EXPLORING WHAT MATTERS
THE ACTION FOR HAPPINESS COURSE

SESSION 1
WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN LIFE?
Welcome! We really hope you enjoy the course...

This 8-week course explores what matters for a happy and meaningful life. Together we’ll look at some of life’s most important questions, like *What really matters in life? What actually makes us happy?* and *How should we treat others?*

Each week we’ll explore a different theme. We’ll hear opinions from leading experts and explore fascinating findings from the latest research. But even more importantly, we’ll reflect on our own experiences and discuss these together in a friendly and supportive group.

We hope that you’ll come away inspired with practical ideas to contribute to a happier world, not just for yourself, but for others around you and for society as a whole.

### The Importance of Taking Action

This course involves lots of great ideas and conversations. But if we want to be happier and help create a better world, we have to be willing to do things differently. So each week you’ll be asked to choose a practical action that you will take as a result. And during the course you’ll have the chance to share what you’ve done and discuss the impact these actions have had in your life.

### Course Themes

- **Session 1:** What really matters in life?
- **Session 2:** What actually makes us happy?
- **Session 3:** Can we find peace of mind?
- **Session 4:** How should we treat others?
- **Session 5:** What makes for great relationships?
- **Session 6:** Can we be happier at work?
- **Session 7:** Can we build happier communities?
- **Session 8:** How can we create a happier world?
Before we begin to look at this week’s theme, let’s take a few minutes to tune in.

One Moment Meditation

Let’s start by trying this One Moment Meditation exercise. It’s a great way to help us tune in to how we’re feeling and a nice introduction to the benefits of being more ‘mindful’.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6eFFCi12v8

Good things

Now take a moment to reflect on the past week and think of at least three good things that have happened. They can be big or small. Write them down below and try to include why each thing was good. Then tell someone about one or more of your good things.

What good things have happened for you this week?
WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN LIFE?

Lots of things are important in life. But how should we decide what really matters to us? And what should we prioritise as a society?

Rich countries have made great progress in material terms over the last fifty years. Yet modern life remains full of problems. As individuals, many of us are struggling with anxiety, depression and broken relationships. And as a society, we have seen declines in trust, values and social connectedness.

This session asks us to reflect on what really matters in our lives and explores whether a greater focus on happiness and wellbeing might be better for all of us. Can happiness be thought of as the ultimate good for society?

"Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life. The whole aim and end of human existence"

~ Aristotle

What do you think matters most in life?
EXPERT VIEW: RICHARD LAYARD

In this week's Expert View, Richard Layard explains why he believes Happiness matters most - for each of us as individuals, but also as the defining feature of a good society.

“The purpose of our lives should be to try and create as much happiness in the world as we possibly can”

Richard Layard

Lord Richard Layard is Head of the Wellbeing Programme at London School of Economics. He is author of Happiness: Lessons from a new science and co-founder of Action for Happiness.

Summary of main points in talk

- Many things matter but happiness can be thought of as the ultimate good
- The starting point for a happier society is to care about the happiness of others
- We need to move from “zero sum” to “positive sum” activities, where people can succeed in harmony, rather than in competition with each other
- Although income affects happiness, the factors that matter the most are our relationships with others and our inner mental health

What is your reaction to Richard's talk?
DID YOU KNOW?

Here are three interesting facts relating to this week’s theme, taken from the latest research. Take a few minutes to absorb them and think about their implications.

1. Happiness can be measured in a meaningful way

How we feel about our lives is personal. No-one can tell us how happy we are just by looking at the our lives from the outside. But although happiness is subjective, it can still be measured in a meaningful and reliable way.[1] Researchers do this using people's own reports of how they feel about their lives. A typical question would be "Taking all things together, how happy are you?" with possible answers from 0 (extremely unhappy) to 10 (extremely happy).

We know these subjective reports are meaningful because they correspond with objective measurements of bodily functions, such as our immune system responses.[2] They correlate with measurements of brain activity, with positive emotional states linked to activity in the left side of the pre-frontal cortex and negative emotions linked to activity on the right side.[3] They also correlate with subsequent actions that people take in their lives (e.g. leaving a job) and with independent assessments from others.[4]

2. We've been getting richer but no happier

People's income levels have a significant effect on their happiness. In any given society richer people are on average happier than poorer people (although each additional increase in income has relatively less impact on happiness).[5] However, as the average income of a country rises over time, the population does not necessarily become happier. For example in the United States and some of the other rich economies, there has been no increase in average levels of happiness over the last fifty years, despite decades of strong economic growth.[6]

One of the main reasons for this is that, once people’s basic needs are met, they tend to be more concerned with their income relative to others than their absolute level of income.[7] This suggests that if we want to raise happiness levels we need to target more than just economic growth.
3. Happiness brings huge benefits

Happiness doesn't just feel good, it has also been shown to lead to a wide range of other beneficial outcomes, both for us as individuals and for society as a whole.

