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Where you choose to live has enormous impact on how happy you are, but not for the reasons you probably think. And you need to know how location impacts your happiness in order to make a good decision about where to live.

We all know that a bigger house doesn't make people happier, and I write all the time about how more money doesn't, either. So you shouldn't choose a place to live based on where you can get a job that pays the most money, or where you can buy a house with the most square-footage. Instead, take a look at what really affects happiness, and make decisions based on that.

### **More Than Location, Location, Location**

As I wrote about [a couple of weeks ago](#), I moved from New York City to Madison, Wis., after collecting a few years' worth of research on the topic of happiness in order to make the right decision. The most interesting part of the research, perhaps, is that there's research at all.

The field of [positive psychology](#) has been around long enough to become an established discipline in universities, but it's new enough that when we apply it to our everyday lives it tends to shake up long-held assumptions -- especially when it comes to choosing where to live.

To that end, here are some factors to guide your own choice:

#### **1. You need to earn the median income for your neighborhood.**

It's true that [money doesn't buy happiness](#), but you'll never feel secure if you don't earn as much as the people around you. You're much more likely to feel that the amount you earn is fine if it's as much as your friends and neighbors earn. And if you earn the most in your neighborhood, you'll probably feel like you're pretty well off. Money is relative.

This explains why the year my tax return showed that I had an income of about \$200,000, I often felt like I was living just a few short steps from homelessness. And I'm not alone -- New Yorkers talk about that phenomenon all the time.

#### **2. Remember that you'll change careers at least three times.**

Your job isn't stable, and neither is your career, so be careful about picking a location just because it's good for your work right now.

In a family with two people who have jobs outside the house, it's impractical to relocate every time one of them takes a new job. So it makes sense to think in terms of picking a location largely independent of your career.

Do you care a lot about schools? Or being near the beach? These are things to weigh heavily when picking a location, and then figure out what kind of work to do when you get there.

The act of choosing a place to live requires you to balance a lot of competing factors, but don't give work too much weight. [There's little evidence to show that a good job makes you happy](#) -- only that you need to limit the detrimental factors that come with some jobs, because things like a long commute and a crazy boss can really hurt your chances of being happy.

#### **3. More choices don't make you more happy.**

In fact, the more choices you have, the harder it is to make good decisions. You don't need to have a lot of bars to choose from in order to go out with your friends at night, and more restaurants don't bring you a sense of well being.

People mistakenly believe that more choice is good in most cases, but in many instances [it makes life more complicated for no good reason](#). So before you tell yourself that you need to live somewhere with multitudes of opportunity and excitement, consider that no location has everything, and other factors will give you a lot more bang for your buck in the happiness department.

#### **4. There's no free lunch when it comes to schools.**

The nature of public schools in the United States makes finding [an inexpensive city with a top-ranked school system](#) pretty much impossible. If you want your kids to be in a school district that ranks high for academic achievement, then study the rankings before you move.

Once you live somewhere, it's [human nature](#) to tell yourself that whatever school district you're in is fine for your kids. Before you move, you'll be much more able to objectively evaluate the school possibilities.

#### **5. Live where the people you love live.**

Where you live has about the same influence on your personal happiness as what you do for work -- that is, much less than your personal relationships. The biggest thing you can do to create happiness in your life is to cultivate and maintain intimate, reliable relationships with people.

If you have friends you see once a week, you'll live longer. If you have friends at work, you'll like your job. If you have friends who provide emergency child care, you're likely to be a happy working parent.

Friends can change your life, if you have them. So live where your friends and loved ones live, and the other issues won't matter so much.