

Weekend Read | Edition 48

Differentiating Mental Health from Happiness Index

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Denmark stands at number 2 in the list of Happiness Index with a 7.583. But on July 3 2022, a shooting took place in a shopping mall by a mentally challenged individual causing 3 murders. This is telling of how a state could have a high happiness index and a high standard of living but mental health issues persist to an extent that they can result in massive menace.

Mental health refers to the state of well-being in which an individual can realise their potential, cope with everyday stressors, and contribute to their community. It has remained relatively unaccounted for globally and specifically in developing nations such as Pakistan. Conversations around it are perceived as a taboo. An individual showing signs of mental illness is withdrawn from the society or considered 'abnormal'. At that instance his or her happiness takes a backseat.

On the other hand, happiness is a subjective feeling of positive emotions and satisfaction with one's life while mental health is a diagnostic disease. Since happiness is subjective, it may vary from person to person, culture to culture and to context to context. Additionally, happiness can be influenced by individual perspective, values, beliefs, and experiences. The Happiness Index measures life satisfaction, the feeling of happiness, and other happiness.

Gross Domestic Product has been unable to reflect the well-being of an individual. Therefore, Happiness Index has come to the fore. The UN General Assembly passed a resolution in 2011 to use happiness as a measure to inform public policies. Since then, Happiness Index has been used to derive complex policy measures and extrapolate satisfaction of people residing in a country.

In this weekend read we will differentiate mental health from Happiness Index as many a times one is mistaken for the other hindering the process of keeping a citizen's well-being at the forefront.

According to a Gallup's End of Year 2021 Survey, despite the pandemic and economic difficulties, 65% Pakistanis reported to be happy in general with their life. Pakistan ranked above India in terms of happiness index. Other findings included that Pakistan's net happiness was almost equal to the global figure for net happiness. Slightly less Indians felt happy about their life as compared to Pakistanis. Moreover, proportion of people unhappy with their life was much higher in Afghanistan as compared to Pakistan

65% in Pakistan, was well above the regional average of 55%, as they felt generally happy about their life. The year saw a slight increase in net happiness from 40% in 2020 to 42% in 2021. Hence, Pakistan ranked 20th in terms of net happiness alongside Czech Republic.

According to Worldometer, Pakistan saw 1,581,936 cases with 30, 644 deaths and a recovery of 1,538,689. The recovery was high which could contribute to the high happiness even though above 30,000 lives were lost which many accounted to Imran Khan's policy of lenient lockdown.

Although, many would argue that going out of the houses and not being locked in may have served as a source of release for many and allowed many others to carry on with their businesses. Working from home during periods of lockdown was also received merrily, albeit considered difficult initially.

However, during this hustle the mental health of individuals could have taken a backseat. Happiness is arbitrary, however mental health has long term consequences. It became difficult at that point to focus on mental health when there was pandemic chaos all around.

Differentiating Happiness Index from Mental Health becomes even harder in times of crisis such as the pandemic as the mental health resources are scarce as it also goes for other health resources at the time. Therefore, at these instances mental health vagaries are brushed aside.

Moreover, in a country like Pakistan there is not much exposure on the topic of mental health. Therefore, happiness or unhappiness becomes the parameters for policy makers. There is a need for concerted efforts to include mental health alongside if not separately with the Happiness Index to inform matters of significance to a person's well-being.

The state of Pakistan needs to take up mental health as a crucial element in judging the well-being of individuals with budgetary allocation on mental healthcare.

As mentioned above Pakistan's net happiness was almost equal to global figure of net happiness according to the Gallup Survey post pandemic. This can be attributed to the low expectations of the Pakistanis from the government when it comes to healthcare or governance. At the time, as mentioned before, daily wagers were taken care of with lenient lockdown in place.

Moving forward, economic prosperity plays a pivotal role in informing people's happiness. Happiness can be material with hyper consumerism on the rise as well which is leading to financial stress, unrealistic expectations, lack of gratitude, constant urge to buy more which results in unwanted clutter and the cycle goes on. The clutter is inward as well and may contribute to mental health stressors. At the same time mental health accessibility is material too.

