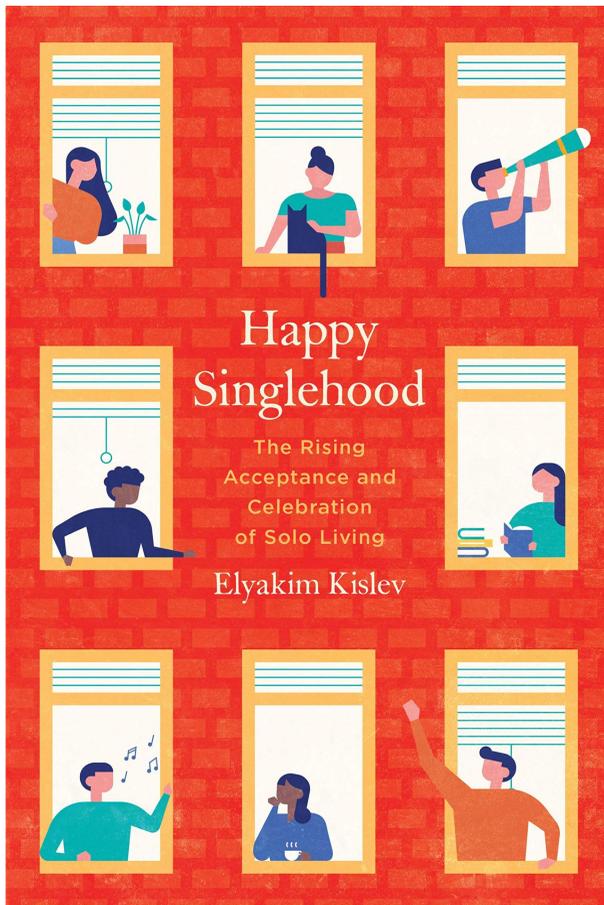


Dr. Elyakim Kislev:

# Happy Singlehood - The Rising Acceptance and Celebration of Solo Living

An Introduction



# Introduction

It is Friday night in conservative Jerusalem. I am a little kid. The public siren, the same one that calls out attacks, begins its two-minute wail, announcing to the city that it is Shabbat time. My family is ready: the table is beautifully set; the house overflows with succulent aromas of the delicious Friday night meal my mom has prepared; and we are all dressed in clean, white-collared shirts. My mom lights five candles: one for each of my parents and three others for her children, my two brothers and me. Standing on tiptoe, looking out the window, I see lights dotting the neighborhood. Every apartment shelters a seemingly happy family enjoying delicious food in a clean dwelling; men, women, and children poised to spend this night and the next day together. No phones. No television. Just family time.

I walk with my father to the synagogue, where every family has its own reserved spot. Everyone around me seems content, even holy. But over in a corner, I always see one man—the same man—standing with his only child, himself an unmarried guy in his thirties. The father's wife has been dead for years, and everyone knows the son. Everyone knows he is unmarried, too. I watch them every time, curious to know what they feel, how they spend their evenings. They never seem happy, at least not to me.

I see them to this very day, more than twenty years later, when I visit my parents and return with my father to my boyhood place of worship. The father, now hunchbacked, and his son still live together; both are unmarried and shy, and they keep to themselves.

When I grew up and moved to New York City for my doctoral studies, I discovered a totally different world, full of singles who seemed like “the bold and the beautiful.” It was the fast-paced, competitive New York that everyone hears about, but which in real life is even faster. Everyone rushed from one thing to the next, from one sexual encounter to another, trying to engage in “big-city life.” They did not need marriage to fit in. In fact, meeting someone in Manhattan with a family was more the exception than the rule. When someone said, “Hey, guys, I’m getting married” (and moving to Queens, of course), the underlying message came in loud and clear: “I’m done—game over.”

Looking back now, I realize how naive I was in my assessment of these two contrasting worlds—married and single. Not everyone lived happily ever after in the tightly knit community of my childhood neighborhood. Some members endured divorce, including my own two brothers, while others continued life in miserable, unhappy marriages. It seems to me, upon reflection, that the latter probably suffered more than anyone. In fact, I often reflect on the old man and his unmarried son living in their own world. Should I have felt pity for them, or was I blinded by my own ingrained family-normative prejudice?

