



## Happiness—A subject for learning!

*Sabine Meyer*

<b>Name of Activity</b>  Happiness—A subject for learning!	<b>Total time</b>  One school year with weekly meetings of 90 minutes and 7 days camp recommended, though it can be adjusted and is flexible: for example incorporating these into a school-holiday or in blocks of 4 days a week.
<b>Overview</b>  This activity offers a guided expedition to discover our concepts and approaches to 'Happiness' through opening and reflecting various perspectives. It relates personal needs and choices to those of the group, natural environment, national societies and to the sustainable development of our planet earth. It fosters competencies of communication, expression, team-cooperation and self-efficacy.	<b>Materials/room</b>  Writing and drawing tools, plus things to create models from.  Room with screening equipment and internet connection.  Campsite in a natural environment.
<b>Number of people</b>  12 to 20 participants	<b>Target groups &amp; Age</b>  Teenagers in their puberty and young adults in the transition period between school and professional life.

**Learning outcomes**

Become aware of one's own view and experiences of happiness;  
Express oneself in a trusted group and listen respect-/mindfully to others;  
Experience one's own talents and role in a cooperative team;  
Become aware of the relations between one's own lifestyle with the earth and humanity;  
Trust one's own talents and the cooperation in the group; experience self-efficacy.

*Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful*  
Albert Schweizer

**PART I: Introduction**

One might think Happiness is a very private issue. Though, can a person really be happy when others around are struggling, or in difficult circumstances?

Especially in periods of change it can help to be conscious about the needs of individuals, groups and the world's sustainability to take suitable decisions.

What we can say for sure: EVERYBODY wants to be happy!

I want to invite you to start the quest: what can be done to support people to discover their ways to happiness in today's world?

**PART II: The Method**

Our course has 4 parts:

1. Council circle talking – learning to speak from the heart
2. Experience nature/wilderness – learning to live with nature
3. Global perspectives – learning about approaches of people in other parts of the planet
4. Practical self-efficacy – learning to design and complete one's own small project

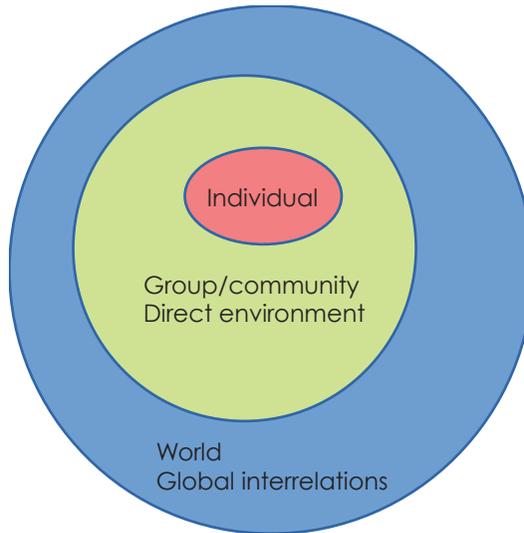
**Intentions**

Encounter Happiness in various aspects;  
Support competencies of communication, expression and team-cooperation;  
Relate and reflect ones lifestyle to sustainable development of our planet;  
Foster self-efficacy.

## Objectives

Become aware of one's own view and experiences of happiness;  
Express oneself in a trusted group and listen respectfully to others;  
Experience one's own talents and role in a cooperative team;  
Become aware of the relations between one's own lifestyle with the earth and humanity;  
trust one's own talents and the cooperation in the group; experience self-efficacy.

## Three levels of reflection regarding happiness



### 1. Council circle talking

This setting and way of sharing in a non-hierarchical way came to Europe from north American indigenous roots. In a council every voice is heard and everybody is visible. The talking piece (for example a natural branch of wood) is handed around clockwise, so everybody who wants to talk talks – one at a time. In the beginning participants agree to treat everything shared in the council as confidential. There are 4 rules/intentions: speak from the heart, listen from the heart, speak spontaneously, and speak concisely. This frame can help to develop mindfulness and empathy for the shared humanity and for the present situation: for example the passage of puberty or any need to adjust to transformations in the outside world.<sup>1</sup>



It connects to happiness in two ways: sharing personally relevant issues with the consciousness that all in the circle is going through a similar passage. Plus the experience to get time to speak uninterrupted to others who are mindfully listening – together it seems to touch a basic need of feeling connected with others and of being present in the very moment.

Some questions to start with:

- How are you today? What's on your mind just now: any burning question or challenge?
- Please describe a happy moment today/during the last week/during the last school-month.
- How would you define happiness? What do you need to feel happy?

The sharing and the experience to be heard and seen in a safe setting itself can benefit the personalities and support the feeling of being part of a group.

## *2. Experience nature/wilderness – learning to live with nature*

Once upon a time nature —‘the wild’— was our ancestor's home. In today's 'modernised', industrialised world many people have become alienated from this home.

Nature and environmental-pedagogy intends to reconnect participants to nature and to bring the interdependency back to our awareness.

