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**The Attitudes of Australians  
to Happiness and Social Well-being**

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## 1. Introduction

There is now an extensive literature on the nature and determinants of happiness, one that has stimulated considerable public debate. In a sense, everyone is an expert on what makes people happy because they can draw on their own experience. The research to date has focussed mainly on the personal rather than the policy aspects of happiness and well-being. Yet in his well-known book, *Happiness: Lessons from a new science*, Richard Layard argues that there is a role for policy intervention to improve levels of national happiness (Layard 2005). Like others, Layard has argued that some aspects of society that make a contribution to national levels of happiness have been compromised by the heavy emphasis governments place on maximising the rate of economic growth. Above a certain level, increases in income have little or no effect on well-being, yet the single-minded pursuit of growth may come at the cost of personal relationships, social equality and cohesion, job security and the quality of the environment, all of which do add to personal and national happiness.

Based on a new national opinion poll, this paper makes a contribution to these debates by exploring some public attitudes to personal and national happiness and the priorities of government. The paper first considers what Australians consider to be most important to their own happiness. Next, three public aspects of quality of life are investigated via reporting on:

- perceptions of changes in the quality of life in Australia;
- views on the primary role of schools, whether they should emphasise a happy personal life or preparation for the world of work; and
- beliefs about whether government should focus on maximising happiness or national wealth.

Finally, the paper considers how Australians understand their lives through exploration of their responses to a question about whether they would take a 'happiness pill'.

Some of these questions have recently been asked in a poll in Britain so comparisons of attitudes between the two countries will be made at various points.

A national telephone survey of 1000 people was conducted by Ipsos Mackay during the month of August 2006. A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure the sample was representative of all Australians by location, and the results were weighted to reflect Australian Bureau of Statistics population figures.

Survey results are reported below by question (questions are given in italics). For all tables, the first column gives the responses for the total population. Subsequent columns report the responses by demographic and other characteristics (age, sex, political allegiance, and so on).

## 2. What makes you happy?

It is widely believed that Australians, like citizens of other Western countries, are intensely materialistic. Certainly, Australians themselves see their society this way with 83 per cent agreeing that ‘Australian society today is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter’ (Hamilton and Denniss 2005, p. 148). Yet public policy, the news media and private behaviour seems to place an extraordinary emphasis on higher incomes and material acquisitions.

The survey asked respondents to nominate the factor most important to their happiness.

*I am now going to read out a number of different things which may contribute to people’s happiness. After I read them out, please tell me which one is most important to you with regard to your own happiness and well-being.*

*A nice place to live*

*Work fulfilment*

*Partner/spouse and family relationships*

*Money and financial situation*

*Religious/spiritual life*

*Community and friends*

*Health*

*Don’t know/none of these*

*[Responses were rotated in the survey administration]*

This question was designed to force respondents to choose the single factor that is most important to their personal happiness and well-being. The results are shown in Table 1. Despite the variety of possible responses, almost 60 per cent of respondents nominated their relationships with their family, including their partner or spouse, as the most important factor contributing to their happiness and well-being. Health is the next most important, with 18 per cent overall citing it as most important, followed by community and friends (8 per cent) and religious/spiritual life (5 per cent). Only 4 per cent consider their money and financial situation to be the most important factor in their happiness.

There is a marked difference between the sexes with women giving a substantially higher priority to relationships with their family, including their partner or spouse: 67 per cent of women say it is the most important thing for their happiness compared to 51 per cent of men. Men are more likely than women to cite community and friends as the most important thing (11 per cent compared to 6 per cent), as well as slightly more likely to choose money and financial situation (6 per cent compared to 2 per cent) or a nice place to live (4 per cent compared to 1 per cent).

The primary source of happiness also differs by age, reflecting the life cycle. A larger proportion of those aged 30-49 say that family relationships (including partner or spouse) are most important: 67 per cent compared to 55 of younger people and 54 per



cent of older people. Among those with children aged under 18, 70 per cent said partner/spouse and other family relationships were the most important thing, compared to 58 per cent of those who do not have children aged under 18 (not shown in table and excluding those in single person households).

Older people are much more likely to nominate good health as important to their happiness. Amongst those aged 18-29, only 10 per cent say health is most important, compared to 26 per cent amongst those aged 50 and over. Those aged under 30 are more likely to identify community and friends as the primary source of their happiness than older people: 16 per cent compared to 6 and 7 per cent respectively for the older age groups. People aged under 30 were also slightly more likely than those aged 50 and over to cite money and financial situation as the most important thing, 7 per cent compared to 3 per cent respectively.