I also think back to my fellow New Yorkers rushing from date to date, jumping into relationships only to quickly realize they wanted out as soon as possible, feeling suffocated and urgently needing to breathe the air of freedom. Still unmarried myself, I understand now that we were neither bold nor beautiful. We shuttled back and forth; we ran hard, but without purpose. In a way, we mirrored the rats we saw every day in the subway tunnels driven by hunger and distress.

Apparently, marital status is last on the list of things we believe we should accept. We are open to various sexual identities, we celebrate

different ethnicities, and we tolerate a wide array of political views, yet we still live in a society where singles, especially in advanced adulthood, are urged to couple up or otherwise face prejudice. In one study, for example, one thousand undergraduate students were asked to list characteristics they associated with married and single individuals. Married individuals were referred to as mature, happy, kind, honest, and loving. Conversely, singles were perceived as immature, insecure, self-centered, unhappy, lonely, and even ugly.<sup>1</sup>

These stereotypes hurt both singles and couples. Singles—whether they are divorced, widowed, or never-married—clearly suffer in the most overt way. But this does not mean married people fare much better. The same stereotypes often pressure individuals to marry despite uncertainty over being ready for such a big commitment or doubts about being with the right person. Couples may marry only to realize later they made a bad or premature decision. Of course, divorce looms in such cases, after which 70–80 percent of divorced people remarry and face an even greater likelihood of a second divorce.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, in this book I investigate the many aspects of modern singlehood, analyzing the cases in which singles accept, even celebrate, their marital status. Indeed, negative societal perceptions of singles are so internalized that singles often blame themselves for not being married. “I’m not sure what’s wrong with me,” I heard time and again in the interviews I conducted for this book. As I will explain in detail, the choice to internalize the negative stereotypes or shrug them off is critical in distinguishing between happy and unhappy singles.

In other cases, it is not stereotypes against singles that prompt low-quality, rushed marriages but rather loneliness.<sup>3</sup> Here again, a decision based on the wrong reasons often ends badly. In fact, research shows that married individuals can be just as lonely as their single counterparts even though they partnered up.<sup>4</sup> Instead of facing loneliness at its roots, many people chase partnership only to discover that loneliness is a stand-alone problem, the cure for which lies mainly within oneself, as researchers have repeatedly argued.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, despite the prevalent social and psychological forces that push people into marriage, reality is inevitably changing and doing so rapidly. Today, unmarried individuals are the fastest-growing demographic group in many countries.<sup>6</sup> According to predictions, approximately one-quarter of newborns in the United States will never marry.<sup>7</sup> Official statistics in China indicate that the percentage of one-person households rose from just 4.9 percent in 1990 to 14.5 percent in 2010.<sup>8</sup> The percentage of one-person households in several major European cities has already exceeded 50 percent, and singles account for around 40 percent of all households in countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Germany.<sup>9</sup> Adults are marrying late, divorce is more prevalent, and public attitudes toward the social status of marriage reflect a decline.<sup>10</sup> Across the world, despite all prejudices and beliefs against it, singlehood is the growing trend.

We are feeling something, wanting something, and doing something that we have yet to agree upon. The world is going single, but cultural disapproval still lingers. The result is that many people who are part of a rising trend of living alone and going solo are still pressured into marriage. The pressure itself makes them unhappy, often more than their marital status, but distinguishing between the two can be difficult, even impossible.

This situation creates a cognitive dissonance among the unmarried population. Many singles stated in interviews that they are looking to marry someone; but from what they told me, they don't behave that way. Existing cultural and social values pressure people to say they would be happy to marry, but their everyday dating and relationship decisions indicate otherwise. They raise the threshold for a potential partner to almost impossible standards, as if to say they need an exceptional argument to stop going solo. It seems society is still in denial about the fact that times are changing, and that there is a rumble under the age-old institution of marriage.

Married people are not different in this sense. Of course, some live happily ever after with their partners, but others envy the rise in

singlehood and want out of wedlock. My findings show that the difference between unhappy singles and unhappily married individuals is often simply the fact that the latter group succumbed to the social and psychological pressures to marry. Both groups are unhappy and trapped in unbearable situations thanks to the stigma of being unmarried, on one side, and witnessing the trend toward singlehood, on the other.

