

# Review of: Making Australia Happy

Aaron Jarden, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2011

Making Australia Happy is a happiness experiment; specifically the challenge to make eight “miserable Sydney-siders” lastingly happy. Charged with this task are three happiness experts: leading the way is coaching psychologist (Dr Tony Grant) who specialises in the new field of positive psychology; second is expert mindfulness coach (Dr Russ Harris); and lastly physiotherapist and physical health specialist (Anna-Louise Bouvier). The overall aim of the experiment is to see if the techniques offered by these multidisciplinary perspectives can increase happiness in a lasting way, and then to further see if happiness can be passed on to the community, and then spread outward across Australia. Dr Grant sums this challenge up as “taking the science of happiness on a test drive from the laboratory to the suburban streets”.

The documentary is presented in an engaging format, with the series consisting of three one hour long, made for TV, episodes. However the experiment itself is an eight week ‘happiness increasing’ program in which eight volunteers have their happiness measured via a range of psychological and biological tests and scans in order to track their changes and transformation over the eight weeks. All eight individuals are looking for greater fulfilment and meaning in their lives, and are pushed to their emotional and physical limits, discovering that the road to happiness is tough, but rewards for their efforts can be immense.

The defining feature of the eight week program is that it is solely based around already empirically proven techniques that individuals can apply to their lives that have been shown to increase happiness. Throughout the episodes the three experts frequently cite research studies underpinning the value of the exercises undertaken. Some examples of the techniques and exercises employed include practising random acts of kindness, eating mindfully, writing an ideal obituary, focusing on ‘three good things’ that happened that day, learning the importance of posture on wellbeing, writing gratitude letters, understanding the benefits of approach goals compared to avoidance goals, learning to forgive and let go, meditation and diffusion, using character strengths, being altruistic, having a nutritious diet, and social and community connectedness and engagement. From these tasks, each week the participants are set exercise plans and other homework as they focus on exercises that are thought to increase their happiness levels.

Some of the key take-home messages highlighted in the documentary are that pleasure is not lastingly fulfilling but rather a short term fix, most people don’t know what makes them happy, it takes hard work and individual responsibility to become happier and change is difficult, and there is usually a need to address core fundamental negative issues (i.e., change is not always about focusing on the positive side of life). All-in-all a very inspiring documentary that leaves the viewer moved and excited about possibility of obtaining increasing lasting happiness.

For more information, see the documentary website: <http://makingaustraliahappy.abc.net.au>