**Table 1 What is the most important thing for your happiness? By sex and age (%)**

	Total	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	18-29	30-49	50+
Partner/spouse and family relationships	59	51 *	67 *	55 *	67 *†	54 †
Health	18	19	17	10 *	14 †	26 *†
Community and friends	8	11 *	6 *	16 *†	6 *	7 †
Religious/spiritual life	5	5	5	7	4	6
Money and financial situation	4	6 *	2 *	7 *	4	3 *
A nice place to live	2	4 *	1 *	2	2	3
Work fulfilment	2	2	2	2	3	1
Don't know	1	1	1	2	1	1

Note: Totals and subtotals may not add due to rounding. n = 1000. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

Table 2 compares the primary factor contributing to happiness for people in different income groups. It shows that people with low household income (less than \$35,000) are less likely to identify family relationships as the most important thing contributing to their happiness than those in high income groups (\$75,000 plus) – 54 per cent compared to 64 per cent.

Interestingly, low-income households are no more likely than middle and high-income households to nominate money as most important to their happiness. However, they are more likely to identify religious/spiritual life as the most important thing (8 per cent) than those with middle or high household income (4 and 2 per cent respectively).

Bearing in mind that personal relationships are the overwhelming dominant factor, ‘A nice place to live’ also appears to be slightly more important for people in low-income than middle- or high-income households (5 per cent compared to 1 per cent in both cases). This may be because people on low incomes are more likely to be living in poorly maintained and located housing than those on higher incomes, and the idea of ‘a nice place to live’ is therefore more salient to them.

**Table 2 What is the most important thing for your happiness? By household income (%)**

	Total	Household income (before tax)		
		Less than \$35000	\$35000 to just under \$75000	\$75000 plus
Partner/spouse and family relationships	59	54 *	60	64 *
Health	18	19	16	18
Community and friends	8	8	9	9
Religious/spiritual life	5	8 **†	4 †	2 *
Money and financial situation	4	5	4	4
A nice place to live	2	5 **†	1 †	1 *
Work fulfilment	2	1 *	4 **†	1 †
Don't know	1	0	1	1

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding. 11.3 per cent of respondents did not state their household income, so n = 887 for results reporting household income. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

Interestingly, there is one significant difference by state with respect to the most important thing for happiness, as shown in Table 3. Almost one quarter (23 per cent) of Victorians and 19 per cent of people in NSW identify health as the most important thing for their happiness, compared to only 11 per cent of Queenslanders. In other words, despite the intense public focus on failings in the Queensland health system, Queenslanders are much less likely to nominate health as the most important factor in their personal happiness.

A slightly higher proportion of those in Queensland cite money and financial situation or a nice place to live than in NSW (a total of 13 per cent of Queenslanders cite one of these things, compared to only 3 per cent in NSW).

Small sample sizes for states other than Victoria, Queensland and NSW means the figures for these are not reliable so only the three most populous states are discussed.

**Table 3 What is the most important thing for your happiness? By state (%)**

	Total	New South Wales	Victoria	Queensland	Western Australia	South Australia	Tasmania	ACT	Northern Territory
Partner/spouse and family relationships	59	60	55	60	68	57	56	51	82
Health	18	19 *	23 †	11 *†	19	19	10	13	0
Community and friends	8	9	9	6	7	14	5	21	0
Religious/spiritual life	5	6	5	7	2	3	8	11	4
Money and financial situation	4	3 *	4	8 *	3	2	1	4	15
A nice place to live	2	0 *	3	5 *	0	2	13	0	0
Work fulfilment	2	3	2	1	1	4	7	0	0
Don't know	1	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding. n = 1000. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

The results of the Australian survey may be compared to those of a British survey, commissioned by the BBC, which asked the same question (BBC 2006). The results are shown in Table 4. It is apparent that Australians place a substantially greater emphasis on personal relationships than Britons (59 per cent versus 48 per cent), with Britons more inclined to nominate good health and a nice place to live.

**Table 4 Contributors to personal happiness, Australia and Britain (%)**

	Australia	Britain
Partner/spouse and family relationships	59	48
Health	18	24
Community and friends	8	5
Religious/spiritual life	5	6
Money and financial situation	4	7
A nice place to live	2	8
Work fulfilment	2	2
Don't know	1	1

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding. n = 1000 for Australia, n = 1001 for UK.