This gap between social and psychological pressure to marry and the reality of rising singlehood itself, in which people all over the world are abandoning the institution of marriage in growing numbers, is central to this book. We often find ourselves behaving in ways of which we are not fully aware: we think one thing and do another; we believe in “couplehood” but live in “singlehood.” We have not yet fully made the link between our true feelings and the attitudes enforced by social norms.

The reason for this disconnect, I argue, is that many are still afraid of accepting singlehood. They see singlehood negatively; or rather, they are blind to the full potential inherent in this way of living. The role of this book is thus to put a spotlight on the mechanisms behind the rising trend of accepting and celebrating solo living.

Having a clear and more benign image of singlehood will allow individuals to freely choose whatever lifestyle fits them best. Some, of course, will continue to choose marriage. However, even this choice can arise from a more relaxed environment that allows for entering marriage at the right time and under the right circumstances. Such a well-thought-out decision will certainly lead to better marriages for those who choose marriage, while others will feel more comfortable going solo. Becoming more aware of the myriad possibilities for singlehood to foster happiness and well-being should liberate those who, until now, have been challenged with deviating from the norm.

Indeed, the phenomenon of rising singlehood is not new. Many researchers have documented the decline in marriage rates, and policy makers closely follow changes in the modern family.<sup>11</sup> The Danish government, for example, has even started ad campaigns encouraging

citizens to marry and to have more sex.<sup>12</sup> In the United States, the media has also addressed these changes, with television shows such as *Seinfeld* (1989–1998), *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), and *Girls* (2012–2017) and films such as *How to Be Single* (2016).

The conversation has already begun, but this book takes it one step further. It is not about the social phenomenon of rising singlehood in and of itself. The actual social transformation goes far beyond discussing the phenomenon, and this book concerns the next stage of singlehood: the mechanisms that allow a better quality of life for those taking part in this rising trend.

*Happy Singlehood: The Rising Acceptance and Celebration of Solo Living* discusses questions such as: How do singles effectively deal with the fear of aging alone? How do singles face discrimination? How do social activities play out for singles' happiness compared to that of couples? How do values rooted in individualism and postmaterialism help singles embrace their lifestyle? What are the differences among singles by choice, singles by circumstance, divorced individuals, widows, cohabiters, and married people in how they increase their life satisfaction? Finally, how can policy makers cater to the growing singles population and increase singles' well-being?

This inquiry is mostly new to academic research on singles, which until now has frequently shied away from asking these critical questions, focusing instead on measuring and observing the phenomenon of singlehood itself alongside declining marriage and birth rates and rising divorce levels. At the same time, popular media and the self-help industry have generally fixated on how to alleviate loneliness but without basing their work on comprehensive research. Hence, this book expands the current literature beyond asking descriptive questions, by inquiring how singles can achieve happiness in everyday life despite social headwinds. Such an investigation leads to evidence that supports or rejects the common discourse about singles that is prevalent in popular media and the self-help industry.

An even more ambitious goal of this book is to propel individuals to think about a new reality: the evolving ways in which human beings

around the world are organizing their social and family lives. I analyze the specific needs of the growing singles population and outline several pioneering proposals—including innovative living arrangements, communities, and social interactions—to set the stage for an era of happy singlehood. In this sense, you should feel free to start with the chapter that ignites you the most.

The silent minority of singles may soon grow into a vocal majority. Public demonstrations about rising rents for singles' housing, cohabiters' unclear legal status, impoverishment of single parents, and tax rights of divorced people have already taken place in several metropolitan centers around the world. In Tokyo, for example, a demonstration organized by the group Call for Housing Democracy demanded that the government reduce rents. The organizers told the reporters of the *Japan Times*, "The chances of getting into a public housing unit in the capital is now 1 in 20 for families and 1 in 57 for singles, and by singles the government means retired people. If you're young and unmarried, you have no chance of getting into public housing, regardless of how poor you are."<sup>13</sup> Such protests signify the increasingly important, and urgent, need to discuss the factors contributing to singles' happiness and well-being. Policy makers should address these needs and begin finding ways to cater to this population.

