The H word

Type "how to be" into Google and "happy" will be the search engine's second suggestion ("single" is the first). There are 74 TED talks addressing the topic, a quarter of a million results in the Amazon bookstore. There's also Gretchen Rubin's *Happiness Project*, Neil Pasricha's *Happiness Equation*, the Dalai Lama's *Book of Joy*, and Mark Manson's *Subtle Art of Not Giving a F...* With so much advice on offer, why does the hunt continue? **Britt Mann** ponders the question of our time.

Happiness: the Danes reckon they know a thing or two about it. After all, it's the country that invented hygge – the untranslatable word connoting cosiness, comfort, conviviality and contentment, usually involving cinnamon scrolls, woolly jumpers, and a roaring fireplace.

The Scandinavian country of 5.7 million people is blessed with government policies and a culture which, to outsiders, are utopian. Healthcare is universal; tertiary education is free; new parents get 52 weeks of paid leave, and cyclists are treated as royalty on the roads.

The Danes also have one of the best work-play ratios in the world – 1457 hours worked a year on average, compared to the UK's 1790. If you work at the weekend, it has been said, you're suspected of being a madman plotting a secret project.

Danish happiness researcher Meik Wiking is the founder and CEO of the Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen, a think tank comprising economists, philosophers, psychologists, political scientists and anthropologists who study the policies and behaviours of those countries scoring highest on happiness indexes. New Zealand ranks eighth in this year's World Happiness Report. Denmark is first, Norway is second. Australia is at number 9. Wiking, 39, also penned 2016 bestseller *The Little Book of Hygge*.

Wiking says the Danes don't have a monopoly on happiness. "The keys to happiness can be found all over the world," he writes in his follow up to *The Little Book of Hygge*. Stuffed with stock images and cutesy illustrations, *The Little Book of Lykke* (lykke is the Danish word for happiness) sprinkles well-thrashed statistics (happy countries have a strong sense of community; spending time in nature improves happiness) with well-worn, if aspirational, hacks (plant a community garden, buy a bicycle).

There's a pleasing universality to the advice, which covers togetherness, money, health, freedom, trust and kindness. Speaking by phone from Copenhagen, Wiking says the factors which drive happiness in Christchurch are the same as those in New York. "Whether we're from New Zealand or Denmark, Germany or the US, I think we're, first and foremost, humans."

The quest to understand – and attain – happiness isn't new. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote of eudaimonia, the Ancient Greek concept of happiness or human flourishing, which the philosopher posited as humanity's highest aim.

Since then, Wiking says, we've been sidetracked by the belief that happiness increases with wealth. He uses the example of South Korea, one of the world's richest countries, which has the highest suicide rate in the OECD.

"A lot of people in a lot of countries have gotten richer without getting happier," Wiking says. "We're looking for new measures of progress."

THE TROUBLE WITH HAPPINESS

The trouble with talking about happiness is twofold: how to define it, and how to measure it. Wiking does his best to do both, identifying (as so many others have done) three types of happiness: the affective dimension – emotions people experience on an everyday basis; the cognitive dimension – life satisfaction overall; and eudaimonia – the notion of living a meaningful, purposeful life. *The Little Book of Lykke* focuses primarily on the cognitive dimension (it's little, after all), generally using "happiness", "wellbeing" and "quality of life" interchangeably.

Wiking doesn't apologise for attempting to study an intangible topic scientifically, nor for the subjective nature of the Institute's research.

"Humans are studying a lot of things – we're trying to understand depression, we're trying to understand anxiety, we're trying to understand stress – all those things are subjective phenomena," he says. "For some reason, people think happiness is more difficult to grasp and quantify."

Dr Lucy Hone, director of the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing and Resilience, isn't a fan of the H word.

When it comes to discussing wellbeing, she and her colleagues use Cambridge University professor Felicia Huppert's definition: "Feeling good and functioning well." The "feeling good" bit refers to happiness, Hone explains.

"But there's so much more to living a good life than just being happy."

Hone, who has a Masters from the University of Pennsylvania's Applied Positive Psychology programme, was motivated to study resilience after hearing the term bandied about during the Global Financial Crisis. She eventually applied her knowledge in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes and, in her own life, following her daughter Abi's death in a car crash in 2014.