Sources: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute; for UK, Survey commissioned by the BBC from Gfk NOP for *The Happiness Formula* series on BBC Two, 3 March 2006.

### 3. Is life getting better?

The survey asked respondents to make a judgment about quality of life in Australia. The following question, which has been asked in previous surveys, was posed.

*Thinking about the overall quality of life of people in Australia, taking into account social, economic and environmental conditions and trends, would you say that life in Australia is getting better, worse, or staying about the same?*

Table 5 shows that more Australians believe that life in Australia is getting worse than believe it is getting better. Although 34 per cent of Australians believe that quality of life in Australia is staying about the same and 25 per cent of Australians say the overall quality of life in Australia is getting better, 39 per cent of Australians believe it is getting worse.

Given that economic conditions have been very favourable for over a decade, with high incomes and low unemployment, it seems remarkable that only a quarter of the population believes that life in Australia is improving and four in ten believe it is deteriorating.

**Table 5 Is life in Australia getting better, worse, or staying about the same? By sex and age (%)**

	Total	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	18-29	30-49	50+
A lot better	9	9	9	7 *	8	12 *
A little better	16	15	17	22 *	14 *	15
<i>Total better</i>	25	24	26	29 *	21 *	26
About the same	34	35	33	39 *	38	28 *
A little worse	20	19	21	18	22	19
A lot worse	19	20	18	12 *	17	24 *
<i>Total worse</i>	39	39	39	31 *†	39 †	44 *
Don't know	2	2	2	2	2	2

Note: Totals and subtotals may not add due to rounding. n = 1000. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

This question was asked in a Newspoll survey in 1999 (Eckersley 1999). Then 36 per cent of Australians said that the overall quality of life was getting worse (with 14 per cent indicated 'a lot worse'), indicating that Australians now take a slightly more negative view. In the 1999 survey 24 per cent said life is getting better and 38 per cent said it was staying about the same.

Table 5 also shows that whilst there is no significant difference between men and women, younger people tend to be more positive about the quality of life in Australia than older people, although it remains true that more young people believe life is getting worse than believe life is getting better. Those aged under 30 are most positive about quality of life in Australia, with 29 per cent saying it is getting better, compared to 21 per cent of 30-49 year olds and 26 per cent of those aged 50 and over. Those aged 50 and over are most likely to say that overall quality of life in Australia is getting worse, with 44 per cent saying this compared to 39 per cent of those aged 30-49, and only 31 per cent of those under 30.

The greater confidence about the future amongst younger people is consistent with sociological commentary on Generation Y, which covers those currently aged 18-24 (Huntley 2006). It may also reflect that younger people have less past experience to refer to than older people when answering such a question and hence may have less sense of longer-term trends. However, it remains true that among those aged 18-29 as many believe life is getting worse as believe life is getting better.

Table 6 shows that Labor and Coalition voters differ markedly in their opinions about trends in the overall quality of life in Australia. Half (51 per cent) of Labor voters believe that overall quality of life in Australia is getting worse, compared to 26 per cent of Coalition voters. More Coalition than Labor voters believe that overall quality of life is staying about the same (41 compared to 28 per cent) or getting better. Even so, it is noteworthy that after a decade of Coalition Government in which economic conditions have been very favourable only 30 per cent of Coalition voters believe the overall quality of life in Australia is getting better, with only one in ten (11 per cent) believing it is getting a lot better.

**Table 6 Is life in Australia getting better, worse, or staying about the same? By political allegiance (%)**

	Total	Political allegiance	
		Coalition	Labor
A lot better	9	11	7
A little better	16	19	14
<i>Total better</i>	25	30 *	21 *
About the same	34	41 *	28 *
A little worse	20	14 *	28 *
A lot worse	19	12 *	23 *
<i>Total worse</i>	39	26 *	51 *
Don't know	2	3	1

Note: Totals and subtotals may not add due to rounding. n (total) = 1000, n (Labor) = 344, n (Coalition) = 375. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

Table 7 shows that people from low-income households are less likely to believe that quality of life in Australia is getting better, and more likely to believe it is getting worse, than those in high-income households. Only 21 per cent of people with household incomes less than \$35,000 say that quality of life is getting better, compared to 35 per cent of people with household incomes of \$75,000 or more. Conversely, only 33 per cent of those with high household income think quality of life is getting worse, compared to 48 per cent of those with low household income. It is of particular note that more than a quarter of people with low household income believe that quality of life in Australia is getting a lot worse.

