



# A 10,000-mile Happiness Walk Identifies Wellbeing Domains of the USA



## Authors

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A leading education, organizing, and advocacy organization in the United States committed to the promotion of wellbeing by expanding measures of progress and success beyond GDP

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**Happiness Walk Data Analysis Report**  
**A white paper from Moser, M. and Francis, P.**  
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**Background**

GNHUSA is building new pathways to sustainable happiness and wellbeing through research, education, and advocacy within the United States. We are committed to the promotion of happiness by expanding measures of progress and success beyond economic values to include holistic measures of well-being – by measuring what matters. We do not do this alone. We spent seven years painstakingly reaching out to people from all walks of life to include their view on what is essential to their happiness and well-being. Their voices were heard. We honor them and promote the resonance between what *We the People* value, how we live, and what we measure – taking care to dignify all living creatures and to pay homage to the planet.

The [Happiness Walk](#) was a multi-year effort undertaken by [Gross National Happiness USA](#) (GNHUSA)’s own co-founder Paula Francis with the purpose of researching and reporting on what contributes to Americans’ happiness & well-being. GNHUSA wanted to know whether certain domains of happiness & wellbeing first developed and utilized in the Kingdom of Bhutan were consistent with how Americans conceptualize their own happiness & wellbeing. To answer this question, between 2012 and 2019 Paula walked 10,000 miles through 32 states and Washington D.C. interviewing 3,000 people she met on the road during her travels. An amazing feat.

This report is an accounting of the recorded interviews Paula made on the Happiness Walk between 2012 and 2019. As Paula met people during the walk, she asked them to expound upon the theme of happiness in their lives, asking interviewees “What matters most in life?”, a question which quickly came from asking, “What makes you happy?”.

Paula walked 10,000 miles, interviewing on average one person every three miles. While individuals were informed about the happiness project during the interviews, many connections were made without the interviewees’ knowledge of Paula’s purpose for walking. Connections were made in a variety of ways, many of which were initiated by the interviewee, many by Paula, and some were made through introductions or via planned events. Interviews took place in many locations including private homes, businesses, public places, places of worship and recreation, and on the road.

The Happiness Walk itself, transcription, and interview coding and analysis were largely funded by Paula, through private donations and a small grant from the Global Vision Institute, with in-kind support from the University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies, and the help of many volunteers. Paula was also the beneficiary of the enormous generosity of people who provided for her needs through her travels.

**Data Analysis Methodology**

The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed by GNHUSA volunteers under the direction of Michael Moser, Coordinator for the Vermont State Data Center and Research Project Specialist at the University of Vermont’ Center for Rural Studies.

Following standard qualitative data analysis procedures, coders reviewed interview recordings and transcripts, and categorized responses to the research questions: initially- “What makes you happy?” and subsequently, “What matters most in life?”. Responses were coded into the “Domains of Happiness” as described by the [Happiness Alliance’s Gross National Happiness Index<sup>1</sup>](#)- an aggregate measure of personal and subjective wellbeing based upon Bhutan’s original nine GNH Domains and modified slightly in attempts to record and measure aspects of Psychological Wellbeing, Physical Health, Time Balance, Community Vitality, Social Connectedness, Life-Long Learning and Culture, Physical Environment, Governance, Material Wellbeing, and Work Life. These categories are similar to, but not completely consistent with Bhutan’s nine domains developed in 2008. The Happiness Alliance added Social Connectedness and Work Life, and combined Life-Long Learning with Culture for a total of ten domains. Responses that did not readily fit into one of these pre-identified categories were coded into other categories described below.

Coders listened to interviews and completed independent categorizations of the responses, with analysis capturing up to three responses per individual. Coders then reviewed and addressed differences between their results. This ultimately led to a “unified” coding document where differences were replaced with mutually-agreed-upon codes.

