

The power of starting small

How we can create happier neighbourhoods



BONAVA

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INTRODUCTION

The great impact of small, everyday actions

At Bonava we aspire to create happy neighbourhoods for the many. As a residential developer, we are on a constant quest to explore new ways of how we can design homes and neighbourhoods that contribute to a more happy, sustainable and healthy society. To be able to fulfil this purpose, we need to really understand what happy neighbourhoods mean to people.

That's why we, in 2017, initiated **Happy Quest**, our ongoing research project where we ask people in our markets what factors they value in their homes and neighbourhoods. What has become obvious is that the living situation has a significant impact on people's general happiness. This year, the results show that how satisfied people are with their home and neighbourhood stands for almost 20 percent of their general life happiness. And when it comes to how happy people are where they live, Swedes are the happiest followed by Finns and Norwegians.

When it comes to what actually makes people happy in their homes and neighbourhoods, there's of course no one size fits all. However, through years of research, we have identified a few common factors. These factors form the basis for what we call the **House of Happiness***, our data driven model for developing happy neighbourhoods. The model consists of four elements: 1) **Functional**, the need for a hassle-free lifestyle through e.g. transport,

education and location 2) **Emotional**, the need for well-being and a healthy lifestyle 3) **Community**, which captures the social need and a sense of belonging and 4) **Neighbourhood purpose**, which relates to purpose creation – having an impact on others as well as on the community. Each element represents a floor in the house. In the model, the level of happiness increases by each floor.

While all floors are equally important for creating neighbourhood happiness, in this report we will focus on the two at the top: **Community** and **Neighbourhood purpose**. After a few challenging years where distancing rather than coming together has been the paradigm, and a feeling of loneliness became an even bigger issue than before in our globalized and digitalized society, we have some catching up to do on these aspects of neighbourhood life.

By sharing the insights from our study, together with inspiring neighbourhood examples from all over the world, as well

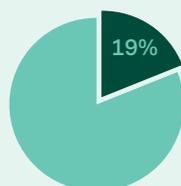


as knowledge and tips from our happiness experts, we hope that this report will provide a deeper understanding of how we all can level up our neighbourhood happiness through community and a common purpose. **Because if there is one thing that we have learned writing this report, it is that even the smallest, everyday interactions that we as people engage in can have great and long-lasting impact – for ourselves, our neighbours, and the planet.**

Happy reading.

STATE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD HAPPINESS 2022

Impact of home and neighbourhood satisfaction on general life happiness



Neighbourhood happiness**

All markets	77
Sweden	80
Finland	79
Norway	78
Latvia	76
Germany	74
Estonia	72

* Read more about the House of Happiness in our previous report, The Happy Neighbourhood Report 2019

** An explanation of the Neighbourhood Happy Index can be found on page 21

We've got some social catching up to do

For most of us, the last few years have meant that many social activities were put on pause. While it's still difficult to say what consequences the recent lack of social interaction will have on people's well-being, what we can say is that we have some social catching up to do. Because social interactions and connections – of all sorts – play an important role in our lives.

In this chapter we look more specifically at the importance of neighbour relationships, and the positive effects that come with interacting more with our neighbours. We'll show that there are many groundless reasons to not interact with your neighbours, but more proven reasons to overcome the social thresholds.

The strong – but undervalued – value of “weak ties”

It is well-known that strong social connections, such as family and friends, play an essential role in our lives and are crucial for our well-being. However, more experts are highlighting the importance of less close relationships – sometimes referred to as “weak ties”.¹ For example, it has been shown that also momentary social connections can enhance things like empathy, happiness and cognitive development, as well as ease loneliness and deepen our sense of belonging.² Thus, there is a lot to win by making sure we have relationships on all sorts of levels. The relationships many of us have with our neighbours are typical of what can be defined as “weak ties”.³ When you think about it, the character of neighbour relationships is quite special: while we live close to one another, we seldom socialize or engage on a deeper level, and many of us probably do not reflect on how doing so could affect our well-being or happiness. However, maybe it is time that we do.

The happiness experts: It’s time to upgrade the importance of neighbour relationships

While more research shows the importance and positive health effects of less close connections, the experts we have talked to tell us that people in general tend to undervalue the importance of neighbour relationships. This might come with a cost to well-being, sense of belonging and ultimately happiness. Science journalist **Marta Zaraska** explains that our need for both strong and weaker connections is deeply rooted in humans:

– We humans have evolved to live in tribes. To feel happy and content, we need many

different kinds of social connections, not just to our closest family and friends. If our only social connections are close friends and family members, who perhaps live far away and that we seldom meet, there’s a risk that we lack a sense of safety and connection in the community where we actually conduct our day-to-day life. That’s why these less strong social ties and momentary interactions, such as greeting a neighbour or exchanging a few words with the local shop owner, are so important.

To describe the direct impact neighbourhood community can have on people’s well-being, Marta explains the study that has late given name to the phenomenon “The Roseto Effect”:

– It comes from a study that was conducted on residents in the American village Roseto in the 1950s. The researchers were fascinated by the residents’ extraordinary health despite their poor diet, and high cigarette and alcohol consumption. What the researchers found was that the community largely consisted of Italian immigrants who had maintained their strong social neighbourhood lifestyle from their home country, for example frequently popping by to see their neighbours and holding large communal events where everybody was invited. This has been an important proof point for the importance of neighbourhood community to our health.