It should be noted that the proportion of those in middle income households – \$35,000 to just under \$75,000 – who think that the quality of life in Australia is getting better is the same as the low income group (21 per cent). However, those in middle income households are more likely to think quality of life is staying the same, and less likely to think it is getting worse, than the low income group.

**Table 7 Is life in Australia getting better, worse, or staying about the same? By household income (%)**

	Total	Household income (before tax)		
		Less than \$35000	\$35000 to just under \$75000	\$75000 plus
A lot better	9	5 <sup>*†</sup>	11 <sup>†</sup>	12 <sup>*</sup>
A little better	16	16 <sup>*</sup>	11 <sup>†</sup>	23 <sup>*†</sup>
<i>Total better</i>	25	21 <sup>*</sup>	21 <sup>†</sup>	35 <sup>*†</sup>
About the same	34	29 <sup>*</sup>	44 <sup>*†</sup>	32 <sup>†</sup>
A little worse	20	22	19	21
A lot worse	19	26 <sup>*†</sup>	16 <sup>†</sup>	12 <sup>*</sup>
<i>Total worse</i>	39	48 <sup>*†</sup>	35 <sup>†</sup>	33 <sup>*</sup>
Don't know	2	2	0	1

Note: Totals and subtotals may not add due to rounding. 11.3 per cent of respondents did not state their household income, so n = 887 for results reporting household income. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

Table 8 shows attitudes to quality of life by State. Small sample sizes for states other than Victoria, Queensland and NSW mean the figures for these are not reliable so only the three most populous states are discussed. The most striking result is that Victorians are much less likely than other Australians to believe that life is getting better with only 18 per cent taking this view compared to 27 per cent in NSW and 28 per cent in Queensland. This stands in stark contrast to the results of the 1999 survey (Eckersley 1999). Then Victorians were much more positive than other Australians, with 37 per cent saying life was getting better, compared to 24 per cent of Australians overall. Now the situation is reversed, with 18 per cent of Victorians saying life is getting better compared to 25 per cent of Australians overall.

However, it should be noted that residents of all three states are *equally likely* to believe that life is getting worse (so that the two results combined mean that Victorians are less likely than others to say that the quality of life has stayed about the same). Across Australia, there is no significant difference between metropolitan and regional residents.



**Table 8 Is life in Australia getting better, worse, or staying about the same? By state (%)**

	Total	New South Wales	Victoria	Queensland	Western Australia	South Australia	Tasmania	ACT	Northern Territory
A lot better	9	10	8 *	14 *	7	4	3	0	18
A little better	16	17 *	10 *	15	14	29	5	35	15
<i>Total better</i>	25	27 *	18 *†	28 †	21	34	8	35	32
About the same	34	30 *	40 *†	31 †	38	36	43	33	17
A little worse	20	20	23	23	16	17	14	6	18
A lot worse	19	22	18	16	21	13	30	16	14
<i>Total worse</i>	39	42	41	39	37	29	44	21	32
Don't know	2	1	1	2	5	1	5	11	19

Note: Totals and subtotals may not add due to rounding. n = 1000. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

#### 4. What should schools emphasise?

Schools serve a number of functions, including the transmission of life skills, education of good citizens and preparing children for the workforce. In recent years, particularly in secondary schools, there appears to have been a greater focus on vocational education and achieving marks that will allow students to gain entry to university courses. The survey explored attitudes to the role of schools by asking the following question.

*I'm now going to read out a statement and I would like you to tell me whether you agree or disagree with it.*

*“Schools should put more emphasis on teaching students how to achieve a happy personal life and less on educating them for the world of work.”*

*Agree*

*Disagree*

The majority of Australians disagree with this statement with 54 per cent disagreeing and 41 percent agreeing – see Table 9. There is no significant difference by sex but differences by age are striking. Amongst 18-29 year olds, slightly more believe that schools should emphasise a happy personal life rather than preparing for the world of work (49 per cent compared to 47 per cent). However, those in the middle age groups, 30-49 year olds who are most likely to be parents with school age children, 63 per cent favour preparation for the world of work with only 34 per cent opting for emphasis on a happy personal life. Those over 50 and over are more evenly split, with 43 per cent agreement and 48 per cent disagreement and are thus more like young adults on this question.