### Key Findings

- **Social Connectedness** is typically included as subset of the **Community Vitality** domain, yet responses fitting these categories were great enough to lead the team to consider the value of listing them as their own domains.
- Over 40 percent of respondents described aspects of **Social Connectedness** as their primary response to the questions: “What matters most in life?”, or “What makes you happy?”.
- Aspects of personal **Psychological Wellbeing** were cited in first responses by nearly twenty-two percent of respondents- the second most common primary response domain. Related to our sense of life satisfaction, purpose and meaning, mental attitude and emotions- a positive sense of psychological wellbeing contributes greatly to happiness.<sup>2</sup>
- While most responses readily aligned with the Happiness Alliance’s existing happiness & wellbeing domains, one new domain quickly emerged from the data. When asked “What matters most in life?” or “What makes you happy?”, over eleven percent of respondents mentioned aspects of **Spirituality** in their personal lives, the third most common of respondents’ primary answers.
- A clear distinction in responses related to aspects of **Education and Culture** was also evident, leading these two concepts to also be considered independently as their own domains.
- Responses referencing aspects of the **Work Life** domain constituted less than one percent of all responses.
- Secondary responses most often still related to aspects of **Social Connectedness**, though the rate dropped due in part to this having been mentioned by so many as a first response. **Psychological Wellbeing** retained a similar rate of response from primary to secondary responses. And **Spirituality**-related responses declined by only a small amount from primary to secondary responses.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.happycounts.org/take-the-happiness-survey.html>

<sup>2</sup> Terrill, A. L., Mueller, R., Jensen, M. P., Molton, I. R., Ipsen, C., & Ravesloot, C. (2015). Association between age, distress, and orientations to happiness in individuals with disabilities. *Rehabilitation Psychology* Feb; 60(1): 27-35.

- Responses related to **Community Vitality** and **Culture** increased significantly between the primary and secondary responses. Nearly five percent of respondents described aspects of **Community Vitality** as their first response, while more than double that- nearly twelve percent of respondents named aspects of **Community Vitality** as their second response. Likewise, the rate of responses describing aspects of **Culture** more than doubled in second responses as compared to primary responses.

### Happiness Walk Project Domains

The eleven domains expressed through this research project are listed below and include examples of some of the concepts coded within each domain.

- **Social Connectedness**- connections to family, friends, people, and animals
- **Psychological Wellbeing**- meaning, inner peace, happiness, positive emotion, optimism, flourishing, mental health, contentment, life satisfaction, environmental mastery, gratitude, autonomy, emotions/moods, self-acceptance, personal growth, self-awareness. Meaningful parenting. Also work satisfaction, autonomy, independence, work ethic, humor, and impact of animals on human wellbeing
- **Spirituality**- formal and informal religion, connection to something higher than self, faith, spiritually-based beliefs
- **Education**- formal and informal education and lifelong learning, knowledge seeking, parenting skills, work-related education and training, adventure, new experiences
- **Culture**- values such as goodness, open-mindedness, ethical norms, arts/music, sports, customs, traditions, languages, cultural standards such as dress, food, worship, song, language, and stories, unity, acceptance, culture of trust, kindness, and getting along
- **Community Vitality**- social supports, care of others, compassionate communities, social diversity, belonging, work vitality, opportunities, volunteerism, contributions to society, safety, and security
- **Health**- physical wellness, different-abilities, substance misuse and dependencies, life expectancy, worker injury/disease/disability, nutrition, exercise, and health and vitality of animals
- **Good Governance**- institutional, organizational, corporate, local, state, national and global governance, management of culture, political authority, human rights, societal structures and institutions for the greater good, justice, freedom, trust, responsiveness, honesty, transparency, competence, confidence in systems, equality, life-giving/affirming systems, right to contribute/work, self-determination, human rights, discrimination, citizen participation and engagement, worker rights, practices and policies
- **Physical Environment**- preservation, conservation, destruction/disruptions, loss of species, climate and weather, sustainability, air quality, water access and quality, soil adaptability and health, plant life (flora/fauna/coral), biodiversity, sanitation, forests, parks, honoring sacredness of spaces (historically, spiritually, culturally valued), beauty, ecological diversity, interconnectedness of animals/nature/human wellbeing
- **Material Wellbeing**- standard of living, geographic density, housing, housing with dignity, affordability, habitability, availability of housing/services/transportation, infrastructure, energy/renewables,

communication/information exchange, immigration, migration, food security, food quality and access, integrity of farming animals, unemployment, wages, labor, industry, income, financial wealth, jobs, entrepreneurship, consumer durables, GDP, innovation, and value of housework/volunteerism/parenting/caregiving

