

Happiness Science from Finland

Aalto University Summer School

Instructor: Ashish Thapliyal, Doctoral Researcher, Aalto University

Course Overview

This course introduces participants to the science of happiness and well-being, with a focus on Finnish and Nordic insights. It combines theoretical frameworks and practical applications to provide students with actionable strategies for improving well-being in their personal and professional lives. Through lectures, discussions, and independent group work, participants will explore key antecedents of well-being and evidence-based interventions to improve well-being.

Course Details

- **Level:** Open to Bachelor's, Master's students, and practitioners.
- **Workload:** 2 ECTS (54 hours total).
- **Grading:** Pass/Fail.
- **Language:** English.
- **Prerequisites:** No prior knowledge of well-being is required.

Learning Objectives

Upon completing the course, students will:

- Understand key frameworks and concepts of happiness and well-being.
- Identify and apply evidence-based strategies to enhance well-being in personal and professional contexts.
- Create a personalized well-being plan based on reflection and self-assessment.
- Analyze challenges and future directions for well-being research and application.

Methods

The course employs interactive teaching methods to ensure active student participation and engagement. These include:

- **Morning Lectures:** Theoretical concepts, empirical evidence, and practical strategies. Each lecture begins with a "check-in" discussion where students reflect on independent work and group challenges.
- **Independent Group Work:** Students work in small groups to apply course concepts and develop collaborative deliverables.
- **Learning Diary:** Students maintain a daily learning diary to reflect on daily lessons, activities, and group work challenges, which they submit at the end of the course.

Course Structure

Pre-Assignment (5 Hours): Students submit a brief (1-2 page) reflection on:

- Their expectations for the course.
- Their current understanding of well-being and happiness.

Lecture Week (Day-by-Day Outline)

1. Day 1: Introduction and What is Well-Being?

- Introductory session and participant introductions.
- Overview of course structure and expectations.
- Introduction to the science of well-being: Why study well-being?
- Historical perspectives: Aristotle's eudaimonia, utilitarianism, and Buddhism.
- **Discussion:** Reflect on personal expectations and definitions of happiness.
- **Independent group activity:** Can well-being be the ultimate goal of society? From GDP (Gross Domestic Product) to GNH (Gross National Happiness).

2. Day 2: Foundations of Well-Being

- Introduction to key frameworks: needs-based, subjective well-being, and integrative approaches.
- Explore autonomy, competence, and relatedness as foundational psychological needs.
- **Discussion:** How do autonomy, competence, and relatedness impact well-being?

3. Day 3: Relationships, Social Connections, and Gratitude

- Importance of close relationships for mental health and happiness.
- Role of social support systems and community belonging.
- How giving enhances happiness: Prosocial behavior and its impact on well-being.

- Gratitude practices and their role in improving happiness.
- **Independent group activity:** Gratitude journaling activity – Reflect on positive aspects of life and express appreciation.

4. Day 4: Autonomy and Meaning

- Explore the importance of having control over one's life.
- Cultural perspectives: Autonomy as a universal need with diverse expressions.
- Define meaning and purpose: How do they contribute to happiness?
- **Discussion:** What gives your life meaning, and how do you define autonomy?

5. Day 5: Mind, Body, and Nature

- Investigate how physical health, thoughts, and behavior influence well-being.
- Examine genetic and personality factors in well-being.
- Explore the role of green spaces and nature in reducing stress and enhancing happiness.
- **Discussion:** How does trust in people and institutions affect well-being? What institutions do you trust and why?

6. Day 6: Life Experiences and Their Impact on Well-Being

- Analyze the effects of income, education, and work on happiness (e.g., Easterlin Paradox).
- Explore how social media shapes well-being, both positively and negatively.
- Attention: What do happy people attend to?
- Adaptation: Why do people adapt to good and bad life events differently?
- **Independent group activity:** Reflect on significant life experiences and their influence on your well-being.

7. Day 7: Designing for Happiness

- Importance of intentional actions and mindsets in creating a fulfilling life.
- Learn evidence-based interventions for well-being: mindfulness, compassion, gratitude, and flow.
- Explore strategies for balancing pleasure and purpose in life.
- **Independent group activity:** Design a personalized "Happiness Toolkit" with actionable interventions.

8. Day 8: Challenges to Happiness

- Examine critiques of happiness: Amartya Sen's slave argument and Nozick's Experience Machine.
- Review research on how the pursuit of happiness can backfire.
- Are all pleasures equal - Distinction between material comfort and meaning and purpose.

- Explore societal norms and their influence on happiness: salary expectations, marriage, and altruism.
- **Independent group activity:** Identify societal norms shaping happiness and propose ways to challenge or navigate them.

9. Day 9: Finland/Nordic Insights to Well-Being

- Work-life balance, flat hierarchies, and parental leave policies in Nordic contexts.
- Finnish education system, healthcare, and access to nature.
- Explore trust in government and institutions in Finland and its impact on happiness.
- **Independent group activity:** Propose a Nordic-inspired policy for enhancing well-being in your home country.

10. Day 10: Reflection and Future Directions

- Transitioning from individual well-being to societal and planetary well-being.
- Explore future directions for well-being, including AI and flexible work.
- Discussion on how Organizations and Governments use well-being frameworks.
- Reflect on course takeaways and strategies for implementation.
- **Discussion:** What challenges will flexible working practices create for individual well-being?
- **Independent group activity:** Write and discuss a personal "Happiness Manifesto," summarizing key takeaways, challenges, and actionable plans.

Assessment and Assignments

This is a pass/fail course. Assessment is based on:

- **Pre-assignment:** Short reflection (1-2 pages) on their expectations for the course.
- **Active Participation:** Attending lectures, contributing to discussions, and engaging in check-ins.
- **Learning Diary:** Students will submit a learning diary at the end of the course reflecting on each day's activities and takeaways.
- **Group Work:** Collaborative work on assignments such as the Happiness Toolkit or similar group project.

Workload

- Contact hours (lectures and discussions): 30 hours.
- Group work (independent, unsupervised): 9 hours.
- Personal reflection/learning diary (independent): 10 hours.
- Pre-assignment: 5 hours.

Total: 54 hours (2 ECTS)

Reading Material

After the course begins, students will receive a curated reading list. The readings will include theoretical papers and practice-oriented case studies, offering both foundational knowledge and practical insights.

Teacher Bio

Ashish Thapliyal is a doctoral researcher at Aalto University, specializing in happiness and well-being in the context of future work trends. His research focuses on the impact of flexible working practices on employee happiness. Ashish holds three MSc degrees: Communication Engineering (Aalto University), Strategy (Aalto University), and Behavioral Science (LSE). He has 19 years of industry experience and brings a rich, interdisciplinary perspective to well-being research.