

How do South Africans feel about themselves?

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Sunday, 10 October, was World Mental Health Day. RS, South Africa's leading marketing insights company, recently conducted a survey amongst a sample of 3 504 SA adults from all corners of the country, interviewing them face-to-face in their homes, to find out how they are feeling.

We are full of vitality right now

On a positive note, six out of ten people say that they are feeling generally happy and cheerful. This is up 6% on the same time last year and is in line with a number of other broad measures that we track. All of these show that the country has experienced an unprecedented wave of optimism, pride in the country and feeling of well-being, especially since the end of March. This is, no doubt, influenced by the falling inflation rates, reductions in the interest rate, the successful elections and the whole run-up to the elections with the Ten Years' of Democracy celebrations, winning the 2010 Soccer World Cup bid, the success of our athletes in Athens, the wonderful medal haul of the Paralympians and our Tri-nations win. There has been a new vitality about South Africa in recent months, reflected in the fact that 50% of us feel alive and energetic and a third of us feel we have varied lives with lots of activities - up from a quarter last year. Whilst there are signs that this wave is peaking, right now, we feel better than we have for a while.

We have direction

Having a reason to get up in the morning is vital to one's well-being. Just over a half of SA adults feel that their lives have direction and meaning. Almost four in ten feel that they are spiritual beings. These numbers do not show a shift compared with last year.

About a quarter of SA adults are the sort of people who like excitement and extremes and just over one in five feel that they have interesting challenges and that they have the skills to handle those challenges. Surprisingly, perhaps, only 40% of people feel happy with what they have achieved in their lives so far.

But there is a cost

Last year, 48% of people felt that they had enough leisure time to be happy. This year, that figure has dropped to 35%. A quarter of the people we interviewed admitted to driving themselves too hard in a bid to be the best. It seems that we are living more intensely at the moment.

This competitiveness can lead to emotional problems: one in six working people feel anxious about the challenges that they face at work, almost one in five say that their work does not make them happy and 16% do not feel secure in their jobs. One in seven don't find their work challenging enough and are bored. From these results, it is clear that there is quite an imbalance in the skills/challenges equation: only 29% of people feel that their skills and the challenges they face are in balance.

RS calculates a stress/pressure index that lies on a scale of 0 to 100. Last year, the average stood at 29; this year, it has shifted only marginally to 30. This is because the stress felt by the majority of the population is poverty related, and poverty alleviation is still happening only very slowly. If one takes out this type of stress, and looks at those less affected by poverty, the figure drops to 22. But there are some interesting differences across the population. Indians appear much more stressed at 33 (especially Indian females at 35). Stress levels are highest in the 25 to 34 year age group, where providing for young families, climbing the job ladder and advancing in life all make demands. What is also interesting is that, even in relatively well-off households, the lack of a job pushes stress up (the index hits 34 here). A job is more than being about

money: it is also about self-esteem and feeling worthwhile about one's self.

What about the more seriously affected people?

There is a significant proportion of the SA adult population who feel very negative about their lives:

- One in thirteen people feel that their lives are emotionally empty (down from one in eight last year).
- 6% say that they feel a failure - this is quite a big thing to admit to in a survey of this nature.
- Whilst 12% are experiencing feelings of depression and hopelessness, this is down four points from 16% last year.
- Loneliness is an emotional killer - one in ten feel lonely, and 12% say that they don't know many people. Five percent do not have a close relationship in their lives although six in ten do say that they have family and friends to turn to in times of crisis. The good news is that all of these negative figures show significant drops of two to three percentage points, showing that SA's mental health has definitely improved in the last year.

Self-esteem and the recognition of others are crucial to how we feel about ourselves. Here, 7% say that they do not feel that people think much of them or respect them and 5% (down from 10% last year) don't feel that they belong.

Linked to this, an astounding 20% feel that their opinions are seldom sought by others.

One thing that we can all do for our fellow human beings is to acknowledge them as such. It is so easy to do - all we need to is not to denigrate them or ignore them. Look people in the eye when you deal with them; a simple smile helps.

Why is all this important?

RS has been working in this field for some time. Every shred of evidence we have shows that it is the happy, healthy, vital people who make it all happen. They are the most productive, make most of the key decisions, and have an enormous positive effect on others. The way people shop, use the media and run their everyday lives is greatly affected by how they feel about themselves. Feeling good is closely linked to optimism, and it is the optimistic people who become leaders, fuel the economy and help other people the most. So it is sad to see that a quarter of our population feel that they will never achieve their dreams.

Is it all about money?

Money does play a role in feelings of happiness and well-being - but only to a point. Our research shows consistently that, once a household achieves a monthly income of around R8 000 to R9 000, happiness and well-being become more affected by forces such as loneliness, recognition, having a purpose, helping others, achieving goals and having a varied and active life.

Physical health is also a crucial component (one in ten don't feel well most of the time but six out of ten feel well and in good health), as is exercise (a third of people admit to getting no exercise). We have also found that mental and physical health is highly correlated. Chances are that, if a person feels bad in one area of her or his life, other areas will also be affected. It is no longer only the mystics who talk of the inter-relationship of the mind and the body: it is a demonstrable phenomenon that has led to a worldwide revival of interest in all aspects of the body, mind and soul - the holistic human being. And this is not just the preserve of the social scientists: hard-headed business people are also coming to realise the importance of understanding their customers properly, as "people" and not just as "consumers".

The "Happiness" Index

Last year, we constructed a "Happiness" Index. On a scale of 0 to 100, our overall average was 75. This year, that has risen two points to 77, despite that fact that so much of our population - 80% - live at income levels well below R8 000 a month. The small overall change is also due to the opposing forces of living life more intensely and the higher stress levels that result.

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