Firstly, happy people tend to experience better overall health and live longer than people who are less happy.[8] For example, people with high psychological wellbeing are half as likely to catch the cold virus[9] and people who experience greater levels of optimism and positive emotions are significantly less likely to suffer from heart attacks, stroke or other types of cardiovascular disease.[10]

Secondly, people who are happier tend to function better. Experiencing positive emotions broadens our perceptions and build our capabilities, helping us to make better decisions and cope more effectively with adversity.[11] Happier people have also been found to be more productive at work.[12] And people who are happy as young adults have even been shown to earn more than their peers later in life.[13]

And finally, happier people are better for society as a whole. They tend to have better relationships[14] and they are more likely to make a positive contribution to society.[15] They are also less likely to engage in risky behaviour - for example, people who are more satisfied with their lives have been found to be more likely to wear seat belts and less likely to be involved in road accidents.[16]

References for facts

Personal View: Your Future Self

"Enjoy the little things in life, for one day you'll look back and realize they were big things"

~ Robert Brault

Take a few minutes to stop and reflect.

Imagine you are towards the end of your life - hopefully many years from now.

You are looking back at your life as a whole - your family life, your relationships, your work, your achievements, your joys and your sorrows - all the things you've done with your time on earth.

You start to think about the things you're feeling proud of and grateful for, but also about the things that you wish you'd spent more time focusing on, or less time worrying about.

Once you've got a good sense of how your "future self" might feel, answer this question...

What advice would your future self give you about what really matters?
GROUP DISCUSSION

Get together in a small group of around 3-5 people and spend around 20 minutes discussing your thoughts and feelings about this week’s theme.

This can just be an open conversation based on whatever you’d like to focus on as a group. Or alternatively here are some discussion points you might like to follow:

- **Share one thing.** Take turns to share one thing that has had a big impact on you from this week's session. This could be something you think is really important, something you were surprised by or something that has really inspired or affected you.

- **The big question.** Discuss your answers to this week’s main question: "What really matters in life?". Listen to other people’s perspectives and notice in what ways they’re similar or different from your own views.

- **So what?** What are the implications of what you've discussed - e.g. what might this mean for you personally, for the people you care about, or for society as a whole?

What were the main points that came out of your discussion?
ACTION IDEAS

Take a minute to reflect on everything we've covered in this session - including your initial thoughts, the expert talk, the facts, your personal perspective and your group discussions.

Then write down at least one action that you plan to take as a result of this week’s session.

This could be something personal for you, or something you plan to do at home, at work, in your community or elsewhere. It could even be something that you'd like to see change in society and how you plan to help make that happen.

Try to be as specific as you can and focus on what you’re going to do and when.

A few example action ideas

- Spend more time focusing on something, or someone, that really matters to you
- Stop doing something that you know makes you or others unhappy
- Start more conversations with others about what really matters in life
- Join the Action for Happiness movement and encourage others to as well

"Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony"

~ Gandhi

What action will you take as a result of this week's session?
Here are some other useful resources relating to this week's theme:

### BOOKS
- Happiness: Lessons from a new science - Richard Layard
- Man’s search for meaning - Viktor Frankl
- Philosophy for Life: and other dangerous situations - Jules Evans
- The Happiness Hypothesis - Jonathan Haidt

### ARTICLES
- Top five regrets of the dying
  [www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/01/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying](http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/01/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying)
- Why does happiness matter?
  [www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/nov/03/why-does-happiness-matter](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/nov/03/why-does-happiness-matter)
- How do we measure a good life?
- The happiness tipping point
  [www.huffingtonpost.com/sunnie-toelle/happiness-tipping-point_b_3375580.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sunnie-toelle/happiness-tipping-point_b_3375580.html)
- Searching for happiness: What makes life meaningful?

### VIDEOS
- Alan Watts: What if money was no object?
  [www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5yWMrh9gk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5yWMrh9gk)
- Mark Williamson on Action for Happiness
  [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENpVoC0hE2U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENpVoC0hE2U)
- Satish Kumar on Wellbeing
  [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-FJerab0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-FJerab0)

### WEBSITES
- Action for Happiness
  [www.actionforhappiness.org](http://www.actionforhappiness.org)
- New Economics Foundation: Centre for Wellbeing
- Greater Good Science Center
  [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu)

### REPORTS
- World Happiness Report
  [http://worldhappiness.report](http://worldhappiness.report)