Just like Marta, Professor Markku Ojanen says that people tend to undervalue the importance of neighbour relationships. He believes this can be explained in part by the Western world’s transition from a collectivistic to an individualistic society:

– As we have become more individualistic and self-sufficient, we tend to depend – or

at least believe that we depend – less on one another. As a result, most of us focus on individual aspects, when we are trying to become happier and more fulfilled. But if we believe we can only become happier through making a career or optimising our physical health, we neglect the importance of relational factors.

I believe it’s time to shift focus, to ask ourselves: How can I become more satisfied and happy in my life through connecting more with the people around me? And then I mean both close relations, such as our partner, and less strong connections, such as neighbours.

Small interactions have big impact: A simple “hello” can go a long way

So, neighbour relationships can have an important positive impact on our well-being. But could interacting and engaging with our neighbours really make us happier? According to our study, it can. By looking at how different types of interactions affect people’s reported level of general life happiness and neighbourhood happiness, the results show that people who interact more often with their neighbours in different ways report higher levels of both general life happiness and neighbourhood happiness, than those who seldom interact with their neighbours. Those who have interacted or talked with their neighbours during the past week report feeling around 15 percent happier than people who haven’t done so in more than a year. Further, those who live in neighbourhoods where they feel neighbours and other people have good relationships are on average 55 percent happier in their neighbourhood, and 30 percent happier in general.

DIFFERENCE IN REPORTED LEVEL OF HAPPINESS AMONG PEOPLE WHO HAVE INTERACTED WITH THEIR NEIGHBOURS IN THE PAST WEEK COMPARED TO WITH THOSE WHO HAVEN’T DONE SO IN MORE THAN A YEAR*

Type of interaction	General Happiness	Neighbourhood Happiness
Greeted a neighbour	+17 % ↑	+30 % ↑
Talked with a neighbour	+15 % ↑	+24 % ↑
Socialised with a neighbour in my home or garden	+10 % ↑	+15 % ↑
Socialised with a neighbour in his/her home or garden	+9 % ↑	+15 % ↑
Socialised with a neighbour outside our homes/gardens	+6 % ↑	+11 % ↑

Q: There are different ways of interacting with neighbours. When was the last time you did the following? N=6590

*Percentage increase in happiness index, based on respondents answering “Past week” compared to respondents answering “More than a year ago” or “Has not happened” for each activity listed above.

1. <https://culdesac.com/blog/post/walkability-and-happiness>

2. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/608695/the-power-of-strangers-by-joe-keohane/>

3. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0146167214529799>

The more we interact with our neighbours, the safer we feel in our neighbourhoods

In addition to feeling happier, our study shows that people who interact more with their neighbours also say they feel safer in their neighbourhood. Again, the results shed light on the great impact of even the smallest interactions, as “greeting a neighbour” showed the biggest difference in perceived safety: Across markets, those who had greeted their neighbour in the past week reported a 21 percent higher level of perceived safety compared to those who hadn’t greeted a neighbour for more than a year or not at all. This is an important insight, as “feeling safe” is the factor that people rank as the most important for liking and feeling at home in their neighbourhood.

It’s time to combat social thresholds and close “the liking gap”

Now that we know that even the smallest interactions might have a great impact on our happiness, taking the step to actually say “hello” or small talk might be easier said than done. This is something Professor **Markku Ojanen** can relate to. As a “hard-core introvert”, he admits having struggled to chit-chat with his neighbours, and understands that people might hesitate to initiate contact randomly. But by challenging himself to interact more with his own neighbours, he has noticed the positive impact:

– My mood is actually lighter, and I take notice of the external world in a way I didn’t before. What I’ve realized is just how little it takes. You don’t have to start an advanced or super interesting conversation, it’s the interaction in itself that is important, not the subject. In fact, you do not even have to say a word, a smile is enough to get that positive feeling you get from human interaction.

Markku believes that another threshold for initiating contact with our neighbours is that people worry that the other person will think we are weird or that we are being intrusive. Research shows that people systematically underestimate how well-liked they are in conversations. Even in situations where the person they’re talking with gives signals that they’re enjoying the conversation, such as smiling, people tend to believe the other person thinks the worst of us. This tendency even has a psychological term: “the liking gap”.^{4,5} Thus, there are many groundless reasons why you wouldn’t interact with your neighbours, but more proven reasons to overcome the social thresholds and just say “hello”.

You don’t have to start an advanced or super interesting conversation, it’s the interaction in itself that is important, not the subject. In fact, you do not even have to say a word, a smile is enough to get that positive feeling you get from human interaction.

Markku Ojanen,
Professor Emeritus of Psychology

Planting, barbequing or practicing yoga – The many ways and places to come together

Once we’ve combatted the social thresholds and saying hello or chit-chatting to our neighbours comes more naturally, we might be ready for a little bit more

interaction, and perhaps even take the initiative to organise an activity ourselves. Our study not only shows that there is a widespread interest in participating in activities with our neighbours, but also that it has an effect on happiness: People who live in a neighbourhood where it’s easy to initiate activities on average report 21 percent higher general life happiness and 30 percent higher neighbourhood happiness. So what activities are people interested in doing with their neighbours? Across all markets, people are most up for social gatherings and maintaining the neighbourhood.