According to Gallup's End of Year Survey 2020 Hope, Economic, Optimism, and Happiness in Pakistan 48% of Pakistanis thought that 2021 will be a year of economic prosperity while 30% thought it will be of economic difficulty, 12% uttered it would be the same and 10% said they had no idea.

These figures reflect some hope from the future. And hope is related to happiness. Promises of a better tomorrow leads to a sense of content and happiness. 2020 was the year of pandemic and people expecting economic prosperity in the following year is mind boggling. But a lot of it has to do with the state narrative and propaganda regarding economic policies that would be put in place and people hanging on to those in a time of crisis.

Prospects of economic prosperity might lead to high happiness index or hope for a better future in this instance, but mental health suffers even if a household is economically stable. Since mental health disorders are internal, incommunicable and are at the behest of a family member or friend who understands and encourages the individual to seek help.

But the second factor that comes to the fore, is the costly services of mental health that a middle- or low-income household's individual might not afford even if they identify that there is a problem, they do not have the monetary capital to address the issue. That leads to the family

labeling the individual ungrateful and that praying and religious rituals will bring ‘happiness’. That it is a matter of sadness and not mental health. Decade’s long trauma residing within the patients’ bodies may not be treated with mere rituals and turning to religion for cure. Some low-income households go to the extent of taking those struggling with mental health to dargahs (shrines) that puts more strain than abating the health problem.

Then again, the question arises what about happiness? One could consider both inter-related. If you are happy your mental health may flourish and vice versa.

Going back to the End of Year 2021, Pandemic Survey one may find ways to differentiate mental health problems from the measure of happiness in the form of Happiness Index. Social distancing was recommended during this time period which means a halt to communal gatherings. This could lead to people showing signs of dissatisfaction as human beings are essentially social beings. But unexpectedly, despite this policy the Happiness Index was simmering. This be accounted for that at the time people were able to spend more time with their families, bonds developing stronger than before as well as some time left for them to spend on their own with work also taking a relative slow-pace, followed with indulgence at some workplaces.

However, when it comes to counselling, in-person counselling is considered more preferable than the hybrid forms. Also, the reliability on technology, zoom calls etc., may further increase one’s anxiety levels as many had not been accustomed to it.

According to Word Happiness Report 2020, studies on the effects of COVID-19 findings showed that particularly young people suffered more from the pandemic, while there is no significant difference between males and females in happiness during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, with the prevalence of social media the youth relied on the various platforms. This is also the time where TikToker generation emerged and a sense of appeasement was seen alongside instant gratification serving as a form of happiness. While many studies have shown harmful effects of over-usage of the internet on the mental health. This is one other area where happiness or instant gratification can be differentiated from mental health problems.

Using it activates the brain’s reward center by releasing dopamine, a ‘feel-good chemical’ linked to pleasurable activities such as sex, food, and social interaction. The platforms are designed to be addictive and are associated with anxiety, depression, and even physical ailments. Therefore, one may feel good but mental ailments may persist. It is also seen as a form of addiction.

To conclude, mental health parameters are a better source of judging a person’s wellbeing as opposed to the Happiness Index since happiness is a feeling, fleeting and influenced by cultural, individual, contextual factors.

Mental health diagnosis is contextual too but the government must pay more attention to the provision of healthcare in this department.

This read set about to differentiate mental health from happiness index using pandemic survey results primarily which showed that people were content despite a health crisis that point to social factors and social factors are bound to favor Happiness Index results as opposed to mental

health problems. This is because mental health ailments have long term consequences and are many a times left unacknowledged hence not discussed and left untreatable.

¹ Gallup Pakistan – Pakistan’s Foremost Research Lab (n.d.), *End of Year Survey 2021 Happiness Index of Pakistan*, <https://gallup.com.pk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Happiness-in-Pakistan-Dec-30.pdf>.

¹ ‘Pakistan COVID - Coronavirus statistics – Worldometer.’ – Worldometer Real Time Statistics, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/pakistan/>

¹ Gallup Pakistan – Pakistan’s Foremost Research Lab (n.d.), *End of Year Survey 2021 Hope, Happiness and Economic Optimism in Pakistan*, <https://gallup.com.pk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Special-Press-Release-EoY-2021.pdf>.



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