

species and the natural environment through our daily encounters, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, how we travel, and even the materials that provide us shelter. I felt that we needed a new concept that captured this interdependence. Could such a concept offset the media messages that urge hyperconsumption? Could we imagine taking our pursuit of happiness and well-being to a new level?

Sustainable happiness is happiness that contributes to individual, community, and/or global well-being and does not exploit other people, the environment or future generations.

These ideas led to the development of something that makes my heart sing – “sustainable happiness.” In a nutshell, sustainable happiness is about everyone and everything thriving. Over the last six years, I’ve shared this concept with teachers and students at Cape Breton University and elementary schools across Canada, and the process has been deeply gratifying. I’ve had the pleasure of creating a resource guide that links sustainable happiness with health education outcomes for every province for students in kindergarten through to grade six. It is available in French and English at no cost from www.sustainablehappiness.ca.

Sustainable Happiness for You

Happy, resilient teachers are more effective educators. Tapping into the wellspring of happiness studies can enhance your own well-being and spill over into creative applications for your classroom. You can start your own journey towards sustainable happiness by creating a “Bliss List” – write down some activities that make your heart sing. How often do you engage in these activities? Are there some that you wish to do more frequently? Some teachers find it helpful to post their Bliss List on the fridge, because it reminds them to set aside time to take care of themselves.

Happiness research claims that gratitude letters can enhance well-being, and expressing gratitude and appreciation can have remarkable effects on your health. To be honest, I was skeptical of these assertions at first. But every year my university students tell me that writing a gratitude letter is one of the best activities they have ever done. Some people like writing things down and find that keeping a Gratitude Journal helps them to appreciate the people and world around them. Others prefer creating songs or artwork that reflects their appreciation. In my experience, taking a few moments each day to consider aspects of my life that bring genuine wealth enhances my well-being. I bring my attention to things that could easily be taken for granted—breathing, the ability to walk, my senses, easy access to clean water, a beautiful environment, a trusting neighbourhood, wonderful friends and family, and the list goes on!

SUSTAINABLE HAPPINESS ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS

GRATITUDE

Objectives

- 1) Students will understand that expressing gratitude contributes to their well-being and the well-being of others.
- 2) Students will express gratitude to someone or about something.

Process

Invite students to suggest how people show that they are grateful or appreciative. Ask what it feels like to express gratitude and to experience it. Assist students to realize that this is a readily accessible source of positive well-being that they can choose to experience.

Ask students to think of someone (or something) they appreciate. This may be done best with their eyes closed. Guide them to think about all the reasons why they are grateful to that person or appreciate the thing (perhaps an animal) they have in mind. Ask them to consider how they would like to express their gratitude or appreciation. It may be a card, a song, a poem, a picture, a sculpture, etc. They may also want to do something for that person/pet or spend time with them. This could be encouraged as an addition to making something that expresses their gratitude or appreciation.

HAPPINESS INTERVIEW

Objectives

1. Students will explore the concept of happiness and what it means to different people.
2. Students will discover that for most people happiness comes from relationships with family and friends, being involved in the community, meaningful work, feeling connected to other people or the natural environment, spiritual beliefs (and is associated less often with material possessions).

Process

Explain to the class that this activity is about discovering what contributes to lasting happiness and well-being. Instruct them to interview someone from home, school or the community whom they know well (not a stranger). They should probably pick the happiest person they know and ask the following questions (they may add some of their own questions too):

- 1) What contributes most to your experience of happiness?
- 2) What lessons have you learned about happiness through the tough times in your life?
- 3) What advice do you have for my generation about having a happy life?

Once the interviews are complete, prepare four large pieces of paper (or four columns on a white/black board). Each page should include one of the above questions. The fourth page is for other questions that the students asked. Students can use point form to summarize the answers they received for each question.

Once the chart is completed by each student, review the answers with the class. Ask the class to point out similarities and differences. What are some of the key lessons from this? Do they agree with the advice that has been given? How does the interview information compare with the information that the media gives us about happiness?

Excerpts from: Sustainable Happiness and Health Education- Teacher’s Guide, O’Brien, C. 2010. Available at no cost: www.sustainablehappiness.ca.

Happiness is at the heart of who we are. Incorporating sustainable happiness into our lifestyle, classroom and school can inspire us to leave a legacy of sustainable happiness—a happiness footprint that contributes to the well-being of other people, other species and the natural environment.

Catherine O’Brien is an education professor at Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia. She developed the world’s first university course on sustainable happiness. Her “Sustainable Happiness and Health, Teacher’s Guide” is being used by educators in Canada and other countries.



“Thank-you” posters that students at Ruth M. Buck School in Regina created as part of an active school travel project. Sustainable happiness is a component of the project. Photos by: Tracey Briggs, School Travel Planning Coordinator with Saskatchewan in motion.