In Germany and Norway, people are most up for social gatherings, with 47 and 48 percent respectively saying they are interested in doing this with their neighbours, compared to 28 and 30 percent respectively in Latvia and Estonia. However, Latvians and Estonians are more interested than other countries in participating in activities to maintain the neighbourhood (32 percent of Latvians and 33 percent of Estonians). When it comes to actually organising activities, quite a large share, around one in six (16 percent) across all markets say they have organized an activity in their neighbourhood in the last year, and almost one in five (19 percent) say they are interested in doing so. All in all, this shows both the importance of and value in creating neighbourhoods with spaces that enable and encourage people to meet outside of their homes to socialise and be active.

TOP 5 LIST: THE ACTIVITIES WE PREFER DOING WITH OUR NEIGHBOURS*

- | | |
|---|------|
| 1. Social gatherings, e.g. BBQ or local celebrations | 39 % |
| 2. Maintain the neighbourhood, e.g. painting, clearing weeds or cleaning | 25 % |
| 3. Physical training, e.g. running, walking or yoga | 15 % |
| 4. Support others in the community, e.g. kids or elderly | 15 % |
| 5. Initiatives for a sustainable lifestyle, e.g. flea markets, exchanging goods | 13 % |

Q: What of the following would you like to do together with your neighbours? N=6590

*This table represents the most popular response options, several other response options, not included in this table, were available to survey respondents.

The expert explains: This happens in our body when we interact with people



While our study shows that interacting with our neighbours seems to make us happier, we wanted to understand what happens from a scientific perspective when we for example greet or talk to a neighbour. To find out, we turned to Marta Zaraska. As a science reporter and author of a book about the science of happiness, she has gone through piles of research on the subject.

Marta, what happens in our body when we interact with people?

– When we connect with other people, our body releases so called “social hormones” such as oxytocin, serotonin and endorphins. These hormones are linked to feelings of

love, happiness and pleasure, and make you feel warm and fuzzy. But there are also many direct health effects which we don’t often talk about. For instance, the release of these hormones has anti-inflammatory properties, reduces pain and helps regulate blood pressure. They have even been proven to help bone growth, which reduces the risk of osteoporosis. Another very important benefit of social interaction is that it works with our stress response system. Interacting with others can help dampen the release of stress hormones like cortisol, which will not only make you calm in the moment, but can have positive long-term health effects.

Tips on small actions you can take today

- ✓ A smile will go a long way. But for the one up for a challenge, try a monthly one to become better at making small interactions with your neighbours. Start the first week with smiles, then level up to saying “hello” or make small comments during the second and third week. And by week four, try to small talk with at least one neighbour for a few minutes.
- ✓ Our study shows that there is a widespread interest in participating in activities with one’s neighbours, but there is room for more people to actually organize them. Thus, any initiative will be appreciated. Take the chance to become a praised neighbour by inviting the neighbourhood for a potluck barbeque or just a walk. If it feels like a big project to do it yourself, why not do it together with a neighbour?

Neighbourhood happiness amplifiers: Engaging, sharing and helping

Now that we've learned the many positive effects of interacting with our neighbours, let's have a look at what behaviours we can adopt to increase not just our own, but also neighbours' happiness.

In this chapter we will present three "neighbourhood happiness amplifiers", simple actions that we all can take to make ourselves and our surroundings happier. You will learn why it's so important to keep our neighbourhoods well-kept and what things and spaces we are most willing to share. Finally, our happiness expert explains the science behind why we can become both happier and healthier by lending a helping hand to a neighbour.

Happiness amplifier # 1: Engaging in your neighbourhood

Looks do matter

Caring about looks may seem shallow, but research shows that keeping the neighbourhood nice and clean can have a significant impact on people's well-being. For example, in a study conducted in areas of Philadelphia where many live below the poverty line, residents reported a 70 percent drop in depression after public spaces were cleaned and greened.⁶ That appearance is important is confirmed in our study, as "that the neighbourhood is well-kept and clean" is ranked as the second most important driver of neighbourhood happiness. Further, people who live in neighbourhoods that are well-kept and clean in general score 27 percent higher on general life happiness. As we saw in the previous chapter, there is also a lot of interest among people in engaging in activities to maintain the neighbourhood, such as painting or clearing weeds. We can also see that people who report having possibilities for their own or common plantings are 24 percent happier in their neighbourhoods in general.

The power of neighbourhood empowerment

It has long been known that people tend to appreciate things more when we ourselves have put in some work to create them, for example when it comes to putting together furniture.⁷ The positive effects of being able to impact something can be applied to the places we live as well. Today, participatory design is a well-used approach in urban planning, a key factor in models for planning and evaluating communities, such as The Thriving Places Index.⁸ Now, our study suggests that being able to impact your neighbourhood also has an impact on happiness, as people who

live in neighbourhoods where they feel they can influence the development of their neighbourhood report 21 percent higher general happiness levels.

