HLI's Research Agenda for 2026 and 2025 Recap

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At the Happier Lives Institute (HLI), we search for the most cost-effective ways of improving lives globally, as measured by wellbeing outcomes. We are the first and only organisation focused on this topic. This report sets out our current research priorities.

Please contact us at Michael@happierlivesinstitute.org if you are a decision-maker interested in research consultancy, or if you would like to support our work by funding us.

If you have any comments or questions on the Research Agenda, or if you are a researcher interested in collaborating, reach out to joel@happierlivesinstitute.org.

2025 Research Recap

- In 2025, we published a chapter in the World Happiness Report— the first-ever global comparison of charities by the happiness they create per dollar.
- In support of this chapter, we authored around 20 blog posts which helped capitalise on the attention surrounding the World Happiness Report and drive traffic to our (newly renovated) website. A notable post that gathered traction was our deep dive into why large multi-armed charities are rarely good philanthropic bets.
- We authored a mental health report for Bloom, renewing the case that mental health remains an important cause area for those concerned about improving global wellbeing as much as possible.
- This was alongside our quarterly research support for Bloom's 2025 grantmaking.
- We supported High Impact Athletes in developing the mental health portfolio for their Hyrox "Race for Impact" Partnership, which has already raised $3M. 39% of racers have chosen to fundraise to improve mental wellbeing across the globe. We take this as a promising sign for the demand for charities targeted at improving mental wellbeing amongst the pool of potential effective givers.
- As part of this, we performed an analysis of Action for Happiness. We plan to revise and publish it with more time and resources, but it is not currently a priority.

- We collaborated with Giving What We Can's "Evaluating the Evaluators" project, which did not result in a recommendation, but we were pleased to be described as a "promising charity". This collaboration led to the start of several projects we hope to advance throughout 2026:
    - Creating a view on time discounting and applying this consistently across analyses.
    - Updating and harmonising our income-to-wellbeing conversion rate across reports.
    - Mental health → SWB conversion: Translating mental-health measures into WELLBYs.
- We completed the bulk of the work on three research projects, which are either published or forthcoming:
    - An investigation into Shamiri (CEA): School-based psychotherapy intervention for Kenyan secondary students.
    - An updated cause area report on reducing pain.
    - Happiness vs. life-satisfaction priorities (Fundamental): Literature review comparing implications for using different wellbeing measures for cause prioritisation.
- We also set aside some work and are unsure if we'll complete it in 2026:
    - Sangath school mental-health programme (CEA / Scoping): Investigate an Indian school-based wellbeing programme that reduces bullying and improves school wellbeing based on a large RCT.
- We also supported the launch of our Happier Lives Fund, raised over $70k in its first month of December 2025 alone.
- We also gave a number of talks, which we've summarised in our annual review.

Our 2026 Research Agenda

This research agenda provides an overview of our upcoming work for 2026, broken down by research type. It contains a broad set of projects we intend to pursue, though we do not expect to complete all of them with our current research capacity.

Exploring New Cause Areas

We plan to produce cause area reports on two topics. If promising interventions are identified, we will begin charity evaluations later in the year.

- **Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)**, including household violence and potentially violence against children.
- **Palliative care and pain relief**, building on our earlier work in this area.

Finding More Cost-Effective Funding Opportunities

Our primary goal this year is to find excellent charities with large funding needs. Planned charity evaluations for 2026 include:

- **Palliative care charities**, including Pallium and similar models providing end-of-life care in low- and middle-income countries.
- **A parenting or violence reduction charity,** depending on which appears most promising after our cause area research.
- **Against Malaria Foundation**: Updating our analysis and re-examining its life-improving benefits.

Methods and Fundamental Work

We will continue to work on projects with broad applications for improving wellbeing, not necessarily tied to individual charity evaluations.

- **Happiness vs. life satisfaction priorities**: Investigating how the choice of wellbeing measure—life satisfaction, happiness, or other affect measures—changes which interventions and cause areas appear most promising. This is a two-stage project: a literature review followed by an empirical analysis of how direct happiness measurement affects cause prioritisation.
- **Due diligence and reliability improvements**: Strengthening our charity due diligence process and making our analyses more reliable and replicable.
- **A guide to our methodology**: Writing an accessible guide explaining our evaluation approach and seeking feedback and buy-in from others working in impact evaluation.
- **Updating how we weigh evidence**: Revisiting how we weight different sources of evidence—such as RCTs, quasi-experimental studies, and monitoring data—to arrive at our overall cost-effectiveness estimates.
- **Wellbeing weights:** Publishing a report on our version of moral weights, which will include:
    - Time discounting: Developing our approach to discounting the future benefits of interventions, which has potentially significant implications for how we compare charities.
    - DALY-to-WELLBY conversions.
    - Income-to-WELLBY conversions.
    - An explanation of our wellbeing-focused worldview.

