For first time, researchers find genes that explain differences in how we each experience happiness

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For the first time in history, researchers have isolated the parts of the human genome that could explain the differences in how humans experience happiness. These are the findings of a large-scale international study in over 298,000 people, conducted by VU Amsterdam professors Meike Bartels (Genetics and Wellbeing) and Philipp Koellinger (Genoeconomics). The researchers found three genetic variants for happiness, two variants that can account for differences in symptoms of depression, and eleven locations on the human genome that could account for varying degrees of neuroticism. The genetic variants for happiness are mainly expressed in the central nervous system and the adrenal glands and pancreatic system. The results were published in the journal *Nature Genetics*.

Genetic influences on happiness

Prior twin and family research using information from the Netherlands Twin Register and other sources has shown that individual differences in happiness and well-being can be partially ascribed to genetic differences between people. Happiness and wellbeing are the topics of an increasing number of scientific studies in a variety of academic disciplines. Policy makers are increasingly focusing on wellbeing, drawing primarily on the growing body of evidence suggesting that wellbeing is a factor in mental and physical health.

VU Amsterdam professor Meike Bartels explains: “This study is both a milestone and a new beginning: A milestone because we are now certain that there is a genetic aspect to happiness and a new beginning because the three variants that we know are involved account for only a small fraction of the differences between human beings. We expect that many variants will play a part.” Locating these variants will also allow us to better study the interplay between nature and nurture, as the environment is certainly responsible — to some extent — for differences in the way people experience happiness.”

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