- **Time Balance-** work balance, leisure, commuting, time to address passions/priorities/meaningful activities

**Primary responses.**

Domain	Count	Percentage
Social Connectedness	1218	40.6%
Psychological Wellbeing	650	21.7%
Religion/Spirituality	342	11.4%
Community Vitality	143	4.8%
Physical Health	140	4.7%
Culture	132	4.4%
Governance	128	4.3%
Physical Environment	78	2.6%
Material Wellbeing	55	1.8%
Time Balance	42	1.4%
Education	36	1.2%
Other	32	1.1%
Work Life	4	0.1%
Total	3000	100.0%

**Secondary responses.**

Domain	Count	Percentage
Social Connectedness	452	21.0%
Psychological Wellbeing	443	20.5%
Community Vitality	254	11.8%
Culture	229	10.6%
Religion/Spirituality	172	8.0%
Governance	143	6.6%
Physical Environment	116	5.4%
Physical Health	109	5.1%
Material Wellbeing	79	3.7%
Time Balance	62	2.9%
Other	44	2.0%
Education	42	1.9%
Work Life	11	0.5%
Total	2156	100.0%

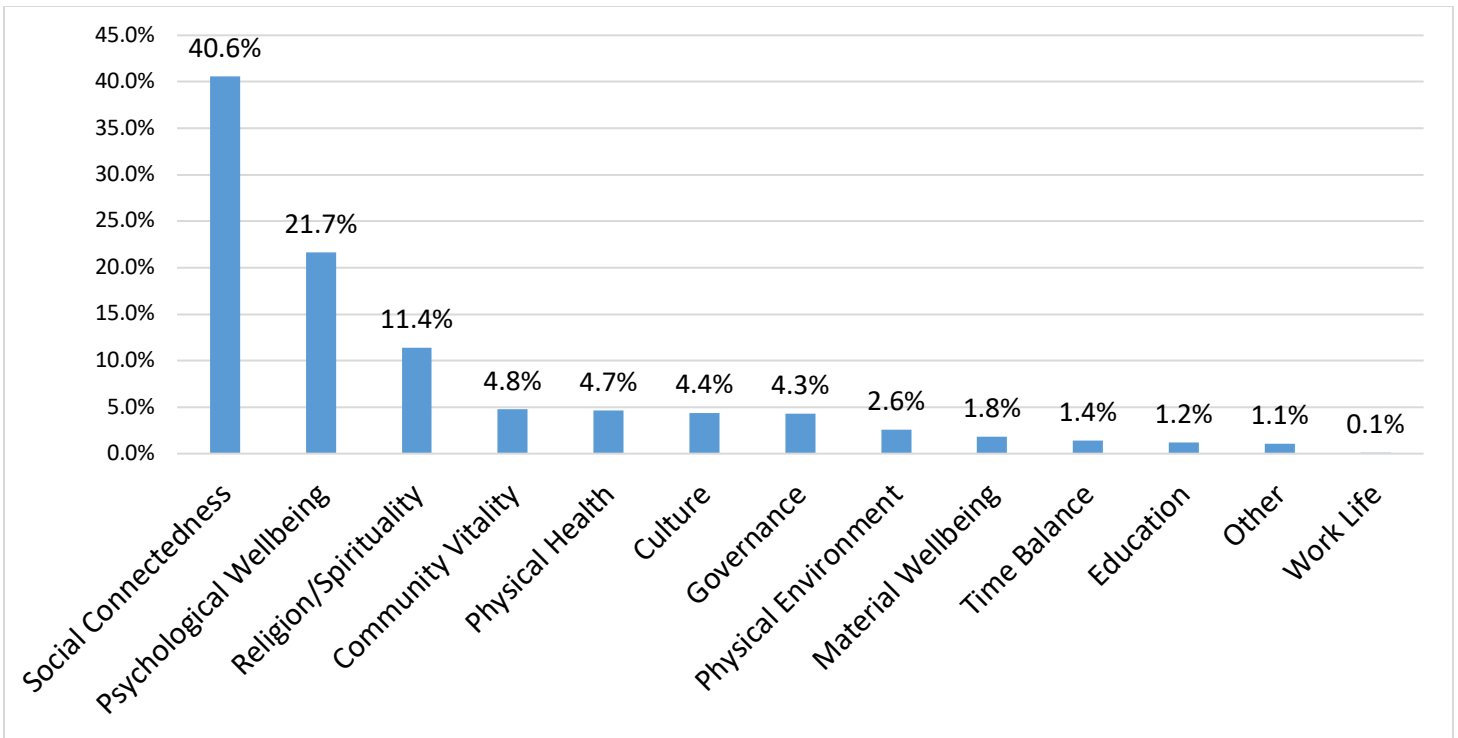
**Tertiary responses.**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Psychological Wellbeing	268	21.3%
Culture	176	14.0%
Social Connectedness	154	12.2%
Community Vitality	148	11.8%
Governance	135	10.7%
Physical Environment	91	7.2%
Religion/Spirituality	63	5.0%
Material Wellbeing	55	4.4%
Physical Health	51	4.1%
Time Balance	44	3.5%
Other	39	3.1%
Education	35	2.8%
Work Life	0	0.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1259</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**Response Comparisons.**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> response</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> response</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> response</b>
Social Connectedness	40.6%	21.0%	12.2%
Psychological Wellbeing	21.7%	20.5%	21.3%
Religion/Spirituality	11.4%	8.0%	5.0%
Community Vitality	4.8%	11.8%	11.8%
Physical Health	4.7%	5.1%	4.1%
Culture	4.4%	10.6%	14.0%
Governance	4.3%	6.6%	10.7%
Physical Environment	2.6%	5.4%	7.2%
Material Wellbeing	1.8%	3.7%	4.4%
Time Balance	1.4%	2.9%	3.5%
Education	1.2%	1.9%	2.8%
Other	1.1%	2.0%	3.1%
Work Life	0.1%	0.5%	0.0%

