

# The Feel Good Factor

by Rosemary Sturgiss

Well-being

## The general public's opinion of Well-being

A group of Eastern Development Centre staff came together to discuss a way of finding out how to draw from the wealth of understanding that ordinary people have to support their own mental health and Well-being.

As the Eastern Development Centre is based in Colchester, staff decided to carry out a 'quick and dirty' survey of passers-by in the town centre on Bank Holiday Saturday, 5th May 2007.

A total of 152 adults were interviewed. The sample ranged across age, gender and ethnic group and provided a broadly representative sample of the permanent area population.

All participating staff took with them a list of local and national contact information, so that they could respond to, or signpost people to, additional external sources of support, if requested.

Permission was arranged in advance from Colchester Borough Council to carry out the street questionnaire, and the team identified themselves by wearing t-shirts with a 'Feel Good Factor' logo.

The intention was to explore perceptions of mental health and Well-being among ordinary people, captured in their own words and reflecting their natural understanding of causal relationships.

## Context

The notion of 'Well-being' is widely felt to be an important end in itself for both individuals and communities. It is also highly topical in England today, where after decades of economic prosperity, data shows that whilst economic output has nearly doubled in the last 30 years, happiness levels have flatlined, at

the same time as the incidence of reported depression has significantly increased (New Economics Foundation, 2006). In carrying out a survey asking the general public to reflect on Well-being and what makes them feel good, it should also be noted that, amongst policymakers and professionals, there is no single definition of mental health or Well-being, although there is widespread consensus that it is more than the absence of mental illness. A still widely used definition of mental health was produced by the Health Education Authority in 1997:

*"Mental health is the emotional and spiritual resilience which allows us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of Well-being and an underlying belief in our own, and others' dignity and worth"*

The World Health Organisation, in their 2001 World Health Report, defined mental health as:

*"A state of Well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her own community"*

The WHO has elaborated on this in the 2005 Mental Health Action Plan for Europe:

*"Mental health and Well-being are fundamental to quality of life, enabling people to experience life as meaningful and to be creative and active citizens. Mental health is an essential component of social cohesion, productivity and peace and stability in the living environment, contributing to social capital and economic*

*development in societies"*

Clearly the terms 'mental health' 'mental Well-being' and 'Well-being' are often used interchangeably by professionals and policymakers. When using the term 'Well-being,' the New Economic Foundation also recognise that:

*"Well-being is more than happiness. As well as feeling satisfied and happy, Well-being means developing as a person, being fulfilled, and making a contribution to the community"*

What all of these statements reinforce is the importance of pursuing positive mental health in its own right, as a resource to be promoted; as well as highlighting its protective role in sustaining overall physical health.

## Findings

The Feel Good Factor Questionnaire consisted of 4 direct questions in order to gain an insight into how people think, feel and function and how they perceive this to impact on their overall health.

- 1 What makes you feel good?
- 2 What does Well-being mean to you?
- 3 Name three things essential to your mental health and Well-being
- 4 Do you feel you have control of your Well-being?

A total of 107 written responses were received and analysed.

## What makes you feel good?

This question elicited a broad range of responses which were clustered around the following themes which were common to age and gender groupings:

- Importance of family/partner relationships.
- Physical activity and sport;

- active leisure pursuits and holidays.
- The importance of surroundings/weather and environment.
- The value of satisfying/fulfilling work and the sense of financial security and stability associated with this.

What was significant was how often a sense of connection and relationship with others, was cited over more material pleasures. The following extracts give a flavour of the range of responses to this question:

*"Being hugged... being with my wife, playing with my dog",* Male 25-45

*"Body being healthy, mind being satisfied",* Male 40-50

*"Having family around",* Female 50-65

*"Adrenaline kicking in... playing sport",* Male 16

*"Painting, playing music, walking",* Male 18-25

*"Going on holiday, meals out, studying history... walks, especially by the sea", and "Chocolate, Sex",* Female 40-50

*"Laughing, basketball, sleep, my son... having people to turn to",* Female 25-40

*"Knowing my children and grandchildren are alright", and "(Moving) from a terrible place... to a nice quiet place",* Male 65+

*"Sleep, exercise, family, good chat... my baby", and "Sunshine, seeing people smile (which you don't see here much!)",* Female 50-65

*"Security... the ability to make a difference... people/ community",* Male 40-50

### What does Well-being mean to you?

Although more people gave an answer to question one than to question two, it was clear that there are core elements that are seen as supporting Well-being. For some, Well-being was defined by the absence of distress:

*"All good emotions",* Male 25-40

*"Life being on my side... not having depression",* Male 50-65

*"Something that doesn't make you grumpy",* Female 16

*"Not have aches and pains",* Female 65+

*"..Environmentally and socially, everything going well and no reason why it shouldn't continue that way",* Male 40-50

*"Glass half full, not half empty",* Male 25-40

*"Not being sick... being happy with myself",* Female 18-25

What was also clearly evident from the responses was the extent to which many people understand Well-being as a balance between mental and physical health (30 people explicitly linked the two), usually underpinned by a sense of financial security and a sense of being in control of one's own future.