Happiness amplifier # 2: Sharing spaces and things with your neighbours

The sharing economy, a socio-economic system built around the sharing of resources, is growing globally and in most sectors – not least when it comes to city and housing development. Sharing spaces and things with our neighbours comes with many benefits for both people and planet, as it is resource efficient, increases sense of community and combats isolation. Across the world we see the development of neighbourhoods that are built on the idea of facilitating sharing both spaces and things to become more sociable and sustainable. One example is **Culdesac Tempe** in Arizona, a neighbourhood designed with the purpose to facilitate social connections, combat loneliness and increase the residents' well-being.⁹ The neighbourhood has lots of open spaces to facilitate both spontaneous and planned interactions, and through the "Extend Your Home On-Demand" program, residents have access to over 30 different spaces, such as a makerspace, office space, and podcast studio.¹⁰

Our study confirms the positive impact of common spaces that facilitate interaction: People who live in neighbourhoods that have common places where they can enjoy spending time are 19 percent happier in their neighbourhoods, and 15 percent happier in life in general. Further, those who live in neighbourhoods where there are places and occasions that facilitate encounters with others report being 19 percent happier in life in

general, and 30 percent happier in their neighbourhoods. This really shows the importance of making sure that there are spaces to ignite interaction, may it be a space with a pre-defined purpose, such as a hobby room, or a space that allows for different types of interactions and activities, including green areas.

People who live in neighbourhoods that are well-kept and clean in general score

27%

higher on general life happiness

Given the many positive effects of sharing, it is great to see that quite a large proportion of people in our study are willing to share both spaces and things with their neighbours. In general, we people are most open to share spaces, such as an outdoor BBQ area, gym and outdoor spaces. There is also an interest in sharing hobby rooms. The space we are less open to share with our neighbours? Not surprisingly, the bathroom: Only one percent responded they were interested in sharing this space with their neighbours. There are also some interesting differences between countries. For example, 39 percent in Finland are open to share a gym, compared to only 11 percent in Germany. When it comes to outdoor spaces, Estonians are most open to share these, with almost 37 percent compared to 18 percent in Sweden and Norway and only 8 percent in Germany.

TOP 10 LIST: THE THINGS AND SPACES WE ARE MOST WILLING TO SHARE WITH OUR NEIGHBOURS*

1. Outdoor BBQ area	27 %
2. Gym	23 %
3. Outdoor space (e.g. pergola, rooftop garden)	23 %
4. Multipurpose room for social activities (e.g. association premises, event space)	23 %
5. Tools	23 %
6. Planting areas (e.g. green house, gardens)	19 %
7. Workshop	17 %
8. Hobby room (for e.g. handicraft, recreation activities)	15 %
9. Spa/sauna	15 %
10. Laundry room	13 %

Q: What of the following options would you be interested to share with people that live in your neighbourhood? N=6590

*This table represents the most popular response options, several other response options, not included in this table, were available to survey respondents.

6. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2688343>

7. https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/norton%20mochon%20ariely_6f7b1134-06ef-4940-a2a5-ba1b3be7e47e.pdf

8. <https://www.thrivingplacesindex.org/page/about/about-the-tpi#>

9. <https://culdesac.com/blog/post/walkability-and-happiness>

10. <https://culdesac.com/tempe/floor-plans>



Happiness amplifier # 3:

Giving your neighbour a helping hand

A third way to amplify our neighbourhood happiness is by practicing acts of kindness towards our neighbours. Our study shows that helping others has a significant impact on our happiness: People who have helped, lent or given something to their neighbour report higher levels of both general life happiness and neighbourhood happiness. Further, people who live in neighbourhoods where they believe neighbours are willing to help each other when needed report being 23 percent

Research shows that people tend to pay kindness forward to others. This means that by just reaching out to one neighbour, you will start a ripple effect where helpfulness – and thereby happiness – will spread throughout the neighbourhood.

Marta Zaraska,
Science reporter

happier in life in general and 40 percent happier in their neighbourhoods.

Science reporter **Marta Zaraska** explains that kindness has a contagious effect, which leads to more positives for the neighbourhood:

– Research shows that people tend to pay kindness forward to others. This means that by just reaching out to one neighbour, you will start a ripple effect where helpfulness – and thereby happiness – will spread throughout the neighbourhood. This will also help build a sense of trust and community in the area.

INCREASED DEGREE OF HAPPINESS BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO HAVE OFFERED OR RECEIVED HELP OR THINGS FROM THEIR NEIGHBOURS THE PAST WEEK COMPARED TO THOSE WHO HAVEN'T DONE SO IN MORE THAN A YEAR OR NOT AT ALL*

	General Happiness	Neighbourhood Happiness
Asked a neighbour for help	+7% ↑	+13% ↑
A neighbour asked for help	+7% ↑	+14% ↑
Lent something to a neighbour	+7% ↑	+12% ↑
A neighbour gave something to me	+7% ↑	+13% ↑
Gave something to a neighbour	+7% ↑	+14% ↑

Q: There are different ways of interacting with neighbours. When was the last time you did the following? N=6590

*Percentage increase in happiness index ranking, based on respondents answering "Past week" compared to respondents answering "More than a year ago" or "Has not happened".