Perhaps these results reflect the greater importance of working life for people in the years when they are most likely to be supporting a young family. Indeed, as Table 10 shows, people with children under the age of 18 are substantially less likely to agree (36 per cent agreed compared to 45 per cent of those without children aged under 18) and more likely to disagree (61 per cent disagreed compared to 49 per cent of those without children aged under 18).

**Table 9 “Schools should put more emphasis on teaching students how to achieve a happy personal life and less on educating them for the world of work.” By sex and age (%)**

	Total	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	18-29	30-49	50+
Agree	41	38	43	49 *	34 *†	43 †
Disagree	54	56	51	47 *	63 *†	48 †
Don't know	6	6	5	4 *	3 †	9 *†

Note Totals may not add due to rounding. n = 1000. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

**Table 10 “Schools should put more emphasis on teaching students how to achieve a happy personal life and less on educating them for the world of work.” By family status (%)**

	Total	Children under 18	
		Yes	No
Agree	41	36 *	45 *
Disagree	54	61 *	49 *
Don't know	6	3 *	7 *

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding. This question whether the respondent had children aged under 18 was only asked to those who did not live in single person households, so n = 836. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

Table 11 shows that people with low household incomes (less than \$35,000) are more likely to believe that schools should put more emphasis on teaching students how to achieve a happy personal life, and less on educating them for the world of work. Those in the high-income group (\$75,000 plus) are more likely to favour preparation for work than personal happiness (60 per cent compared to 36 per cent).

**Table 11 “Schools should put more emphasis on teaching students how to achieve a happy personal life and less on educating them for the world of work.” By household income (%)**

	Total	Household income		
		Less than \$35000	\$35000 to just under \$75000	\$75000 plus
Agree	41	44 *	40	36 *
Disagree	54	49 *†	57 †	60 *
Don't know	6	7	3	4

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding. 11.3 per cent of respondents did not state their household income, so n = 887 for results reporting household income. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

This question was also posed in the British survey (BBC 2006). While 41 per cent of Australians believe that schools should emphasise a happy personal life before preparation for the world of work, 52 per cent of Britons take this view. On the other hand, while 54 per cent of Australians opt for preparation for the world of work, 43 per cent of Britons share that position. Thus Britons are more likely than Australians to believe that schools should increase the emphasis on teaching students how to achieve a happy personal life even when this requires reducing the emphasis placed on educating students for the world of work.

## 5. What should government aim to achieve?

In Australia, as elsewhere, the Government regards maximising the rate of economic growth as its first priority. For example, in 1998 Prime Minister Howard said: ‘The overriding aim of our agenda is to deliver Australia an annual growth rate of over 4% on average during the decade to 2010’. But is this what Australians want? The survey asked what the principal aim of government should be.

*I’m now going to read out another statement and I would like you to tell me whether you agree or disagree with it.*

*“A government’s prime objective should be achieving the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth.”*

*Agree*

*Disagree*

A large majority of Australians believe that government’s prime objective should be promoting the greatest happiness of the people rather than the greatest wealth, with 77 per cent agreeing and only 16 per cent opting for higher wealth. This opinion is remarkable consistent across sexes and age groups – see Table 12.

**Table 12 “A government’s prime objective should be achieving the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth.” By sex and age (%)**

	Total	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	18-29	30-49	50+
Agree	77	80	75	80	77	77
Disagree	16	15	17	15	18	14
Don’t know	7	6	8	5	5	9

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding. n = 1000. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

However, there are differences between income groups with respect to the statement – see Table 13. People with household incomes *below* \$75,000 are more likely to agree that government should place national happiness before national wealth (79 per cent of the lowest income group and 81 per cent of the middle income group) than those with income above \$75,000 (70 per cent). Nearly one quarter of those with household income above \$75,000 disagree, compared to only 13 and 14 per cent of those in lower income groups. The actual preoccupation of the Government with economic growth is therefore more at odds with the views of those on middle and lower incomes, which may explain why members of those groups are more likely to believe that the quality of life in Australia is declining.

