

FACT SHEET



University
of Victoria

Measuring well-being

Subjective well-being is just that: subjective. Unlike factors such as sex, income or age, all of which can be known objectively, we rely largely on self-report surveys to measure well-being. The questions that we use to ask people about their perceived level of subjective well-being are taken from or based on past research studies which have found certain questions to be better than others; that is, clear, easy to understand, focused on factors relevant to well-being and more likely to yield an accurate response. Once a researcher has a few questions in mind, the next step is to decide how many questions to ask, and how often.

One time or several times?

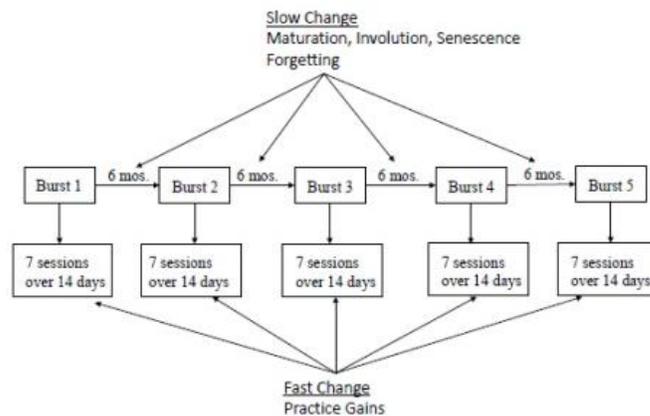
Some research studies ask a few well-being questions at a single point in time, often as part of a larger survey. Typically, the researchers are not interested in focusing solely on well-being, and so ask a few questions about several different factors that they think may be involved in some way with their topic of interest. Using this method, which is called **single measures**, the goal is usually to compare survey results across people, looking at what are called **between-person differences**.

To accomplish this, the research participants are asked one or two questions about their perceived level of well-being. Some examples include “How do you feel about your life as a whole?” and “On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your life?”. The people who give high ratings are compared and contrasted with those who gave low ratings. For example, a researcher may wonder which factors are in common among people who give a high rating to life satisfaction.

This method works well for some types of research, but it is not the most precise way of finding out a person’s actual level of well-being. A big reason for this is that the participants are only asked about their well-being once, as if it were stable and unchanging. However, we all know that some days go better or worse than others, depending on the experiences we have. These experiences can affect some or all of the components of well-being, and thereby affect how we feel our life as a whole is going. This means that if a participant answered the survey question on a worse-than-average day, the researcher will assign that person to the ‘low well-being’ group, though their true level of well-being may be much higher.

To get around this problem, a different method, called **repeated measures**, can be used. Instead of just once, participants answer well-being questions many times, for example once a day for two weeks. By taking the average of all of these responses, a researcher can effectively smooth out the artificially high scores from better-than-average days and the artificially lower scores from worse-than-average days to find a person's overall level of well-being.

For an even more precise estimate of well-being, a **measurement burst**, like the daily for two weeks example above, can be continued for a long period of time over months or years. In this way, a researcher learns about **within-person differences**: by asking the same survey questions at regular intervals, it's possible to determine which daily experiences and events co-occur with natural increases and decreases in an individual's level of well-being. We might be interested in asking whether the number of hours slept the night before, sleep quality or exercise is associated with well-being for that day.



The repeated measures approach underlies much of the research done in the Laboratory for Integrative Lifespan Research at UVic. A major focus of our work is to develop new measures of well-being that are sensitive enough to detect daily within-person variation, and our work to date with both young and older adults has shown that even relatively minor daily events can cause fluctuations in well-being. This is also why we ask so many questions about well-being at once. Well-being is a complex concept that includes emotional and social aspects as well as autonomy, personal growth and self-acceptance. We want to ensure that our questions cover all of these components and often ask multiple questions about the same things to make sure that the words we use or the way a question is asked don't affect the answers given.

To learn more about the measurement of well-being and research methodology in psychology, we recommend you see the following resources:

- Laboratory for Integrative Lifespan Research methods:
https://www.ilifespan.org/?q=research/research_methodology
- Martin, M., & Hofer, S. M. (2004). Intraindividual variability, change, and aging: Conceptual and analytical issues. *Gerontology, 50*, 7-11.
- Rast, P., MacDonald, S. W. S., & Hofer, S. M. (2012). Intensive measurement designs for research on aging. *The Journal of Gerontopsychology and Geriatric Psychiatry, 25*(2), 45-55.