The expert explains: The science behind why we get happier by helping

Most of us can relate to that warm feeling we get inside our body when we help and give something to others. But what exactly happens in our body? Again, we turned to science reporter Marta Zaraska to find out. In addition to going through research and writing about the connection between helping and happiness, she has conducted a study to investigate the effects of acts of kindness.

So why do we get happier by helping others?

– When we help others, our bodies activate our so called “caregiving systems”. These systems are mainly designed to help us care for our children, which can be very challenging and stressful on the body. The caregiving system triggers our reward system, to let our bodies know we are doing something good. It also lowers the level of the stress hormone cortisol and dampens the fight-or-flight response our body has when experiencing stressful situations. Prolonged periods of stress are harmful on our bodies, so the more time we spend helping others and thereby activating our caregiving systems, the more time we ease our bodies of the stresses of daily life. In the long-term, this can improve our physical and mental health.

Large, randomized trials show that even the smallest acts of kindness have a positive effect on our health.

Marta Zaraska,
Science reporter

Does the size of the good deed matter for the impact of our happiness?

– Interestingly – and positively – large, randomized trials show that even the smallest acts of kindness have a positive effect on our health. This is actually something I’ve experienced myself. For the purpose of my book, I did a study together with researchers from King’s College in London to measure how acts of kindness effected my cortisol levels. The days I performed small acts of kindness, like leaving a post-it note with a smiley face on my neighbour’s car or picking up trash around the neighbourhood, my cortisol levels were much more stable. So you really don’t have to make great deeds to notice the positive effects.



Tips on small actions you can take today



Think of ways to help improve the atmosphere in your neighbourhood and make your neighbourhood look well-kept, such as planting some flowers or picking up litter. And why not make it a social activity? Take inspiration from the community group **Love Our Street** in Melbourne, where residents gather once a month to remove litter from the streets and parks for an hour, followed by gathering for “a cuppa” (coffee, that is).¹¹



Challenge yourself to practice small acts of kindness in your neighbourhood – such as picking up your neighbor’s garbage or offering to buy groceries for an elderly neighbour. Why not make your own, less scientific, version of Marta Zaraska’s study? Take daily notes on your mood to see if you notice any difference.

11. <https://www.beachpatrol.com.au/los>

The triple win of happy neighbourhoods

So far we've identified actions that make us as individuals happier, and what activities we can engage in to create happier neighbourhoods.

In this last chapter, we will look into yet an additional dimension of happiness and the positive effects of everyday actions. We will explore the interlinkage between happy, sustainable and inclusive places, and see how the activities we engage in in our neighbourhood can play an important role in combatting societal challenges on a global level.



The connection between happy, sustainable and inclusive places

A theme that is becoming more highlighted in neighbourhood and city development is the interlinkage between people's well-being, sustainability, and inclusion. By putting the well-being of people and planet in the centre, urban planners are looking at ways to develop urban places that support rather than combat sustainability and well-being, and envision a future where urban spaces become "powerhouses" for health and climate.¹² In this context, there is also an increased interest in studying the intersection between urban design and happiness, and urbanists argue that developing places that make people happier will be key to tackling many of the most urgent challenges of our age, such as climate change, social exclusion and health problems.¹³

One element in urban spaces that illustrates the interlinkage between the well-being of people and planet is nature and green open spaces. Mounting evidence shows the many positive effects of green space. For example, green areas serve as stepping stones for animals and plants, which make them important for biodiversity and to increase resilience to climate change.¹⁴ Further, green urban spaces are accessible for everyone, and encourage both sustainable, social and healthy behaviours, for example walking or cycling rather than driving and enabling encounters between neighbours. Thus, green urban spaces are being described as providing "a triple win" for climate, people and the planet.¹⁵

That there is a connection between happy, sustainable and healthy places is supported in our study. Again, we can see the positive effects of green spaces, as people who live in neighbourhoods that are close to parks and green areas report on average 18 percent higher scores of general life happiness, and 38 percent higher neighbourhood happiness. Further, those who feel their neighbourhood supports an environmentally friendly and sustainable lifestyle report being 22 percent happier in life in general and 37 percent happier in their neighbourhood, and those who feel their neighbourhood supports a healthy lifestyle report being 23 percent happier in life in general and 31 percent happier in their neighbourhood. Also, those who live in neighbourhoods with good walkability and bikeability in general report 17 percent higher in general life happiness and 27 percent higher in neighbourhood happiness. Thus, developing neighbourhoods that are sustainable is not only crucial if we want to make less damage to the climate, but is also key to elevate people's happiness.

