, say they are happy. However, other indicators, such as rates of mental illness and suicide, suggest that [not all is rosy under the surface](#).

Researchers have shown that changing your thoughts and behaviours is far more likely to improve happiness levels. [Reliable methods](#) include expressing gratitude, building personal relationships, being optimistic, exercising, helping others and being mindful.

These approaches sound simple, but require effort to develop suitable habits. And there are [barriers to developing happiness-promoting habits](#).

## The knowledge gap

One barrier is lack of knowledge. Despite an outpouring of popular accounts of happiness research, many people know little about it. Happiness is seldom studied in schools. Even when people know about happiness research, it can be very hard to apply its findings to their own lives.

Other barriers are harder to overcome. The Australian economy is built around endless growth, with the underlying assumption that a central goal in life is to make money, which will lead to happiness. This comes across in the relentless news coverage of “the economy”.



A large body of research indicates that money really can't buy happiness. [401\(K\) 2013/Flickr, CC BY-SA](#)

Then there is advertising. Much of it is centred on making people feel inadequate, with the solution being to buy something. Commercialism, with its manifestations of advertisements, malls, conspicuous consumption and keeping up with the Joneses, pushes us in a direction that does very little for human happiness.

In fact, people who are more materialistic are [less likely to be happy](#).

## Work-life balance matters

Many people work long hours. Some even take a second job to earn extra money. Yet research shows that most people would be happier earning less and spending more time with friends and family.

Sources of satisfaction at workplaces include interactions with co-workers, opportunities to concentrate on challenging tasks and participation in workplace decision-making. However, employers pursuing greater productivity seldom prioritise worker satisfaction and unions are more likely to demand higher pay than industrial democracy. The result is that many workers see their jobs simply as means of making money.

One group, though, is greatly affected by income, or rather lack of it: the very poor. For those with very little, material improvements can make a difference. For this reason, reducing poverty should be a goal of any policy about collective well-being.

Town planning is another arena affecting happiness, but much of the orientation is around possessions and status.

A transport policy that encourages walking and cycling would increase physical activity and hence happiness levels. Living close to work would reduce long-distance commuting, which is one of the least-satisfying activities for most people. Housing could be designed to foster interaction and sharing, and thus contribute to stronger relationships.

## Happiness is shared

One reliable way to improve your well-being is to voluntarily help others. For example, you could advocate for people with disabilities, visit the ill, or teach children to read. Schools present a great opportunity for peer-assisted learning: by helping other students to learn, students learn themselves and feel better about themselves.

A more co-operative society, built around mutual aid and with greater equality, is likely to foster greater life satisfaction. However, much of Australian society is moving in the opposite direction, with ever greater emphasis on competition, individualism, mobility and lack of concern for others. Even relationships are commercialised, for example via word-of-mouth marketing.

The usual assumption is that each person has to improve their happiness on their own, without any collective change. Individual initiatives to foster happiness-promoting habits are certainly worthwhile, but [the wider cultural context needs to be challenged](#). As long as commercialism, individualism and inequality persist, greater happiness will be elusive for many.