This book is, therefore, also a call to action. It calls for researchers and policy makers, who are not used to thinking of singles as a disadvantaged minority, to focus more on their growing numbers and the numerous obstacles they tackle.<sup>14</sup> The time to rise—for the continually overlooked population of singles—has come. Its unique needs, lifestyle, and living arrangements deserve more attention, and I detail them in this book. I sincerely hope it serves as a modest contribution to the singles population, a roaring giant who has just awakened.

#### THE RESEARCH APPROACH USED IN THIS BOOK

The findings and ideas presented in this book are based on a thorough assessment of the existing literature as well as new quantitative and

qualitative findings. On the quantitative side, using advanced statistical models, I analyzed large, highly representative databases from over thirty countries, which allowed me to employ solid empirical data to address the question “What makes today’s singles happy?” (see below for a discussion of the term *happiness*). I used multilevel models based on integrative databases from several sources that surveyed hundreds of thousands of individuals. These sources include the European Social Survey, American Community Survey, the US Census Bureau, the World Bank, the United Nations, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The statistical investigation provides an accurate picture of current trends in singlehood and is presented in an accessible way for both academic and general readers, in the form of maps, charts, and examples.

On the qualitative side, I conducted 142 personal interviews of single people in the United States and various European countries. For this purpose, I was assisted by a highly qualified research team. Together, we interviewed people from different locales, men and women, young and old, straight and gay, city dwellers and residents of small towns, all with differing socioeconomic and ethnic background. The average age among interviewees is 43.9, with the oldest aged 78 and the youngest aged 30 (see below for the reason for the lower age limit of 30). In addition, women are 56 percent of interviewees, and the average self-reported income level, on a scale of 1 to 10, is 4.7. Of course, all the names of the interviewees have been changed to maintain anonymity. Interviews were transcribed, and central themes relating to the research questions have been identified and categorized systematically.<sup>15</sup> I designed the interviews to be as impartial as possible, with care taken to ensure that questions were emotionally neutral. I avoided questions indicating predetermined conclusions about motivations and incentives for being single and/or feeling positive or negative about single status.

Furthermore, I supplemented interviews with a systematic analysis of over four hundred blog posts, over three hundred newspaper and magazine articles, and thousands of comments and Facebook posts on

singlehood. A purposive-snowball sampling approach was used to identify singles' blogs and posts. This sampling strategy is suitable in such cases, where a true random sample is not possible because of the absence of a known population. Rather, a sample with specific characteristics (e.g., blogs about singles) needs to be put together.

Writer profiles were examined to identify the authors' self-declared age, gender, and location, when possible. Most writers' characteristics were easily identifiable; some information, however, required a deeper exploration of content from multiple blogs or posts. The thematic content was then analyzed to identify the topics that singles wrote about. So that I could examine reliability, this content was coded independently by two trained assistants familiar with the codebook. In a later stage, I supplemented both this analysis and that from academic literature with newspaper and magazine articles relevant to the subject of singlehood. This supplementation informs the evidence supporting this book with contemporary and up-to-date information. The coding system for all qualitative data uses a bottom-up procedure similar to the grounded theory approach.<sup>16</sup>

#### DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS BOOK

For the purposes of this study, I define single people as those who identify as divorced, widowed, or never-married, and I distinguish among the three categories throughout. Demographically, only individuals more than thirty years old were selected from the databases, and this is also true for the interviews, blogs, and posts. I chose the age of thirty to represent a population that is generally above the average age at first marriage: singles who have already encountered assumed social pressure and thus face the consequences of not being married. In contrast, younger individuals are many times in a transition phase and do not think about marriage at all.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, I separately categorized those who currently cohabitate with a significant other, estimated at around 10 percent of the population.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, cohabitation is considered a midpoint category in this book and not part of singlehood *per se*. On one side, cohabitation is now closer to marriage both socially and legally, with common marriage laws providing rights similar to those granted to formal marriages in many places, such as the United States, Australia, Canada, and various European countries.<sup>19</sup> On the other side, cohabitating is still close to singlehood because it is also based, at least in part, on the increasing frustration and disillusionment with the institution of marriage.<sup>20</sup> Fear of marital commitment and aversion to the risk of divorce have contributed to the number of couples choosing to cohabit for significant periods of time without getting married.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in some contexts, cohabitation has an immediate impact on the share of singles in the population. Cohabiting relationships are less stable and more short-lived than marriages, and they are more likely to end in separation, independent of the couple's age, income, or number of children.<sup>22</sup> As a result, a higher proportion of people are expected to spend longer periods of time as singles, both before and after cohabitation. The reader should be aware of this complexity, and I analyze cohabiters separately from other categories of singles as much as possible.