**Method:** The 'tools' are real experience: spend some time in the forest and build a shelter from natural materials, find firewood, light a fire, find something eatable. And most important: open the senses for the sounds, smells and other observations by spending at least 20 minutes in silence each day.

**Location:** Find a place close to nature to set up a camp, where the participants can sleep in tents and where you have permission to cook in an open fire. We recommend a one-week duration. This allows a comfortable timeframe to get to know each other and find ways to collaborate as a group. Also as we get to know the area and build self-trust to feel safe with oneself in the nature.

In case you can't take a week: try to make it possible to spend at least one night outside with the group!<sup>2</sup> (Recommended guidebook with lots of inspiration for practise by Jon Young, Ellen Haas, Evan McGown).

### *3. Global perspectives – learning about approaches to happiness of people in other parts of the planet*

Intention: relate oneself and the lifestyle of one's community/ country to global issues.

Material needed: Internet connection, screening equipment, world map, pens and paper.

#### **Method A: Opener: Let's take a look at the whole world — 'World-allocation-game'**

Please draw the world map on the floor so that participants can position themselves on it. Then ask the group to position them on the map like they think the wealth (the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, fossil fuel resources) is allocated. All participants are representative of 100% of Earth's population. At the end you confront the group with real figures, which you can find on the internet<sup>3</sup>. The obvious inequalities will trigger reflections. (Detailed description of this method is available on the internet<sup>4</sup>).

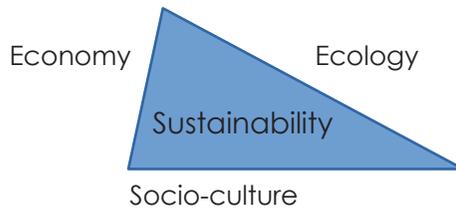
The core intention of the method is to open the perspective to imbalances in the world. This overview leads to some questions to discuss:

- Is financial wealth important for happiness?
- Does the use of fossil energy sources and the emissions like CO<sub>2</sub> and their effects on the planet relate to happiness?
- Does consumption relate to happiness? — to one's own, the communities' or the worlds'?

- Does it affect your happiness, to see the inequality in the world?

This is a good moment to introduce the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>5</sup> as an international reference point.

A much-simplified drawing can serve as a reminder in the following discussions to assess different approaches.



Why refer to the SDGs in a course about happiness?

The SDGs are part of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is adopted by 193 Countries in the world. It is the most widely accepted agreement to take appropriate steps towards a kind of development that secures the survival in dignity on planet earth for all.

### **Method B: Happiness as a national aim — Example Bhutan**

In 2008 the king of Bhutan stepped back and handed over powers to a democratic parliament. The new constitution contains the specific aim of the country: the Gross National Happiness (GNH) instead of a growth in GDP (Gross domestic product) — as most other countries pursue. Since in this Buddhist country spirituality and compassion have been integrated in governance before, this seemed a consequent path to modernise the system.

The GNH's central tenets are: 'sustainable and equitable socio-economic development; environmental conservation; preservation and promotion of culture; and good governance'<sup>6</sup>.

#### **Approach:**

Step A: Ask the participants: Suppose you were the leader of a country: Which indicators would you use to measure the happiness of the people?

Step B: Explain the concept of how Bhutan has implemented the Gross Happiness Index; show a short film<sup>7</sup> to get an impression and discuss: How can you relate to the Bhutanese approach? Which of their indicators would you implement in the country you live in?

Step C: You may have a look at the World Happiness Report<sup>8</sup> together and discuss its approach and results, as well as relate it to the living conditions in the country you live in/in your community.

### **Method C: Buen vivir – Sumac Kawsay – ‘Good living’: An approach from South America**

This philosophy has its roots in practises of indigenous peoples in the Andean-region. Its focus is collaborative consumption and the sharing economy as well as a balanced way to live with the Mother Earth (Pacha Mama).

In Ecuador it found its way into the preamble of the constitution, so here it becomes a political struggle as well, with the objective to save nature/respect Mother Earth as an existential basis for survival.<sup>9</sup>

Step A: Two small groups each write on a poster what ‘Good living’ means and the other group on ‘Successful living’. Afterwards all take a look at what was expressed and discuss differences and commonalities of both ‘life-approaches’. Experience says that the expressions focus on different pathways: ‘Good life’ seems to trigger more intrinsic aims – ‘Successful’ more extrinsic/reaching status in society.

Step B: Explain to the participants the example of Yasuni National Park in Ecuador where oil extraction poses a threat to the rainforest nature reserve and the survival of the indigenous residents.<sup>10</sup>

Small groups of 3–4 then find arguments, pros and cons of keeping the oil in the ground. Thereafter they discuss in the plenum their arguments in relation to the approach of Good living and SDGs.

You might think: ‘Ecuador is too far away for the imagination of my group.’?

