



## Unhappiness is soaring around the world

*Jon Clifton, the head of Gallup, says  
the problem began long before the pandemic*

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Economists, Statisticians and other experts know how to count all sorts of things: unemployment, mortality rates and the size of every country's economy. They even counted the number of trees in the Sahara Desert. **But it remains surprisingly hard to find statistics on one of the most important things: how people feel.** That has caused leaders to miss a disturbing trend: the global rise of unhappiness.

Gallup, the analytics firm, first began tracking global unhappiness in 2006. Negative emotions - the aggregate of stress, sadness, anger, worry and physical pain - reached a record high last year. This may not be surprising. The world is suffering from a large European conflict (in addition to other ongoing wars), inflation and the consequences of a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. But the global rise in unhappiness started long before most of those issues made headlines. In fact, **unhappiness has been increasing for a decade.**

Each year Gallup asks roughly 150,000 people in over 140 countries about the emotions they experience. It is remarkable how open people are about sharing their pain or suffering. A Lebanese man told us his life was **zefit**, the Arabic word for "tar", meaning his life could not be any darker. A Canadian man spoke of his loneliness after we unknowingly called him on his birthday. And a Vietnamese factory worker broke down in tears after telling us that no one had ever asked her how happy she was. Each of these stories is sad. What is alarming is how much more often we hear them.



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Many things can make people unhappy, but the rise of global unhappiness has five main causes according to Gallup's research:

## 1) Poverty

Today, 17% of people find it “very difficult” to get by on their present income - one of the highest shares we have recorded.

## 2) Broken Communities

Broken communities aren't helping: **2 bn** people are so unhappy with where they live that they wouldn't recommend their community to anyone they know.

## 3) Hunger

Poverty's contribution to global suffering remains well known, despite great strides to tackle it in recent decades. A rise in hunger around the world is making matters worse. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation “the decades-long decline in hunger in the world [has] unfortunately ended.” In 2014, nearly 23% of people globally were moderately or extremely food insecure. Now the share is over 30%.

## 4) Loneliness

The world is also struggling with another crisis: loneliness. Gallup finds that 330m adults go at least two weeks without talking to a single friend or family member. Although we have not captured loneliness data globally since the pandemic, other studies suggest it is worsening. The Survey Centre on American Life, a think-tank project, found that 10% of women reported having no close friends in 2021, up from 2% in 1990. And it was worse for men: 15% reported having no close friends in 2021, up from 3% in 1990.



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Just because someone has friends, it doesn't mean they have good friends. One-fifth of adults do not have anyone they can count on for help. And it's not an exaggeration to say that loneliness is deadly. It can increase blood pressure and decrease life expectancy. According to a recent meta-analysis, loneliness takes a toll that is physically equivalent to smoking almost a pack of cigarettes per day.

## 5) Scarcity of Good Work.

Global unhappiness is also increasing because of the daily grind of work. Despite a regular pay cheque, someone who is unhappy at work is statistically more likely to experience negative emotions, such as anger, stress and physical pain, than someone who is unemployed. Some 19% of workers are completely miserable in their jobs. But even among those that enjoy their work, unhappiness is rising. Stress and worry have risen among workers around the world consistently since 2009.

Gallup asks people to imagine their worst- and best- possible lives. If both scenarios represented the poles of a scale from zero to ten, where would they stand today? Fifteen years ago, **before the widespread use of social media**, 3.4% of people rated their lives a 10 (the best possible life) and only 1.6% rated their lives a zero (the worst possible life). Now the share of people with the best feasible lives has more than doubled (to 7.4%), and the share of people with the worst possible lives has more than quadrupled (to 7.6%).

If you group the world into wellbeing quintiles, this inequality is even more evident. In 2006, the top quintile for life ratings averaged 8.3; the lowest quintile averaged 2.5. Now, look at 2021. The top quintile averaged 8.9, and the lowest quintile averaged 1.2. The gap in those life ratings is now 7.7 points - the highest in Gallup's history of tracking.



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This wellbeing inequality is as serious as income inequality, in my view. *It reflects a growing divide in emotions rather than possessions.* And this type of inequality is plainly evident when you ask people to rate how their lives are going. Life could hardly be better for one fifth of the world, and for another fifth it could hardly be worse. It may be that the people at the top appreciate what they have more than ever before. *For the most unhappy, they are more aware of what they lack than ever before.*

**Social media partly explain why.** Through online platforms users can see that their misery is not always shared. **Comparison is the thief of joy**, as the saying goes, and social media enable comparison like nothing else. They bring people all over the world into each other's homes through handheld devices and more people have smartphones than ever before. But these platforms are only one of the factors behind the rise in global unhappiness, however. **A fifth of those suffering in the world are in places where social platforms are not widely accessed.**

Our emotions influence our decisions, actions, and even cognition - sometimes for the better, sometimes not. Unhappiness may even make us vote differently. George Ward, a behavioural scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, thinks it does. Using decades of research, he believes he can explain the outcome of elections and the rise of populist attitudes just by **looking at a population's mood.**

There are several reasons why there is a dearth of analysis on unhappiness. It isn't exactly hard to measure, but it can be expensive to do so. In most countries, Gallup conducts face-to-face interviews. This requires hiring and training local interviewers and paying for their travel. And many countries don't just lack happiness surveys, they lack all kinds of economic and social data. I also suspect that many political leaders fail to take 'how people feel' seriously, which makes



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them less likely to shell out for analysis on unhappiness. Some may feel that sentiments cannot be captured adequately in surveys; others may not believe that a person is able to report on his or her own feelings.

Policymakers must respond to record misery. They cannot pretend that the problem relates only to the past two years and that the end of covid-19 lockdowns will sort it. *If politicians want to curb global unhappiness, they can start by monitoring systematically how people feel. More governments should report regular measures of national contentment, just as they now publish figures for GDP, mortality and unemployment.* Asking Britain and Bhutan how they already do so would be helpful. Ignorance of misery is not bliss. ■

Jon Clifton is the head of Gallup.