As the interlinkage between people and planet well-being is becoming more evident and important, more community builders are taking a holistic approach to sustainability when developing neighbourhoods. Perhaps one of the most ambitious projects is the **UN17 Village** in Copenhagen, it is the first project ever designed to address all of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in one holistic approach. The village, currently

under development, puts biodiversity and reducing emissions at equal importance with supporting the residents' mental and physical health, and building a strong community. When completed, UN17 Village will offer different types of apartments at affordable prices to promote a mix of residents in terms of age, gender, family size and employment, and through universal design the area will ensure equality and inclusion for people with physical and mental disabilities. Further, the common facilities will support specific activities that facilitate both connection and a sustainable lifestyle, such as neighbourhood activities, organised group meals, volunteer work, cultivating kitchen gardens, repairing bicycles and a homework café. To support the residents' well-being, all UN17 Village residents will be offered regular check-ups at the Health Clinic, where they also can get consultations and access to weekly menu plans, training programmes, counselling, online courses and teaching.¹⁶

People who live in a neighbourhood that supports an environmentally friendly and sustainable lifestyle report being

22%

happier in life in general

12. https://www.swecourbaninsight.com/news-item/the-happy-healthy-city-a-dream-or-tomorrows-reality/#_edn9

13. <https://happycities.com/the-book>

14. <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/67/9/799/4056044>

15. <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/16/22/4403/htm>

16. <http://www.un17village.dk/en/>



By engaging more in “neighbourhood happiness amplifier” activities, we can all contribute to a positive change and make the world happier, more sustainable and equal. Global change starts with local action.

Local community empowerment as a force to tackle global challenges

As we saw in chapter two, many people are either engaging in or are interested in engaging in activities, such as maintaining the neighbourhood, sharing spaces and things with their neighbours and helping their neighbours. We could also see that these activities, and the feeling of being able to influence the development of one’s neighbourhood, make people feel happier, both in general and in their neighbourhood. Lately, it is becoming highlighted that in addition to positive effects on the local, personal and interpersonal level,

community engagement and social activities can also have great, long-term impact on a global level. For example, in a recently launched report from the UK think-tank IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research) it is concluded that many community projects – such as community gardens, car-pooling, swap shops and repair cafés – play an important role in reducing emissions, and at the same improve the citizen’s health and well-being, while reducing poverty and increasing local control. Although increasing health, wealth and quality of life often is the end goal, the activities contribute to improving

the climate as well. Since a more local framing drives engagement, the think-tank recommends “a major ‘paradigm shift’” for a new approach where communities are put at the heart of addressing the climate crisis.¹⁷

Thus, by engaging more in “neighbourhood happiness amplifier” activities, we can all contribute to a positive change and make the world happier, more sustainable and equal. Global change starts with local action.

Tips on small actions you can take today

- ✓ Want to take action to make your neighbourhood more sustainable for people and planet, but lack inspiration or don’t know how to? Several organisations have developed guides and tools to help people (regardless of background or previous experience) make places better by engaging in different community activities, which you can use as inspiration. Placemaking Europe has an open-source toolbox with guides on how to organise things like seed and plant swaps¹⁸, pop-up cafés¹⁹ or activity trails.²⁰
- ✓ Many have our own “life hacks” to live more sustainably in our homes and neighbourhoods, such as saving water or electricity, or making sustainable choices when it comes to electricity contracts or renovation. Why not share it with your neighbours in a common Facebook group, and encourage others to share theirs?

17. <https://rri-tools.eu/-/the-climate-commons-how-communities-can-thrive-in-a-climate-changing-world>

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/mar/10/study-highlights-under-the-radar-uk-community-projects-green-benefits>

18. https://placemaking-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/listing-uploads/file/2021/01/Nabolagshager-plant-and-seed-swaps_final1-1.pdf

19. <https://placemaking-europe.eu/listing/pop-up-cafe-tool-manual/>

20. <https://placemaking-europe.eu/listing/activity-trail/>

The Bonava approach and some examples of what we do

Creating happy neighbourhoods for the many is our purpose. By exploring people's needs and driving forces we get a deeper understanding and knowledge about how this could be done. Our homes and neighbourhoods are built on these insights, and we always strive to develop as green, sustainable and social environments as possible. This holistic approach means that we create areas that provide neighbours with the opportunity to meet, support a healthy and sustainable lifestyle as well as encourage neighbours to hang and do things together.

Here are a few examples of neighbourhoods in our different markets that illustrate how we take our purpose into action.

JOHANNES-KEPPLER-QUARTIER – LÜBECK, GERMANY

In the Johannes-Keppler living quarters in Lübeck buildings are loosely fitted in the area leaving natural space for residents to grow plants and creating natural meeting points for neighbours when walking through the neighbourhood. Residents have also been invited to cooperate with a beekeeper to create wildflower meadows and insect hotels, in the spirit of creating a sustainable neighbourhood together.



GARTNERLIEN – BERGEN, NORWAY

A green and vibrant neighbourhood in the outskirts of Bergen, Gartnerlien centres around a large Orangery where neighbours can gather for gardening, dinners, and other social events. The space has hosted a summer barbecue for over 70 neighbours and has also become the meeting place for Gartnerlien's gardening team – a group of neighbours who enjoy gardening and horticulture.



TOMTEBO GÅRD – UMEÅ, SWEDEN

Just outside of central Umeå the district Tomtebo Gård is taking shape. The neighbourhoods have been designed to support low, sustainable energy consumption according to wishes expressed in dialogue with the citizens. The area is also characterized by the many common areas, such as recreation rooms, ramparts, bicycle workshops and saunas. You can even borrow a canoe and life jacket to enjoy the nearby lake.



