

PREMIUM

HEALTH

Happiness and wealth aren't enough—here's why you should strive to 'flourish'

Scientists say "flourishing" is a better framework for living a fulfilling life. A huge new global study reveals who is actually flourishing—and who is languishing behind.



Flourishing is a helpful concept because there are different ways to achieve it. Not every measurable element of a person's life must be perfect to flourish.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KENDRICK BRINSON, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION



What really makes for a fulfilling life? This question has been on Tyler J. VanderWeele's mind for decades.

In his first faculty job as a biostatistician at the University of Chicago, he was dissatisfied with how scientists defined and measured human well-being.

There were plenty of studies on specific measures of clinical symptoms, like depression, or emotional states like happiness or anxiety. Researchers had tracked objective markers of health, like blood pressure or sleep quality as well as were how economic conditions influence health.

But while these measures captured specific slices of both the problems and joys of life, VanderWeele felt they missed a holistic picture of what humans really seek, especially the need for meaning and purpose in life.

Since that first job, his team has developed a more rounded way to measure how people are doing – mentally, physically, and spiritually. They call it “flourishing.”

“Flourishing itself might be understood as a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good,” he wrote in an influential 2017 paper titled “On the promotion of human flourishing.” He and his team have since expanded that definition to include the context, communities, and environments in which a person lives.

Flourishing is a helpful concept because there are different ways to achieve it. Not every measurable element of a person's life must be perfect to flourish. It also recognizes what matters to people — what gives meaning and purpose to their lives — must resonate with their deepest values.

In the years since that initial insight, VanderWeele, now a Harvard professor, has worked closely with Baylor University's [Byron R. Johnson](#), to create a scientifically calibrated measure of flourishing in order to study it more deeply. Five years ago, in partnership with [Gallup](#) and the [Center for Open Science](#), they embarked on an ambitious five-year study of over 200,000 participants from 22 countries to find out what causes a person to flourish.

Its latest results, just out today in the journal [*Nature Mental Health*](#), are raising some provocative and disturbing questions about how people are doing around the world.

A key takeaway? Community is crucial. "What we sometimes get wrong, especially in the West and perhaps especially in American culture, is the notion that complete autonomy will really help us to flourish," VenderWeele says. What we really need more of is one another.

"The Global Flourishing Study reveals fascinating insights into the key question of what makes a life well lived," says [Ian Goldin](#), a development economist at Oxford who was not involved in the study, but reviewed it prior to publication. "It is the choices we make, as individuals and communities, not our material possessions or virtual engagements, that give us deep satisfaction and a feeling of well-being."



Group and communities activities help people flourish.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LUISA DORR, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

The flourishing age gap

The goal of the Global Flourishing Study is to gauge how individuals from different countries have flourished over five years, based on participants' annual answers to a number of questions about their lives – ranging from “I understand my purpose in life” to “how would you rate your physical health”

The GFS focuses on six key areas: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material security. Answers to questions in each area tallied up to get a snapshot of how well a person is doing.

Findings from the second wave of data released April 30 show that, in general, people between the ages of 18 to 29 are not flourishing. “The most concerning thing [to me] is that young people in many countries are not doing well,” says VanderWeele. “This has real implications for policy and raises questions about the extent to which we’re prioritizing the well-being of youth and investing in in them.”

(*What is brain fog? Here's what scientists are finding out.*)

The conventional wisdom among those who study wellbeing is that people’s satisfaction with their lives tends to form a U-shaped curve: higher in youth and old age, and lower in the middle years. The latest results suggest the shape of that experience may be flattening through age 18 to 49 and then increasing after that. “The youngest people are reporting the lowest levels of flourishing,” VanderWeele says. “It’s not the case universally... but it’s the case in Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Germany, Sweden, the United States, and the United Kingdom.” (Notably: it’s not the case in Poland and Tanzania.)

fallout from the pandemic, uncertainties over work in the future, and a general fraying of social institutions such as religion and government in many parts of the world.

Other studies are also ringing similar alarm bells over the struggles of younger people. The World Happiness Report, which reported its 2025 results in March and is also based on Gallup poll data, found that younger people are in distress. In 2023, 19 percent of young adults across the world reported they had no one they could count on for social support – a 39 percent increase compared to 2006.

Brandon Kwok, 24, who grew up in Singapore, began struggling with anxiety attacks at 14 and now openly discusses the challenges he's faced in avoiding social isolation and, instead, seeking out social interactions with friends by participating in sports teams and volunteering as a bartender at college. "The biggest thing that's affecting my generation is anxiety," he said. "Nobody's got a playbook" for dealing with it.



Family and friends celebrate Nowruz, the Persian New Year, at a home in Claremont, California. People who attend weekly religious services tend to score higher on flourishing. But secular community events can make a big impact too.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BALAZS GARDI, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

Lower-income countries are outflourishing wealthy ones

One of the Flourishing Study's research team's most provocative findings is that meaning in life and flourishing seems to be inversely correlated with a country's GDP (gross domestic product) per capita. "While the richer more developed countries do report higher on things like financial security ... they don't report as high on meaning, on relationships, on pro-social character," VenderWeele says, emphasizing that was a big surprise in the data.

be at the top and that's not the case. It's not about GDP."

More follow-up is needed. "The data do not provide evidence that increased prosperity *causes* declines in flourishing," says Eranda Jayawickreme, a psychology professor at Wake Forest University, who was not involved in the current research.

