

# THE SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING EVALUATION TOOLKIT:

A resource to support the use of Subjective Wellbeing to measure the impact of community programs and public policy initiatives.



This toolkit has been developed to encourage the use of Subjective Wellbeing in the evaluation of community based projects, strategies and interventions funded by philanthropic organisations, community grants, and government public policy initiatives. For many organisations program evaluation is a daunting task so this toolkit resource has been developed to provide more information on what Subjective Wellbeing is, why it is an ideal measure of strategies and interventions, how to measure Subjective Wellbeing using only 8 questions and how to interpret survey results collected in Australia.

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## WHAT IS SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING?

Subjective Wellbeing is an individual's subjective experience of their life.<sup>1</sup> It describes how a person feels about their life and is comprised of feelings contained in moods and emotions as well as thoughts and judgments.<sup>2, 3</sup> Life satisfaction is a very broad measure of Subjective Wellbeing which can be broken down into a number of different domains or key areas.

Subjective Wellbeing includes cognitive processes or thinking that can be traced back to the ancient philosophy of Aristotle where it was used to describe human fulfilment, flourishing and having a life worth living<sup>4</sup>. Subjective wellbeing also includes affective experiences and emotions and recent research indicates that Subjective Wellbeing is dominated by stable positive emotions that describe a sense of contentment, happiness and excitement or energy.<sup>2, 5-7</sup> The levels of these feelings or emotions are stable in most people explaining why Subjective Wellbeing is generally positive, stable and remains within a narrow range when measured across time in individuals and populations.<sup>5, 8</sup>



# SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING IS A SOCIAL INDICATOR OF SOCIETAL PROGRESS AND INDIVIDUAL WELLBEING

Research into Subjective Wellbeing as a social indicator started in the 1960's and has progressed considerably over the past 50 years. Much research has investigated the influence of different life circumstances on individual level Subjective Wellbeing which has made it a social indicator of interest to many government organisations. Subjective Wellbeing provides a unique and personal assessment of life satisfaction and can be more specifically measured according to a number of different domains or topics. These domains can be assessed by asking people questions about their overall life satisfaction as well as health, relationships, economic circumstances, employment, social connections, civic engagement, safety and the environment.<sup>9</sup>

Subjective Wellbeing is used in a range of national surveys and provides a different perspective to more traditional indicators of societal development like Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that focus on economic growth in preference to asking people about their own wellbeing. One of the biggest limitations of relying on economic measures to assess progress in societies is that not everything that we value can be costed or sensibly compared.<sup>10</sup> Even more importantly, high levels of economic growth over time does not result in greater levels of happiness<sup>11</sup> – a fact first established over 4 decades ago and referred to as the Easterlin Paradox<sup>12, 13</sup>.

Questions about life satisfaction and Subjective Wellbeing are now included in surveys conducted all over the world. Examples include the Gallup World Poll and World Values Survey, the European Social Survey, Eurobarometer, Latinobarómetro, German Socio-Economic Panel, British Household Panel Study, and Household Income and Labour Dynamics Australia. Data have also been collected by National Statistical Offices across 31 European countries, Australia, Canada, Israel, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, United States and Turkey.<sup>14</sup> In Australia, the Subjective Wellbeing of over 60,000 people has been measured using the Personal Wellbeing Index included in the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index since. These surveys began in Australia in 2001 and provide a rich source of understanding and normative data on the Subjective Wellbeing of the Australian population. Subjective Wellbeing has also been measured in 2 large population level surveys in 2007<sup>1</sup> and 2011<sup>15</sup> in Victoria, Australia.



# MEASURING SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING USING THE PERSONAL WELLBEING INDEX

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index was developed to measure Australians' satisfaction with their lives, and their life in Australia.<sup>16</sup> Development of the scale and its application has been led by Professor Robert Cummins and includes the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) measuring individual Subjective Wellbeing. The PWI is assessed by asking respondents to rate their satisfaction with the following 7 domains of their personal lives:

- standard of living;
- health;
- achievements;
- personal relationships;
- community connectedness;
- safety;
- future security.

All items are rated according to an 11-point satisfaction scale ranging from 0 (no satisfaction at all) to 10 (extremely satisfied) and the average of these satisfaction ratings is used to form the PWI. These domains can be used separately as domain scores or combined into an average score to

form a PWI or Subjective Wellbeing score. PWI and domain scores should always be converted into a 0-100 scale which can be created by simply multiplying domain scores by a factor of 10. It is also important to note that PWI scores of 0 and 100 are always removed before data analysis and are considered to be reflective of response bias. Further information on scoring and psychometrics properties are available in the PWI manual.<sup>17</sup>

An additional and more abstract question of life satisfaction is also asked during administration of the PWI using the same response scale: *Thinking about your own life and personal circumstances, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?* This question is always delivered before the specific domain questions of the PWI because the domains represent the first level deconstruction of this more global and abstract rating of life satisfaction.<sup>17</sup> A complete and formatted version of the life satisfaction item and the PWI are provided on the final page of this wellbeing toolkit.



# SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING HOMEOSTASIS THEORY

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The stability of population level Subjective Wellbeing has been well established across a number of countries and lies within a narrow range with an average of 75 out of 100 on a 0-100 scale.<sup>18</sup> The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index has measured Subjective Wellbeing in the Australian population since 2001 through 32 separate surveys involving over 60,000 Australians. In 2016, the average Subjective Wellbeing PWI score is 75.29 and has remained extremely stable over the last 15 years ranging from a low of 73 to a high of 76 during this time period. In comparison, the average score for the more global Satisfaction with Life as Whole is slightly higher at 77.59. Recent research in Australia has found that the stable set-point range for Subjective Wellbeing has a broad range of 70-90 points.<sup>19</sup>

Subjective Wellbeing is extremely stable and positive for the majority of the population. The stability is explained by homeostasis theory which refers to the ability to return to a natural equilibrium or natural 'set-point' of Subjective Wellbeing unique to each individual.<sup>20</sup> The set-point range is the normal operating range of Subjective Wellbeing for each individual. Homeostasis theory also helps to explain early research findings from over 40 years ago where the happiness levels of both lottery

winners and paraplegics adapted and moderated over time.<sup>21</sup> Recent longitudinal research supports the theory of homeostasis where people were found to have a normal 'bandwidth' of Subjective Wellbeing and also supports that life experiences can result in increases or decreases in wellbeing outside a usual set-point range.<sup>8</sup>

Subjective Wellbeing homeostasis is strongly managed by the experience of core pleasant emotions that include happiness, contentment and excitement – also termed Homeostatically Protected Mood (HP Mood).<sup>2,20</sup> Subjective Wellbeing remains positive and within the expected set-point range of 70-90 when under the protection of HP Mood. However, if life circumstances or events produce significant challenge then homeostasis fails and the dominating positive (above set-point) or negative (below set-point) emotion dominates. Depression is an example of defeat to the HP Mood defence, and a Subjective Wellbeing score on the PWI below 55 is suggestive of depression.<sup>20</sup> Other factors associated with lowered Subjective Wellbeing include very low household income<sup>20</sup>, chronic unemployment<sup>22</sup> and marital divorce<sup>23</sup> and recovery time through adaptation believed to be highly idiosyncratic.<sup>8</sup>

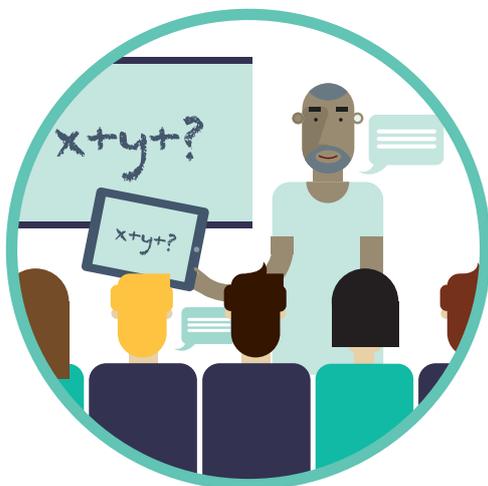
# BENEFITS OF USING SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING AS AN EVALUATION MEASURE OF POLICY, STRATEGY AND INTERVENTIONS

One of the major benefits of Subjective Wellbeing is that it can be assessed using very few questions that are easily understood by the general population. Furthermore, not only does Subjective Wellbeing measure generally positive and stable feelings, the identification of low Subjective Wellbeing provides a simple and convenient method to screen for depression without the need for more direct and intrusive questions.<sup>24,25</sup> Previous research has found that PWI scores below 55 (on the 0-100 scale) or 1 standard deviation below the population mean are indicative of depression.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the simplicity of measuring and understanding Subjective Wellbeing it has only been used as an outcome measure in very few intervention studies.

In the few studies that have been published, subjective wellbeing has been used to assess the psychological functioning of teachers at work,<sup>26</sup> youth wellbeing in schools,<sup>27</sup> healthcare treatment experience for service improvement,<sup>28</sup> randomised controlled trials investigating the influence of homeopathy<sup>29</sup> meditation<sup>30</sup> and tai chi,<sup>31</sup> and the impact of a government education and employment intervention on 'at-risk' adolescents.<sup>32</sup>

This toolkit has been prepared to encourage the use of Subjective Wellbeing as an evaluation measure of policy, strategies, programs and interventions used within government and community settings.