Maintenance and Ongoing Work

Some of our work is not novel but is essential to maintain every year. This includes advising grantmaking, monitoring our recommended charities, and contributing to our living review of WELLBY cost-effectiveness analyses.

Research Consultancy, Collaboration, and Conditional Projects

We have not completely finalised our plan for this year's work. If you are interested in shaping our research agenda by providing input on important research topics, please reach out.

If you want to influence our work, we are open to ~~bribery~~ consulting work for funders or evaluators who want to use the wellbeing approach to assess how impactful different projects are. Contact us at hello@happierlivesinstitute.org if you are interested in tailored, impact-oriented research.

We are also currently writing grants to fund several projects (see here for an overview). Email joel@happierlivesinstitute.org for the full pitches and proposals for these projects. These projects include:

- **The first causal study of the effect of early-life lead exposure on adult mental wellbeing.** Theory of impact: Better evidence leads to higher cost-effectiveness estimates and higher confidence, allowing us to recommend more funds to high-impact lead exposure reduction charities, resulting in a high ROI on money leveraged towards eliminating lead.
- **An RCT to assess the degree of response bias in M&E in mental health charities.** Theory of impact: Finding evidence of response bias and ways to reduce it in routine M&E will encourage better standards. As mental health charities adopt better M&E standards, quality improves. This ultimately leads to MH charities funding more effective programmes and fixing problematic programmes, and mental health funders funding more effective mental health charities, resulting in high cost-effectiveness of money going to global MH.
- **A cause area report on the causes of anti-system attitudes** (with a specific concern about anti-democratic political attitudes), their relationship to wellbeing, and the most cost-effective interventions for reducing these attitudes. This steps outside our comfort zone of exclusively wellbeing research, but we hope to work on this in collaboration with other organisations, and we believe it is timely and potentially worthwhile.

Field Building and Outreach

Communicating our findings remains an important part of our work. In 2026, we plan to present at conferences and continue building the field of wellbeing impact evaluation.

What's on the Horizon: Things We're Looking Forward to in 2027

While not priorities for 2026, we are keeping an eye on several topics for future research, including:

- Education and socio-emotional learning interventions
- New cause area scoping for 2027 (such as corruption)
- Academic publication of our psychotherapy meta-analysis

There are also several organisations that have had recent RCTs of their programme, or will complete an RCT and write-up in 2026. We expect that, for most of these, we will only be able to analyse the results in late 2026 but more likely 2027.

- Labhya has undergone a recent RCT, and we are awaiting a paper about their programme.
- Kaya Guides plans to do an RCT in 2026, and we hope we can use it to evaluate them in 2027.
- StrongMinds plans to do an RCT in 2026, and we hope we can use it to update our evaluation of them in 2027.

If you like our research and would like it to continue, please consider funding us. At this point, funding us likely makes us more cost-effective by allowing us to spend more time on research and less time on fundraising and grant writing.

Things That Are Out of Scope Due to Capacity Constraints

- Wellbeing measurement guidance (Methodology): Practical recommendations for evaluators and funders.
- Overcome (CEA): Evaluating low-cost remote mental-health support using graduate counsellors.
- Pure Earth (CEA): Providing an updated and cross-programme cost-effectiveness analysis of the wellbeing benefits of pollution reduction.
- Cash transfers (GiveDirectly) (CEA): Updating wellbeing impact estimates.
- Evaluating graduation programmes such as the 100 Weeks programme.
- Household wellbeing spillovers (Methodology): Draft working paper formalising current estimates.
- Positive education brief (Cause Area / Explainer): Explaining why this approach appears less promising.
- MANGOs note (Methodology / Explainer): Clarifying challenges of evaluating multi-armed NGOs.
- SWB scales in LMICs (Methodology / Fundamental): Reviewing the reliability, validity, and clustering of SWB measures in LMICs.
- Updating grief spillovers.
- Analysing causal effects of lead on wellbeing.
- Contributing to WELLBY CEA literature with file-drawer BOTECs (TECHO, Earthenable, Fistula).
- Psychedelics memo (Cause Area / Explainer): Explaining why the area does not appear to be cost-effective.