**Table 13 “A government’s prime objective should be achieving the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth.” By household income (%)**

	Total	Household income		
		Less than \$35000	\$35000 to just under \$75000	\$75000 plus
Agree	77	79 *	81 †	70 *†
Disagree	16	13 *	14 †	24 *†
Don’t know	7	8 *	4 *	7

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding. 11.3 per cent of respondents did not state their household income, so n = 887 for results reporting household income. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

Beliefs about the primary focus of government also differ by political allegiance, as shown in Table 14. Labor voters are a little more likely than Coalition voters to agree that government should put happiness before wealth - 80 per cent compared to 73 per cent – although it remains true that almost three-quarters of Coalition voters place happiness before wealth. The sample sizes for Green and Democrat voters are too small for the results to be reliable, so they are not discussed, although the result for Green voters is consistent with expectations.

**Table 14 “A government’s prime objective should be achieving the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth.” By political allegiance (%)**

	Total	Political allegiance			
		Coalition	Labor	Greens	Democrats
Agree	77	73 *	80 *	93	74
Disagree	16	20	15	8	11
Don’t know	7	8	5	0	16

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding. n (total) = 1000, n (Coalition) = 375, n (Labor) = 344, n (Greens) = 32, n (Democrats) = 15. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

This question was also posed in the British survey (BBC 2006). The results are very similar for the two countries with 81 per cent of Britons agreeing that a government’s prime objective should be the greatest happiness rather than the greatest wealth (77 per cent in Australia) and only 13 per cent disagreeing (16 per cent in Australia).

It might be expected that those who think overall quality of life in Australia is getting worse are more likely to believe that the government should shift its priority towards happiness rather than wealth generation. Table 15 shows that that this is indeed the case, although the difference is not great. Amongst people who think life in Australia is getting worse, a greater proportion support the proposition that “A government’s prime objective should be achieving the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth” (81 per cent agree) than amongst those who think life in Australia is staying the same (78 per cent agree) or amongst those who think it is getting better (72 per cent agree).

**Table 15 “A government’s prime objective should be achieving the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth” by “Is life in Australia getting better, worse, or staying about the same?” (%)**

	<i>“Is life in Australia getting better, worse, or staying about the same?”</i>				
	Total	Getting better	Staying about the same	Getting worse	Don’t know
<i>“A government’s prime objective should be achieving the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth.”</i>					
Agree	77	72 *	78	81 *	73
Disagree	16	20 *	16	13 *	13
Don’t know	7	8	6	6	15

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding. n=1000. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

## 6. Would you take a happiness drug?

The present era is often characterised as one in which instant gratification rules with daily behaviour often governed by hedonistic pursuits. In the face of a barrage of messages telling us that we should be happy, many people turn to medication to deal with their distress. It is estimated that around 30 per cent of Australians take medications, excessive alcohol or illicit drugs on a regular basis to get them through the day (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005, pp. 113-18). Yet there is also evidence indicating that most people see a hedonistic life as inferior to one that is fulfilling and meaningful. To explore this issue the survey posed the following question.

*If there was a legally available drug that could be bought over the counter, that made you feel happy and did not have any side-effects, do you think there would be occasions when you would take it? Would you say ...*

*Yes, definitely*

*Yes, probably*

*No, probably not*

*No, definitely not*

*Don't know*

The results are surprising. Almost three quarters (73 per cent) of Australians say that they definitely or probably would not take a legally available happiness drug, with over half (54 per cent) saying they definitely would not. Large majorities took this view across genders and age groups, although those in the youngest age group (18-29 year olds) were less negative – 60 per cent said ‘no’ compared to the average overall of 73 per cent (Table 16). Only around a quarter of Australians say they would definitely or probably take a happiness drug on occasions.

Differences between income groups with respect to the question of whether they would be likely to take a happiness drug are minor, although high-income households are a little more predisposed to taking the happiness pill on occasions – see Table 17.



**Table 16 “If there was a legally available drug that could be bought over the counter, that made you feel happy and did not have any side-effects, do you think there would be occasions when you would take it?” By sex and age (%)**

	Total	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	18-29	30-49	50+
Yes, definitely	11	12	10	18 *	13 †	5 *†
Yes, probably	15	14	15	21 *†	14 †	11 *
<i>Total yes</i>	26	26	25	39 *†	27 †‡	17 *‡
No, probably not	20	22	18	23 *	23 †	15 *†
No, definitely not	54	51	56	37 *†	50 †‡	66 *‡
<i>Total no</i>	73	73	74	60 *†	73 †‡	81 *‡
Don't know	1	1	1	1	0	2

Note: Totals and subtotals may not add due to rounding. n = 1000. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

