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Young people say family, friends make them most happy

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The Associated Press

NEW YORK — So you're between the ages of 13 and 24. What makes you happy? A worried, weary parent might imagine the answer to sound something like this: Sex, drugs, a little rock 'n' roll. Maybe some cash, or at least the car keys.

Turns out the real answer is quite different. Spending time with family was the top answer to that open-ended question, according to an extensive survey — more than 100 questions asked of 1,280 people ages 13-24 — conducted by The Associated Press and MTV on the nature of happiness among America's young people.

Next was spending time with friends, followed by time with a significant other. And even better for parents: Nearly three-quarters of young people say their relationship with their parents makes them happy.

"They're my foundation," says Kristiana St. John, 17, a high-school student from Queens in New York. "My mom tells me that even if I do something stupid, she's still going to love me no matter what. Just knowing that makes me feel very happy and blessed."

Other results are more disconcerting. While most young people are happy overall with the way their lives are going, there are racial differences: The poll shows whites to be happier, across economic categories, than blacks and Hispanics. A lot of young people feel stress, particularly those from the middle class, and females more than males.

You might think money would be clearly tied to a general sense of happiness. But almost no one said "money" when asked what makes them happy, though people with the highest family incomes are generally happier with life. Having highly educated parents is a stronger predictor of happiness than income.

And sex? Yes, we were getting to that.

Being sexually active actually leads to less happiness among 13- to 17-year-olds, according to the survey. If you're 18 to 24, sex might lead to more happiness in the moment but not in general.

From the body to the soul: Close to half of those surveyed say religion and spirituality are very important. And more than half say they believe there is a higher power that has an influence over things that make them happy. Beyond religion, simply belonging to an organized religious group makes people happier.

And parents, here's some more for you: Most young people in school say it makes them happy. Overwhelmingly, young people think marriage would make them happy and want to be married some day. Most also want to have kids.

Finally, when asked to name their heroes, nearly half of respondents mentioned one or both of their parents.

The winner, by a nose: Mom.

Happiness is ...

"... two kinds of ice cream," according to the song from "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown." John Lennon, more darkly, described it as a warm gun. A much more typical description comes from Stacy Rosales, a 23-year-old recent college graduate, who calls it "just a general stress-free feeling where I'm not really worried about anything. THAT makes me happy."

For Chad Fiedler, 17, it's "just waking up in the morning and looking forward to what I'm going to be doing that day."

However they express, define or feel it, 65 percent of those surveyed say they're happy with the way things are going for them right now.

We are family

When asked what one thing makes them happiest, 20 percent mentioned spending time with family — more than anything else. Seventy-three percent said their relationship with their parents makes them happy. After family, it was relationships with friends that people mentioned most.

"It's good news to hear young people being realistic about what really makes them happy," says psychologist Jean Twenge, author of "Generation Me" and a professor at San Diego State University. "Research has shown us that relationships are the single greatest source of happiness."

Also confirming existing research, Twenge says, is the finding that children of divorced parents are somewhat less likely to be happy. Among 13- to 17-year-olds, 64 percent of those with parents still together said they wake up happy, compared to 47 percent of those with divorced parents.

First comes love, then comes ...

Overall, romantic relationships are a source of happiness, but being in one doesn't necessarily lead to greater happiness with life in general.

"It would be nice, but where I am right now is, I want to take care of myself," says Rosales. "Before you can be in a committed relationship you have to know who you are and what you really want."

Eventually, though, marriage is a goal for most young people, with 92 percent saying they either definitely or probably want to get married.

"I don't want to be one of those career businesswomen who just doesn't ever settle down," says St. John, the New York high-school student.

Money, money, money

Money may make the world go around, but when asked what one thing makes them happiest, almost nobody in the poll mentioned money or anything material. Still, money does play a role in happiness.

Those who can't afford to buy many of the things they want are less happy with life in general. Just under half of young people think they'd be happier if they had more money, while the same percentage (49 percent) say they'd be just as happy.

"I'm going to college next year," says Fiedler, who will attend Drexel University in Philadelphia. "Not the cheapest thing nowadays. Money isn't the most important thing, but if something happens, it can turn into it."

Stresses, fears

Young people in this survey had a 10 percent higher stress rate than adults did in a 2006 AP-Ipsos poll. For ages 13 to 17, school is the greatest source of stress. For those in the 18-24 range, it's jobs and financial matters.

Only 29 percent feel very safe traveling, and 25 percent very safe from terrorist attacks. Still, those interviewed said the fear of terrorism interfered very little with their lives.

Drugs and alcohol

Alcohol users are slightly less happy than those who don't drink. The differences are more remarkable among 13- to 17-year olds; just 40 percent of those who drank in the past seven days reported being happy with life, versus 68 percent of those who didn't. And 49 percent of illegal drug users reported being happy with life, compared with 66 percent of those who didn't use drugs.

Racial divide

While 72 percent of whites say they're happy with life in general, just 56 percent of blacks and 51 percent of Hispanics say that. And 66 percent of whites were happy at the moment the interview began, compared with 57 percent of minorities.

Sustenance

for the soul

"I just like believing in something greater than me and everybody else," St. John, who attends a Catholic school, says of her commitment to religion. "When I pray, sometimes it just makes me feel better, if I'm freaking out about things."

Those for whom religion and spirituality plays a bigger role tend to be happier, according to the poll. More than half — 55 percent — say it is either a very important part of life or the single most important thing in their lives.

I need a hero

Oprah Winfrey? Michael Jordan? Hillary Clinton? Tiger Woods? All those names came up when people were asked about heroes. Of public figures, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. got the most mentions. But nearly half mentioned a parent, with mothers ranking higher (29 percent) than fathers (21 percent.)

"My parents came here from the Philippines in the '70s," says Rosales. "They raised a family and got to where they are from scratch. My mother's now the director of a hospital. I admire them both so much."

Blacks and Hispanics were more likely than whites to name their mothers.

Also mentioned: God (more than 10 percent), teachers (nearly 5 percent), members of the military, policemen and firefighters.

The crystal ball

Will young people grow up to be happy adults? Overall they're optimistic: Sixty-two percent think they'll be happier in the future than they are now. (Those over 18 are more optimistic.) But many anticipate a more difficult life than their parents had.

"I think a lot about my kids and what their lives are going to be like," says Fiedler. "There may be wars going on, who knows. I just have a feeling it's going to be harder for the future generation to be happy."

The AP-MTV poll was conducted by Knowledge Networks from April 16-23, and involved online interviews with 1,280 people ages 13 to 24. It had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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