# UNDERSTANDING PWI SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING RESULTS FOR AUSTRALIANS

Interpretation of Subjective Wellbeing results requires an understanding of average or normative results. The Subjective Wellbeing of Australians has been measured in over 60,000 people by 32 surveys over the past 15 years and a summary of these mean survey results are presented in Table 1<sup>33</sup>.

These results should be used as a comparison point to understand if collected survey data are higher or lower than Australian averages. Both means and standard deviations are included to provide normative upper and lower ranges for PWI, domains and global satisfaction with life scores. Further information is available at [www.acqol.com.au/reports/auwbi.php](http://www.acqol.com.au/reports/auwbi.php)

## GENDER

Gender differences are common in Australian surveys of Subjective Wellbeing and women report higher levels of wellbeing across all domains with normative gender based survey means presented in Table 2. These gender differences are not found universally but are consistently statistically significant in Australia.



**Table 1:**  
**PWI Australian Norms Derived from Populations Means in Survey 32 of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index<sup>33</sup>**

	Mean	Standard Deviation
PWI	75.31	12.45
Standard of Living	77.95	16.95
Health	74.53	19.65
Achievements in life	73.56	18.46
Personal Relationships	79.52	21.14
Safety	79.16	17.73
Community	71.12	19.73
Future Security	71.13	19.75
Life as a Whole	77.59	17.06

**Table 2:**  
**PWI Survey Means for Gender Derived from Survey 32 of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index<sup>33</sup>**

	Males	Females
PWI	74.74	75.82
Standard of Living	77.49	78.31
Health	74.07	75.01
Achievements in life	72.62	74.47
Personal Relationships	78.43	80.52
Safety	79.91	78.37
Community	69.50	72.61
Future Security	70.88	71.33
Life as a Whole	76.89	78.26

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## INCOME

Subjective Wellbeing and domain level satisfaction scores are affected by low household incomes of less than \$30,000. However, Subjective Wellbeing measured by the PWI returns to the expected normal range with an annual household income of \$31,000 though people with a household income of \$150,000 or more have significantly higher wellbeing than the lower income groups, particularly those with household incomes of <\$15,000 and \$15,000-\$30,000.

## AGE

Subjective Wellbeing in the Australian adult population tends to exhibit a U-shaped distribution with the highest levels of wellbeing reported by people aged between 18-25 years and 76+ years. Subjective Wellbeing lowers during the busiest years of life associated with work, family, financial and relationship responsibilities and begins an upward trajectory from the ages of 56-65 and 66-75 years.

## WHO YOU LIVE WITH

Relationships are important to wellbeing. Subjective Wellbeing is significantly higher in people who live with a partner regardless of whether they live with, or without, children. Subjective Wellbeing is lowest in sole parents, people who live with their parents and people who live alone.

## MARITAL STATUS

Being separated has a particularly negative impact on Subjective Wellbeing and people who are separated report significantly lower levels of wellbeing. People who are married, de facto or widowed report significantly higher wellbeing than people who are separated. People who are married report the highest levels of wellbeing of all marital status categories. Lowest levels of Subjective Wellbeing are associated with being separated, never married and divorced and these categories are often below expected population level normative ranges.

## EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Being productive and having a purpose in life is an important influence of Subjective Wellbeing. This can be achieved in a number of different ways and people who are engaged in employment, study, home duties, volunteering or are retired have significantly higher levels of Subjective Wellbeing than people who are unemployed. This is consistent with extensive research describing the benefits of employment to health.<sup>34, 35</sup>



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# AUSTRALIAN UNITY WELLBEING INDEX

## PERSONAL WELLBEING INDEX

The following questions ask about people’s satisfaction with different aspects of their life. Please circle a response between 0 and 10 for each of the following questions.

**1. Thinking about your own life and personal circumstances, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?**

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

No satisfaction at all \_\_\_\_\_ Completely satisfied

**2. How satisfied are you with your standard of living?**

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

No satisfaction at all \_\_\_\_\_ Completely satisfied

**3. How satisfied are you with your health?**

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

No satisfaction at all \_\_\_\_\_ Completely satisfied

**4. How satisfied are you with what you are currently achieving in life?**

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

No satisfaction at all \_\_\_\_\_ Completely satisfied

**5. How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?**

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

No satisfaction at all \_\_\_\_\_ Completely satisfied

**6. How satisfied are you with how safe you feel?**

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

No satisfaction at all \_\_\_\_\_ Completely satisfied

**7. How satisfied are you with feeling part of your community?**

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

No satisfaction at all \_\_\_\_\_ Completely satisfied

**8. How satisfied are you with your future security?**

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

No satisfaction at all \_\_\_\_\_ Completely satisfied