*"Good health, good state of mind, financial security",* Male 25-40

*"Being in control of my emotions, work, life – sense of control",* Female 25-40

*"Physical and mental health – realising money isn't everything",* Male 65+

*"Balance, harmony",* Female 50-65

*"Being content with what you have... happy in your heart, being settled and satisfied",* Female 50-65

*"How I feel, and how I live, combined",* Male 18-25

*"Physical, mental and social Well-being",* Female 25-40

*"That we can manage financially, and everyone is okay",* Female 50-65

*"Sunshine, being able to enjoy work, and be able to pay bills",* Male 40-50

Achieving a sense of 'happiness' was also widely alluded to: *"A holistic approach ... a complete happiness. This means quality time with wife, child and friends. Family is happiness to me",* Male 25-40

*"Being happy and healthy",* Female 18-25

*"Feeling content and without concerns",* Female 40-50

Some people clearly also saw fulfilment and Well-being as

incorporating a sense of purpose and meaning, in common with the wider definition offered by the New Economics Foundation:

*"Being at peace... stepping in and out of other people's lives and be able to help".*

*"Personal identity, security, relationships, employment – to be of value".*

### Name three things essential to your health and Well-being

Overall people were readily able to identify behaviour, activities and involvement which they saw as actively supporting their mental 'wellness'

*"Trying to go out and mix with other people... to chat and have a drink",* Female 40-50

*"Healthy eating, exercise and fun",* Female 40-50

*"Sport, work and socialising",* Male 18-25

*"Food, shelter and family",* Male 40-50

*"Income, Family and friends. Happiness",* Male 25-40

*"Keeping fit, healthy eating and a good sleeping pattern",* Male 25-40

Having a balanced outlook and feeling involved in, and in control of, the everyday fluctuations of life was also emphasised.

*"Feeling good about myself... respecting my own boundaries",* Female 25-40

*"Enjoying things and looking forward to things...",* Female 40-50

*"Take time off (from work) ... love people, take pleasure with people... engagement...ability to see the best in people. Spirituality",* Male 50-65

*"Able to sleep. On good terms with people around you. Able to let go of hatred",* Male 40-50

*"Belief in self",* Male 25-40



their answers:

*"Yes, but can be affected by other people, not everyone gets the help they need", Female 18-25*

*"Yes, you have a hand in it, how (you) react to others is important", Female 40-50*

*"Sometimes, I have a growing sense of control, by keeping my life reasonably ordered and talking about what's happening", Female 25-40*

*"If you have the right attitude ... goes a long way towards (Well-being)", Male 65+*

*"I didn't ask to be born, or .. to have to die. If there's a dangerous alternative and a healthy alternative, then you can choose if you know what it is", Male 40-50*

*"Absolutely, totally, completely... The problem is when people don't have, or don't feel they have control", Male 40-50*

*"Reasonably yes, as you get older I think you do... become more flexible (realistic) about the chances of things going wrong"*

Male 50-65

*"Yes – being happy with yourself – live your life every day as though it were the last. Keep things settled and not put things off", Male 65+*

*"Not really, since I live by someone else's timetable, and work dodgy hours (shift work). I don't sleep well at nights. Getting out of the house with the little one helps. It's the little things that help", Male 25-40*

And perhaps the most honest answer:

*"No, not completely...hard question!", Male 18-25*

What these responses demonstrate is that overall, people are able to make a pretty realistic estimation of the degree of control and influence they have over their own Well-being. They also convey, in everyday language, the resourcefulness and practical strategies people often instinctively draw upon, and which they recognise protect both mental and physical health.

Whilst it shouldn't be forgotten

that this survey was very much an informal 'snapshot', filtered through the lens of a sunny bank holiday in a relatively affluent town engaging willing participants in what was a social exercise, it does offer a reality check for policymakers and professionals alike. Thoughts, feelings and beliefs about concepts like Well-being are notoriously difficult to pin down, but this may be sufficient justification to give everyday insights as much validation as academic analysis.

*"Mental Well-being – how people think, feel and function is an important pathway through which some of the major determinants of health – inequalities, exclusion, poverty, unemployment, discrimination – impact on overall health and Well-being". Wilkinson (2006)*

### Do you feel you have control of your Well-being?

Although the majority of people who answered this question gave a closed response, (yes or no), the extent to which people feel they are able to shape their own circumstances, environment, and personal needs, and their belief in their own abilities to take action to support their Well-being was often reflected in their answers to the earlier questions. Those who did offer a more detailed response to this question, tended to qualify



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