**Table 17 “If there was a legally available drug that could be bought over the counter, that made you feel happy and did not have any side-effects, do you think there would be occasions when you would take it?” By household income (%)**

	Total	Household income		
		Less than \$35000	\$35000 to just under \$75000	\$75000 plus
Yes, definitely	11	13 *	8 *†	14 †
Yes, probably	15	14	17	15
<i>Total yes</i>	26	26	25	29
No, probably not	20	19	21	21
No, definitely not	54	54	53	49
<i>Total no</i>	73	73	74	70
Don't know	1	1	1	1

Note: Totals and subtotals may not add due to rounding. 11.3 per cent of respondents did not state their household income, so n = 887 for results reporting household income. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

Table 18 shows that those with a university education are a little more likely to accept the idea of occasionally taking the happiness pill – 31 per cent compared to 23 per cent of those without a university education – which in part reflects the age effect.

**Table 18 “If there was a legally available drug that could be bought over the counter, that made you feel happy and did not have any side-effects, do you think there would be occasions when you would take it?” By highest education level (%)**

	Total	Highest education level	
		University educated	Completed or did not complete school
Yes, definitely	11	16 *	8 *
Yes, probably	15	15	15
<i>Total yes</i>	26	31 *	23 *
No, probably not	20	19	21
No, definitely not	54	49	54
<i>Total no</i>	73	68	75
Don't know	1	2	1

Note: Totals and subtotals may not add due to rounding. n (total) = 1000, n (university educated) = 160, n (completed or did not complete school) = 554. Pairs of percentages in each row are marked with \*, † or ‡ if they are significantly different at the 95 per cent level.

Source: Ipsos Mackay survey commissioned by the Australia Institute

The results of the Australian survey can be compared to those from the British survey that asked the same question. Among Britons, 72 per cent said they would not take the pill, with 53 per cent saying they definitely would not. Twenty six per cent said they might take it on occasions with 12 per cent saying they definitely would. Thus the British results are virtually identical to those for Australia.

Why, in the midst of societies in which hedonism is strongly and consistently encouraged, do such large majorities of Australians and Britons reject the idea of taking a pill in order to attain happiness? This question goes to the heart of how people understand their lives, and the responses to it reflect a deep-seated, if rarely articulated, belief that a worthwhile life requires authentic engagement with the world around us including relationships with others. It is also widely understood that real life involves challenges and growth, and that taking a happiness pill would be a ‘cop-out’ and ultimately disappointing. Tribulations on one’s life path are an inevitable part of any meaningful and fulfilling human life.

Taking a happiness pill would therefore feel inauthentic and represent a means of avoiding what life demands of us. In this view, personal happiness is a side effect of the pursuit of fulfilment just as pain and distress may be the price we have to pay to achieve certain goals. Thus it is widely accepted that developing mutually sustaining

relationships with loved ones requires effort and the difficulties encountered are a necessary part of forming deep and rewarding relationship. If happiness were our main objective then few adults would opt to become parents because, for all of the joys of parenthood, there are so many occasions for worry, conflict and even alienation. Yet most parents regard parenthood as an opportunity to learn and grow and the relationships they develop with their offspring, though often hard-won, are the most enduring and rewarding they have.

Most people nominate their personal relationships as the most important factor in their happiness, yet it is the possibility of love and deep emotional connection, rather than any superficial notion of 'happiness', that justifies the emphasis we place on them.

It might be thought that the rapid rise in the consumption of anti-depressants reflects a willingness to take happy pills that belies the expressed view of three quarters of Australians that they would refuse them. Yet consumption of anti-depressants is aimed at returning to a previous equilibrium, not necessarily a consistently happy place but one from which normal life pursuits again become possible. A 'happy pill' might diminish one's motivation for pursuing one's life path, but anti-depressants are not intended to do this.

Questions about the meaning and purpose of human life have occupied philosophers for thousands of years, and it is apparent that, despite the spread of affluence, instant gratification and contingent relationships, Australians today remain very much aware of the complexity and depth involved in a good human life. As John Stuart Mill once observed, 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied' (Mill 1998). In other words, a satisfied feeling, such as that which might be experienced by a pig or provided by a happiness drug, is not essential to a good human life, much less central to it. A proper understanding of human life reveals that a happiness drug simply 'misses the point', because whilst happiness is a desirable byproduct of living a fully human life, in itself it is not the aim.

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