SPONSORSHIP TO ENGAGE NEIGHBOURS – LATVIA

To support initiatives for neighbours coming together in the Latvian Bonava neighbourhoods, Bonava offers a sponsorship program that helps fund local activities. Last year the program supported everything from cross fit equipment to gardening tools, to facilitate neighbours teaming up to make their neighbourhood happier. In addition to Latvia, the sponsorship is also offered in Sweden, Germany and Finland.



KANVAASI – HELSINKI, FINLAND

Located close to outdoor areas and bicycle paths, enabling a more sustainable way of commuting, the residents of Kanvaasi form a thriving green community. Although situated in central Helsinki, the neighbourhood offers shared green rooms for urban gardening, which can also be used for hobbies or remote working. As well as a bike fixing spot and two club rooms. The buildings are also equipped with solar panel systems which allows the neighbours to track the production of solar power.



More happiness tips and inspiration

Before we wrap up, we would like to share some tips from our happiness experts on small actions to apply in your life today. And for you who want to dig even deeper into the subject of happiness and neighbourhood connection, we've listed a few recommendations for books and videos.

Tips from the happiness experts: Simple actions to increase your happiness

MARKKU OJANEN, PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

1. **Smile!** It really doesn't take much to improve both your own and others' happiness. In fact, you don't even have to say a word – a smile will go a long way. And as smiles have a contagious effect you will most likely get a smile back!
2. **The topic is less important than the interaction.** Don't worry about saying something irrelevant or silly. Most people will react positively at any interaction. Stop and talk about whatever comes to mind. There is often something you can ask about regarding the neighbourhood, their family or pets.
3. **Connect through common interests.** Try to find common hobbies like gardening, exercise or discussion clubs. Connecting through activities where you share a common aim and values makes it less forced.
4. **Don't hesitate to offer help.** People are very independent these days, but we can all do with a helping hand from time to time. If you know a neighbour that might need some help with grocery shopping or pet sitting – don't hesitate to offer your help!

MARTA ZARASKA, SCIENCE JOURNALIST

1. **Apply the Japanese rule of five.** In Japan there is something called "the rule of five", which means you should know the neighbours on the two sides of your house, and the three houses in front of yours. Let's add another rule of five: try to talk to five neighbours a month, or one neighbour for at least five minutes, and see what comes out of it!
2. **Replace expensive superfoods with a walk in the local area.** Many who try to live healthier go all in on expensive, hard to get superfoods. But instead of taking the car to a supermarket far away to buy that latest super berry, walk to your local supermarket and buy some proper carrots. In addition to saving money and getting some exercise, you will probably get a chance to greet or have a small talk with a few neighbours.
3. **Socialize through exercise.** Did you know that doing things in synchrony with others releases even more happy hormones? That's a good reason for taking a walk or a jog with your neighbour. Even if the exercise becomes a little bit less intense, the positive effects of the social interaction will compensate and add health benefits.
4. **Become stronger by being kind.** By helping a neighbour to cut their grass or shovel snow, you will not only become stronger, but also increase happy hormones from both the exercise and the act of kindness!
5. **Keep it nice and clean.** Engaging in activities together with your neighbours to improve the appearance of your neighbourhood such as planting some flowers or picking up trash on the street – will not only improve the atmosphere, it will also increase your happy hormones and sense of community.



Happiness inspiration for further reading and watching

Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design
 Urbanist Charles Montgomery's book explores how urban design and the science of happiness intersects, with the help of some of the world's most interesting cities as examples.²¹

The Power of Strangers: The Benefits of Connecting in a Suspicious World
 In interviews with psychologists and anthropologists, Joe Keohane deep-dives into how talking to people we don't know enhances empathy, happiness and cognitive development, and how doing so might help tackle social issues at both an individual and societal level.²²

TED Talks: The lies our culture tells us about what matters – and a better way to live
 In his TED Talk, David Brooks, founder of Weave – the social fabric project, speaks on the isolation and fragmentation of society today, and how isolated individuals can find their way back to joy by becoming social weavers in their neighbourhood communities.²³

TED Talks: How cohousing can make us happier (and live longer)
 Architect Grace Kim shares her view on how modern housing breeds isolation and how cohousing can be the solution to the loneliness epidemic. Unlike co-living, Kim explains cohousing solutions mean residents often have their own conventional homes, but also access to communal spaces like gardens, spaces for kids to play, social spaces and communal kitchens for larger dinners.²⁴

21. <https://www.charlesmontgomery.ca/books/>

22. <https://joekehane.net/>

23. https://www.ted.com/talks/david_brooks_the_lies_our_culture_tells_us_about_what_matters_and_a_better_way_to_live

24. https://www.ted.com/talks/grace_kim_how_cohousing_can_make_us_happier_and_live_longer

SUMMARY

Key takeaways

Developing happy neighbourhoods is a constant quest, and by looking at inspiring examples and the results from this year's happy quest, we are adding some more pieces to the puzzle. Here are some of the key takeaways going into our future work.