Over the past three years, Hone says she hasn't "felt much like Tigger". She has, however, found serenity.

"It's the opposite of excitement in terms of positive emotions," she concedes, "but... in an increasingly disparate world, where we're all focusing on so many things at once, having a bit of serenity and being able to focus your thoughts is really important."

Dr Lucy Hone prefers to focus on whether actions are helpful or harmful than whether they make her happy. PHOTO: ALDEN WILLIAMS/STUFF

> Humans can live good lives that are meaningful, that are full of important, rewarding and supportive relationships, and mastery and accomplishment, without feeling happy all the time.

Meik Wiking has followed up his *Little Book of Hygge* with *The Little Book of Lykke*. PHOTO: CHRIS McANDREWS

WHAT'S THE POINT OF A HAPPINESS INDEX?

The Sovereign Wellbeing Index, published in 2013, surveyed almost 10,000 New Zealand adults who were asked about 180 questions (Hone was among the researchers). The index was the first national representation of how Kiwis fared personally and socially.

Contrary to New Zealand's high rankings in World Happiness Reports, results of the inaugural Sovereign index surprised researchers. New Zealand consistently ranked near the bottom in personal and social wellbeing, far behind the Scandinavian countries in the lead. New Zealand came fourth from the bottom in the overall rankings.

For key findings of the inaugural Sovereign Wellbeing Index, see: mywellbeing.co.nz.

Hone says happiness in and of itself is too narrow a goal, and an unrealistic one.

"Humans can live good lives that are meaningful, that are full of important, rewarding and supportive relationships, and mastery and accomplishment, without feeling happy all the time."

She adds there's also "a massive expectation, an erroneous one" that we need to be.

"That's just bonkers."

Social media is partly to blame for the notion that a good life is synonymous with a happy one, Hone says.

"I wouldn't be the first person to say that people don't post their bad news on Instagram and Facebook," she says. "I think there is a lack of understanding among young people that struggle and suffering is very much part of life, a normal part of life."

Karen Nimmo, a clinical psychologist based in Wellington, agrees that happiness is an unrealistic goal. When clients walk into her office and tell her they "just want to be happy", she asks them what that might mean for them.

Trauma, tragedy and everyday difficulties stand in the way of "pure" happiness, she says.

"Working with people to aim for pure, unadulterated happiness would be quite an unrealistic goal," she points out. "It'd be better to help them figure out how to navigate a relationship, or solve a problem."

BEYOND HAPPINESS

By training and by circumstance, Hone is an expert in resilience – a term which for her holds far more appeal than "happiness".

"What I want to know is, how do we weather the tough times in life?" she says.

The notion of "realistic optimism" is also useful.

"I've got to be able to focus my attention on the stuff I can change and accept the things that I can't change. That's what an optimist does. They're like, 'OK that bit really sucks – can't do anything about that. I'm going to focus my attention on the stuff I can do something about.'"

For Hone, the tool she's found most useful comes from cognitive behavioural therapy: asking herself in a given moment whether a thought or an action is helping or harming her.

"Whether that is, 'Shall I go for a bike ride?' Or, 'Shall I hang out with that person? Shall I have a fifth glass of wine? Shall I stew over what somebody just said to me in the office?' All the time I just think, is thinking like that or acting like that helping or harming me in my quest to adapt to our new, horrible circumstances?"

She's passed the advice on to others, with positive results. "It really works for people – whether it's not forgiving your family member for what they did at Christmas seven years ago or not picking up the phone to a school friend you really miss, or reading newspaper stories about happiness… Is it helping me or harming me? You've got to find your own way."

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Wiking has two theories about why we continue to chase happiness as a life goal.

Firstly, he says, we tend to focus on what others have, rather than what we need. If we're measuring our happiness against our peers' lives – or at least, as they're depicted on Instagram – we're less likely to be content with our own circumstances.

"I think that's why we see an acceleration in the accumulation of stuff," Wiking says."It does seem like it's a difficult race to get out of, even though a lot of people dislike participation in it."

Secondly, people are waiting for a magic bullet, when really, Wiking argues, we should conceptualise happiness as we do health: the sum of a range of factors. "There's not one thing that moves the needle a lot. But a lot of little things can change." ●

The Little Book of Lykke, by Meik Wiking is published by Viking, Penguin Random House $30.