At least not yet. This ongoing project is doing something that most previous studies of flourishing have not. It is tracking people's responses to the survey over a period of years (versus gauging them at one single point of time), which may eventually help researchers draw conclusions about causality. "It will be interesting to see if this evidence holds across subsequent waves of this study." (Also to note: While the study looked at some very rich countries, and some less wealthy ones, the very poorest countries in the world were not included. It's hard to know where they'd fit in the flourishing rankings.)



Members of a senior synchronized swimming team pose during practice in Sun City, Arizona.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KENDRICK BRINSON, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION



Students at a Hangul school in Baubau, Indonesia, perform a traditional Korean dance.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NYIMAS LAULA, THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

Indonesians thrive in flourishing as Japan faces challenges

At the top of the Global Flourishing Study's ranking is Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim country which has the highest average scores in many aspects of flourishing among the initial 22 countries. Its average flourishing score is 8.47, compared to the U.S.'s 7.18. It's also much less wealthy than the US.

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Why are people flourishing there? “Indonesia is an island country that has always been incredibly diverse in ethnicity, language, culture, and religion,” notes Johnson. “Like any country, it has conflicts, but the country really does work hard to stress harmony.” One possible explanation for that: the country’s traditional village and tribal structures have a history of seeking peaceful relations, including those with different faiths.

these things have been neglected in the West to some extent.”

(*Can religion make you happy? Scientists may soon find out.*)

Alberta Christina C. Pertiwi, 28, who helps direct undergraduate programs at the Universitas Indonesia and lectures in its Anthropology Department, has the perspective of someone who’s lived in New York, as a student at Columbia University, and now in Jakarta, Indonesia, where she was born and raised.

Pertiwi’s experience in Indonesia has been that her students remain hopeful, perhaps because they live in a country with strong social cohesion. “It’s a culture of family togetherness, collectivism, that is manifested through eating together and hanging out.”

While Indonesia, with a GDP per capita of \$5,250 in 2025, came out on top in flourishing, the U.S., with a per capita GDP of \$89,680, was ranked in the bottom third.

Japan, with a GDP of \$35,600, was dead last. Likewise, in this year’s World Happiness Report, Japan’s rank was 55th – just below Uzbekistan’s, a country

“Japan represents a cautionary tale about the risks of very rapid economic development,” says Brendan Case, Associate Director for Research at Harvard’s Human Flourishing Program, who worked closely with the report’s data. He noted Japan’s ongoing debates about its falling birth rates, challenges of family formation, the large numbers of men who are socially isolated, and low levels of religious observance as potentially contributing to its citizens (lack of) flourishing. “It seems plausible to wonder whether the rapid pace of economic and cultural transformation that overtook Japan in the last 150 years came at a relatively high cost in many areas of flourishing.”





As we age and grow more at risk for social isolation, staying involved in clubs and group activities can help bolster well-being. Left: Members of a senior softball team warm-up before a game in Sun City, Arizona. Right: Hikers enjoy Spring colors at the Crested Butte Wildflower Festival in Colorado.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KENDRICK BRINSON, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION (TOP) (LEFT) AND PHOTOGRAPH BY ELLIOT ROSS, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION (BOTTOM) (RIGHT)

How to flourish at any age

Insights on flourishing are urgently needed now – and not just for members of Gen Z like Kwok. Measures of social isolation, loneliness, anxiety, and other anti-social trends are soaring. What’s causing all this languishing, and can we fight back?

We don’t yet have answers to these big societal questions. But as individuals, we can all work towards flourishing. And VanderWeele’s interdisciplinary group at Harvard hopes to spread the message that small changes can help. Its recommendations? Participating in group activities – from bowling

People who attend weekly religious services tend to score higher on flourishing. But secular community events can make a big impact too. Consider Claire Parker, a retired British oncologist, who has faced some serious challenges over the years. At 28, she lost a leg to cancer. At 55, she ended a long marriage.

Dr. Parker, now 64, says she flourishes despite her disability because she's sought out ways to get involved in different communities, including volunteering with the Falcon Boat Club, a nonprofit organization that has supported her and other local water sports enthusiasts since 1869. She also volunteers at schools and started a new beekeeping hobby. "It feels more balanced in my life to be a volunteer," she noted, noting it all has been "very beneficial to my well-being."

Volunteering and community involvement are powerful forms of social connection. So is eating with others, which turns out to be a strong predictor of happiness. Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, director of Oxford University's Wellbeing Research Centre and a co-editor of this year's World Happiness Report, notes that in 2023, about 1 in 4 Americans reported eating all their meals alone on the previous day – an increase of 53 percent since 2003. He notes dining alone has risen significantly in East Asian countries, notably Korea and Japan where the people surveyed reported sharing just one to two dinners per week. This may be because of the intense work cultures of these countries.

ourselves, can help us flourish. But the reality is that, in many places around the world, modern-day economic and social pressures get in the way.

Kwok, the 24-year-old from Singapore, has turned to Aristotle in thinking about how to flourish in his life. He is in his final undergraduate year at Oxford studying philosophy, politics, and economics. He's already got a job lined up for himself in London after he graduates. But his new job will make it harder for him to see his grandmother in Singapore. "It kind of stings a bit," he admitted.

Drawing from his studies of Aristotle, he believes that to flourish, he should meaningfully challenge himself – even if that means taking on a challenge far away from home and family. Finding that balance, especially for young people around the world, has not been easy.

But flourishing is a process, rather than a static condition, as the study's scientists note. It is not something we can ever perfectly achieve. There's always another chance to get the balance right.

Julia Flynn Siler, an academic visitor at Oxford University, is a nonfiction author and journalist who has writing about **rowing**, **dark skies**, and **faith and happiness** for National Geographic.

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