

Did you notice an outbreak of joviality and generosity last week? And the number of books published on non-Christian spirituality has just surpassed the Christian portfolio. Karl Marx, who for all his faults knew a bit about capitalism, captured the keeping-up-with-the-Joneses dynamic of market economies perfectly: 'A house may be large or small; as long as the neighbouring houses are likewise small, it satisfies all the social requirements of a residence. Rates of consumption continue to rise – trapping us on what psychologists have dubbed a 'hedonic treadmill', hoping the next cycle, the next purchase, will finally get us to the promised land. All this when average house prices have just blasted through the GBP100,000 mark, when life expectancy continues to lengthen, mortality rates are dropping and more than a third of young people enjoy what was once the elite privilege of higher education. You might feel OK about your bum until you see Kylie's version plastered everywhere (a commoditisation even Marx didn't predict.) Money doesn't make most of us happy any more. Surely the virtual elimination in our society of most fatal diseases, rising life-expectancy and falling mortality should be cheering us up? Poor people, understandably, see their life satisfaction rise with income but for most of the population in a country as affluent as ours, any jump-start to wellbeing from a pay rise or new conservatory quickly wears off. Mix in some road/air/office/phone rage, a rise in reported incivility and a good dose of political apathy and the misery malaise looks even starker. People beaming at you as they let you go ahead in the bus queue, grinning as they shared your morning traffic jam, smirking through the quarterly budget planning meeting?' At best, people's satisfaction with life is stable, but most of the data suggests it is actually going down,' says Professor Andrew Oswald of Warwick University, the UK's leading expert on happiness trends. The hedonist option is growing in popularity: cocaine at the weekend, as much sex with as many strangers as possible and last-minute holidays to exotic locations. But this doesn't translate into people feeling any healthier.