The great – but undervalued – importance of neighbour relations

While we at Bonava have always been sure that neighbour interaction plays an important role for our well-being and creating happy neighbourhoods, this report confirms just how much positive impact connecting with our neighbours brings. Even if it's just in the form of a smile or a "hello", or connecting over food or a common hobby – we've seen just how powerful neighbourhood interaction is to increase both happiness as well as a sense of community and safety. **This supporting evidence has made us even more convinced to continue our work to develop neighbourhoods that enable connection. By building areas that ignite that first interaction and providing spaces where people can meet – both spontaneously and in organized ways – we can make sure our neighbourhoods work as a catalyst for community.**

Neighbourhood happiness amplifiers: Engaging, sharing and helping

Interacting more with our neighbours in different ways has many benefits beyond increasing our own and our neighbours' happiness. In this report, we've showed that engaging in our community, sharing spaces and things and offering our neighbours a helping hand, are three powerful ways to elevate our own and neighbours' happiness. We've also seen that there is a great interest in both participating and organizing activities, but we believe the interest can grow. **By continuing to develop neighbourhoods that provide spaces where people can come together and that facilitate sharing, as well as develop our sponsorship, we can help people to live more sustainably and engage more in their neighbourhoods.**

The power of small, local actions

While many of us may feel powerless in the face of societal challenges, if there is one thing that we have learned in this report it's that global change can start with local actions, and that we shouldn't undervalue the power of small, everyday actions. We can all do our part to help drive positive change. Our neighbourhoods are filled with opportunities for us to take actions that have beneficial effects for ourselves, our neighbours and the planet. **By empowering and supporting people to take action in their neighbourhoods, and by developing neighbourhoods that are green, that support sustainable, healthy and social habits, we will continue to work to make each of our neighbourhoods incubators of happiness, sustainability and inclusion.**

Want to follow our journey?

Follow us on:



Or visit our website [Bonava.com](https://www.bonava.com)

There you will get even more tips and inspiration on how to live more happy, healthy and sustainably.

What is the report based on?

The content in this report is based on a three-part study conducted by Bonava together with strategy and analysis bureau United Minds and market research agency Nepa in the winter of 2021/2022. Here follows a short description of what we've done in each part.

Happy Quest Survey

The quantitative study was administered and analysed by Nepa on behalf of Bonava. The results are based on questionnaires that were administered through web panels and completed by a total of 6590 people in Sweden (1072 respondents), Germany (1117 respondents), Finland (1102 respondents), Norway (1081 respondents), Estonia (1123 respondents) and Latvia (1095 respondents). Data was collected from December 2021 to January 2022. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 75 and were selected to represent each country demographically. For this study, the selection of respondents was limited to people who own or rent their home.

Throughout the report we refer to two happiness indexes, set to define and measure the degree of satisfaction with the respondents' lives in general, and neighbourhood in particular. The indexes make it possible to compare the degree of which happiness is linked to different behaviours and activities. The indexes have been devised by Bonava in partnership with Nepa and are statistically reliable.

General Life Happiness

Presented through an index defined and measured by the degree of respondents' satisfaction with life in general. The index has been calculated based on results from the question:

- How happy would you estimate that you are right now? Please reflect on your satisfaction with different parts of your life, as well as your well-being in recent times.

The question has been answered on a scale 1-10 and re-calculated into an Index 0-100.

Neighbourhood Happiness

Presented through an index defined and measured by the degree of respondents' satisfaction with their neighbourhood. The index has been calculated based on results from the questions:

- To what extent do you like your neighbourhood?
- To what extent do you feel at home in your neighbourhood?
- To what extent do you feel a sense of belonging to your neighbourhood?

The questions have been answered on a scale 1-10 and re-calculated into an Index 0-100, with equal weights per question.

Research review

The quantitative study was complemented by an extensive review of academic research and recent developments in society at large and residential development specifically, related to the topics of happiness and neighbourhood and urban development. Through this review, relevant human drivers and behaviours, current development and inspiring examples were identified.

Expert interviews

To get a deeper understanding, forward looking perspective and advice on how to take the insights into action, we conducted in-depth interviews with two prominent experts in the field of happiness.



MARTA ZARASKA

Science journalist and author of *Growing Young: How Friendship, Optimism and Kindness Can Help You Live to 100*

French-Polish-Canadian science journalist, Marta Zaraska quite literally wrote the book on how social connections can be more beneficial for our health than any fitness tracker or superfood. When working on her book *Growing Young: How Friendship, Optimism and Kindness Can Help You Live to 100*, she reviewed hundreds of academic articles and interviewed countless researchers, making her an expert on how interacting with others helps us live longer. As a journalist she has previously focused on topics such as nutrition, health, environment and social issues. For this report, Marta shares her knowledge on the health effects of social interaction and helping others.



MARKKU OJANEN

Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Tampere

Having spent the majority of his life researching the topic of mental health, well-being and happiness, and writing no less than 38 books on these subjects, Professor Markku Ojanen is rightfully nicknamed "Professor of Happiness". Markku's research into the field of happiness covers matters like the link between happiness and money, sharing happiness with others and the difference between momentary happiness and general happiness. For this report, he shares his insights on the importance of interacting with our neighbours and focusing on the common happiness rather than our individual happiness.