In that case you will find other examples closer to your location. Unfortunately mining vs. ecosystem and socio-culture is a burning issue in many regions of the world. In my experience children and teenagers pick up very fast what the problems are – sometimes even better with some distance as observers.

With a little more time it can be very interesting and lively to arrange this discussion with various roles – politicians, farmers, conservation — activists, etc. — and ask the groups to prepare arguments for a panel discussion.

## **Method D: How do we envision the future with a better balance? (prototyping<sup>11</sup>)**

Now, well prepared with knowledge and the awareness of needs of nature and people, we raise the question: What is our vision of a happy and sustainable life in the future, on this planet?

At least by now it is clear for all the participants that this course deals with real challenges — as a person, as communities, as humanity on earth — we all are sharing responsibilities and have the potential to influence our future.

The task is to build models/prototypes of a happy world in future – lets say 50 years from now – in small groups; and present and discuss the results afterwards.

As creative materials, things from nature and clay are suitable as paper, glue stick and little toy figures.

Looking at the created tangible models, some questions can be raised:

- Did this model-vision find a balance of environment, economy, socio-cultural needs?
- Does it imply a priority of an aim?
- In which way does it foster happiness?

### *4. Practical self-efficacy – learning to design and complete one's own small project*

During the previous activities there will be ideas coming up what can be done practically. At this point we ask the participants to brainstorm and put all ideas on the table. They will decide in small groups of 3–4 which one they will work on to make their selected projects happen. First, each small group develops a plan with timings and work steps.

Now: enjoy the path to realisation!

### *5. Reflection and feedback during the course*

Further to regular feedback for monitoring the process and fitting of group and methods, a diary for each participant seems very useful. Encourage them to note down their own impressions, thoughts etc. in whatever ways they like to express it. It is for their own reflection and remembrance.

As for the whole course: there is no compulsion! All questions and methods are an invitation to join in and experience, and each person decides how much they want to share with the group and with the guide. Yes, this concept is more like a guided learning tour



than teaching. It implicates the growing of the participants into responsibility.

#### 6. Celebrate the learning and results

At the very end of the period it's time to celebrate! For example you can present the results AND the experiences to others: friends, family, peers. Plus combine this with an action your group likes: it could be cooking a meal together and/or having a party!<sup>12</sup>

#### Notes

1. Zimmerman, Jack & Coyle, Gigi. 1996. *The Way of Council*. Florida: Bramble Books.
2. <<http://coyotesguide.com/>>.
3. For example: <<http://publications.credit-suisse.com/index.cfm/publikationen-shop/research-institute/global-wealth-report-2017-en/http://www.globalcarbonatlas.org/en/CO2-emissions>> Accessed December 29, 2017.
4. <[https://www.endlich-wachstum.de/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Chapter4-The\\_World\\_Game.pdf](https://www.endlich-wachstum.de/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Chapter4-The_World_Game.pdf)>.
5. <<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>>.
6. Tenth Five-Year Plan: 2008–2013 (PDF). Thimphu, Bhutan: Gross National Happiness Commission–Royal Government of Bhutan, June 25, 2009. Retrieved April 1 2017.
7. What is Gross National Happiness?; embedded in: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gross\\_National\\_Happiness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gross_National_Happiness)> (Accessed December 30 2017); <<http://bhutanakingdomofhappiness.com/> (film)>.

8. <<http://worldhappiness.report/>>.
9. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumac\\_Kawsay](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumac_Kawsay)>.
10. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yasun%C3%AD-ITT\\_Initiative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yasun%C3%AD-ITT_Initiative)>.
11. Scharmer, C. Otto. 2009. *Theory U – Leading from the Future as It Emerges*. USA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
12. The project presented here “Towards Happiness – innovative Learning for sustainable learning-and lifestyles for young people’ (Zum Glück - Innovative Bildungsprozesse für nachhaltige Lern- und Lebensstile für Jugendliche). The concept frame was designed by ifak (Institut for applied culture research), Bildung trifft Entwicklung Regionale Bildungsstelle Nord (Education meets Development, unit north), dem Verein Niedersächsischer Bildungsiniativen VNB e.V. (Networking for education in lower saxony) and Wildnisschule Wildniswissen (Wildernessschool ‘Wildernessknowledge’). Three ‘pilot’ schools have been on the project since 2016. Within this project I developed the part of global learning in relation to happiness and practically worked with the participants in that area plus coaching the realisation of their practical projects. More information: <<http://www.ifak-goettingen.de/entwicklungspolitische-informationsarbeit/projekt-zum-glueck/informationen-zum-glueck>>.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Sabine Meyer* trained as a technical drawer in engineering, an Abitur from evening school (qualification granted by university-preparatory schools), a Diploma from University of Hanover in Adult Education with a focus on sociology.

She worked some years in cultural tourism in India and Nepal, which entailed extensive travelling and exploring those countries. She currently freelances as an educator and facilitator in the field of global learning, involving practical action, mindfulness and creativity. She is an Education activist for sustainability and global learning.