**Primary response categories to the questions: “What matters most in life?” Or “What makes you happy?”**



A word cloud built using response keywords.



## Respondents' Locations.

Geographies	Number	% of all U.S. respondents where their state is known	2019 % of total U.S. pop
AL	23	0.8%	1.5
AZ	88	3.1%	2.2
CA	237	8.4%	11.9
CO	137	4.9%	1.7
CT	30	1.1%	1.1
DC	4	0.1%	0.2
FL	164	5.8%	6.5
GA	51	1.8%	3.2
HI	35	1.2%	0.4
IA	81	2.9%	1
ID	114	4.0%	0.5
IL	24	0.8%	3.9
IN	8	0.3%	2
KS	2	0.1%	0.9
LA	107	3.8%	1.4
MA	65	2.3%	2.1
MD	12	0.4%	1.8
ME	1	0.0%	0.4
MI	96	3.4%	3
MO	1	0.0%	1.9
MS	25	0.9%	0.9
MT	2	0.1%	0.3
NC	90	3.2%	3.2
ND	1	0.0%	0.2
NE	99	3.5%	0.6
NH	1	0.0%	0.4
NJ	31	1.1%	2.7
NM	169	6.0%	0.6
NY	117	4.1%	5.9
OH	57	2.0%	3.5
OK	1	0.0%	1.2
OR	192	6.8%	1.3
PA	47	1.7%	3.8
SC	110	3.9%	1.6
SD	1	0.0%	0.3
TN	2	0.1%	2.1
TX	66	2.3%	8.7
UT	117	4.1%	1
VA	127	4.5%	2.6
VT	121	4.3%	0.2
WA	104	3.7%	2.3
WI	63	2.2%	1.8
WV	1	0.0%	0.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2824</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>93.3</b>



MN	0		1.7
KY	0		1.4
NV	0		0.9
AR	0		0.9
AK	0		0.2
RI	0		0.3
DE	0		0.3
WY	0		0.2
UK	1		
ZA	1		
Unknown	151		
QC	15		
ON	2		
NS	2		
Cuba	2		
BZ	1		
FR	1		
ROU	2		