Furthermore, while singles share many of the same challenges, they are affected differently according to more nuanced social and familial situations. Having children is one prominent issue in this sense. For example, a single person with nearby supportive children or grandchildren operates in a different reality than a single with no descendants. Therefore, in all the statistical analyses, I employ a special variable to account for those with children. In addition, I differentiate between those who cohabitated in the past and those who never lived with another person. In the interviews, these differentiations are much easier to make, since the interviewees usually revealed their marital status in detail; I state this information where relevant.

Of course, there are always more subgroups that should be treated carefully. One example is singles in a serious relationship who live alone. It was not an easy task to distinguish these groups from nonexclusive singles in some of the statistical analyses estimated for this

book. For this reason, the qualitative data herein, in which these subgroups are distinguishable, is highly important and complements our knowledge about singlehood.

It is important to note that there are significant overlaps, but subtle differences also exist between singles, the unmarried, and those living alone. Different branches of research on singles opt for different definitions according to research needs and the nature of available data. In many large demographic data sets, for example, attention is often paid to one-person households. Individuals who live in one-person households are often single, but not exclusively. Particularly in rapidly developing countries with high rates of internal migration, such as India, one member of the family (usually the husband) may live permanently or semipermanently in another part of the country for work purposes, sending money home whenever possible.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, I am careful to state explicitly when I use information about one-person households.

On a separate note, the notion of *happiness*, a subjective well-being, is at the center of this book and should be briefly discussed and defined. Happiness is viewed here as the degree to which people judge their lives more or less favorably.<sup>24</sup> This is a modest definition against the background of many cultures and philosophers that attribute ethical virtues, social devotion, and even transcendental Nirvana to the term *happiness*.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, I stick to this reductionist definition following many studies that found it to be widely agreed-upon and to unify many cultural interpretations.<sup>26</sup> For example, one study compared dictionary definitions of *happiness* across thirty countries spanning a period of 150 years, accounting for both time and culture. This study found that the most widely shared aspects of the definition were feeling lucky and experiencing favorable external conditions.<sup>27</sup>

Still, there is no denying that understandings of happiness vary, and one cannot know what exactly stands behind someone's answer in a survey to the scalable question "How happy are you?" Respondents coming from different cultures or different age-cohorts might vary in the meanings they assign to the term *happy*. For example, studies show

that young people associate happiness with excitement, while older individuals link happiness to peacefulness.<sup>28</sup>

To address these difficulties, this book considers large samples ranging across age and locale while accounting for cultural, social, and personal differences as well as the average degree of happiness in each country. The power of large databases is that outliers usually cancel each other out; hence, answers can still be studied, broadly speaking.<sup>29</sup> Thus, although imperfectly, this study assumes that, on aggregate, the question in the European Social Survey, for example, is useful enough because such examination not only carries strong statistical power but also affords generalized conclusions based on various cultures while using multilevel analysis to account for differences. In my research articles on the subject, I delve deeper into these considerations with detailed and rigorous analyses, and those interested will find there much more information regarding the results presented here.

One must admit that by not asking what makes an individual happy, policy makers and researchers are missing out on a huge opportunity for increasing overall population welfare.<sup>30</sup> This holds true especially in light of nascent positive psychology that seeks to reframe classic approaches by focusing on improving happiness and avoiding the negative at the personal and populational levels.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, I urge the reader to use the proposed definitions as practical, applicable, and beneficial tools of analysis, and to cautiously determine if the findings of this book resonate with you.