**Respondents' Gender:** (Self-identified or coded from use of pronouns.)

Male	1290	46.5%
Female	1482	53.5%
Total	2772	100.0%

**Conclusions**

Responses showed a high level of alignment with Bhutan's nine domains of Psychological Wellbeing, Living Standards, Good Governance, Health, Education, Community Vitality, Cultural Resilience and Promotion, Time Use, and Environment<sup>3</sup>. Most responses fit easily into these existing domains with the notable exceptions of the emergent Spirituality theme and the potential breaking apart of the Education and Culture domain and Social Connectedness separated out from the Community Vitality domain. Responses related to Social Connectedness were by far the most frequent of all responses offered and therefore deserve consideration as an independent category, while in Bhutan, social connections are considered under Community Vitality. If the results of these data are used to inform the development of future happiness and well-being indices, then consideration of questions that assess components of spiritual well-being and place an emphasis on social connections might be considered. The Happiness Alliance has begun to include questions on spirituality within their Happiness Survey.

A GNHUSA model shifts the focus from the myopic paradigm of production and consumerism to one in which the definition of our country's progress and success includes a holistic view of that which makes life worthwhile. Each domain cannot be considered without acknowledging its impact on others (e.g., one ought not view our Material Wellbeing without considering its impact on our Physical Environment). Together, all domains contribute to a balanced, healthy, and thriving existence on this planet. The strong responses related to spirituality emphasize this interconnectedness to all things, and those related to Community Vitality

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gnhcentre bhutan.org/what-is-gnh/the-9-domains-of-gnh/>

emphasize not only the need to care for one another, but our keen desire to do so. The responses suggest we look beyond individual interests to build harmonic and healthy communities for all.

Though not analyzed as such, the transcriptions and coding of interviews reveal a significant number of individuals who answered the inquiry to “What matters most in life?” in the negative—by responding what *doesn't* matter, which is money and stuff. It is clear most people see a value in getting their basic needs met and perhaps reaching a certain level of comfort as suggested in a Princeton study by Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton.<sup>4</sup> Beyond that, money doesn't factor greatly into the things that matter most. “There's no U-Haul behind a hearse”, to quote several interviewees.

This research reveals priority values held by people within the United States which diverge from other research on values.<sup>5</sup> Rather than a focus on individualism, patriotism, and competition, our research shows a common desire for unity, government that works for the people, and a spiritual underpinning that transcends materialism and competition. Sadly, what matters most in life to people is not typically reflected in our outer lives. For a great number of interviewees, a clear distinction is reported between what they care about and how they live their lives. Yet others report they remain focused on their priorities even when outer circumstances appear challenging. “Happiness is a state of mind,” say many interviewees. To quote Viktor Frankl, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

While it is clearly important to learn the skills of personal happiness, our systems and many of our national policies rub up against our personal and societal happiness—or even thwart it. In the year following the completion of the Happiness Walk project, a pandemic ensued and our social interactions were markedly challenged. Had our national policies been designed with a GNHUSA framework in mind – thus considering implications to our social connectivity—perhaps we could have avoided the tragic rise in suicides, substance use, and depression that followed.<sup>6</sup>

Science explains we get what we measure. As affirmed by the respondents within this report, we will be better served when we craft systems that support the very things that matter most—when we move towards holistic measurements of wellbeing for all people, animals and the planet.

While the sheer volume of data collected through these interviews is commendable, and the insights gained are exceptionally interesting, deep and revealing- there are some weaknesses inherent in the methodology employed to collect the data. The reason for bringing this up is not to negate the quality of the effort, but rather to be fully transparent. The data were collected utilizing a convenience-sampling style methodology. That is to say- participants opted into a conversation - rather than being randomly selected to tell their stories. Even though the number of individuals who opted out of an interview were minimal, there is an inherent selection bias (conscious or unconscious) that must be acknowledged. And while representativeness may not have been primary to this work- any conclusions or decisions made in the context of this work should be made with this knowledge.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.princeton.edu/~deaton/downloads/deaton\\_kahneman\\_high\\_income\\_improves\\_evaluation\\_August2010.pdf](https://www.princeton.edu/~deaton/downloads/deaton_kahneman_high_income_improves_evaluation_August2010.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bu.edu/isso/files/pdf/AmericanValues.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>