

The Science of Happiness

"Happiness is not something readymade. It comes from your own actions."

— Dalai Lama XIV

In your pursuit of happiness do you wonder how others are living their "best life" while you struggle to maintain your sanity? Maybe you have asked friends or family about their pursuit of happiness and tried to emulate their actions hoping these steps will result in happiness in your life. Many of us dream about what our lives could be, believing that happiness is just around the corner or that it is based on some formula that we need to learn. Yet, there are still others who don't believe happiness is obtainable because their current or past circumstances seem insurmountable. Maybe you believe that happiness is a personal choice. Whether you see the glass half full or half empty, there is information based on neuroscience and positive psychology that provides insight into the necessary steps for you to become a happier person!



Behavior, Fitness, and the Brain

Research from the University of Kansas highlights an interesting phenomenon: our bodies cannot distinguish between genuine smiles and fake ones. Both types of smiles lead to reduced stress levels and lower heart rates. So, even if you are not feeling particularly joyful, putting on a smile can have positive effects.

Regular exercise releases endorphins, which are natural hormones that promote well-being. Interestingly, exercise can be as effective as anti-depressants in improving mood, and it leaves you feeling more energized and physically healthier.

Serotonin, a neurotransmitter, plays a crucial role in regulating our moods and is most strongly associated with feelings of happiness. Surprisingly, 90% of serotonin is found in our intestines. Eating comfort foods can trigger feelings of nostalgia and transport us back to pleasant memories of happy times thanks to serotonin.

What is Happiness?

Positive Psychology provides multiple definitions of happiness. A basic definition is, "Happiness is a state characterized by contentment and general satisfaction with one's current situation." It is also the positive emotions we have regarding the pleasurable activities in which we engage in our daily lives. Pleasure, comfort, gratitude, hope, and inspiration are key emotions that increase our happiness and move us to flourish."

Martin Seligman (2011), the founder of Positive Psychology goes on to state that positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment are the five elements that make up happiness.

What it is not:

Many people equate their happiness to their material possessions, success, power, wealth, or fame. While these are things that may contribute to someone's overall happiness, individuals can have all these things and still be unhappy. Arthur Brock wisely states that "the secret to lasting satisfaction is not to have more, but to want less!" Happiness is not long lasting, because it is based on external factors and our circumstances. It's like catching a butterfly—it's beautiful, but it can fly away.

The quote "Happiness is a journey not a destination" beautifully captures the idea that the journey itself often holds more fulfillment and growth than the destination. Whether it's learning a new skill, overcoming obstacles, or pursuing a dream, the process of getting there is where we find happiness, learn valuable lessons, and create lasting memories.

Practical Ways to Experience Happiness

Happiness isn't just a fleeting emotion; it has far-reaching effects on our health, relationships, and overall well-being. Here are some science-backed insights:

1. Fulfilling Relationships:

- Healthy relationships are the best predictor of happiness. Set up regular times to connect with family and friends while building quality relationships with those who bring value, reliability, and support to your life.
- Remember that building positive relationships is essential, but so is letting go of toxic ones.

2. Acknowledge the Good:

- Instead of dwelling on negatives, focus on recognizing the positive aspects of life. Keep a journal where you jot down three good things that happened each day. [Reflect on why they occurred, emphasizing the enduring sources of goodness around you.](#)
- Try a "Mindful Walk": Take a 20-minute walk and intentionally notice the sights, sounds, and smells around you. Appreciate the simple pleasures, like the sound of birds chirping or a stranger's smile.

3. Meaningful Activities:

- Engage in activities that hold personal meaning. [Volunteering, helping a neighbor in need, working in a meaningful job, or calling a struggling friend can provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment.](#)
- Find ways to integrate meaningful tasks into your daily routine. Giving and serving others through your endeavors can bring purpose and can contribute to your overall happiness.

4. Practice Gratitude:

- Keep a gratitude journal. Write down things you're thankful for, both personally and professionally.
- Express gratitude to loved ones, colleagues, and community members. A simple "thank you" can go a long way.

5. Celebrate Accomplishments:

- Acknowledge your achievements, no matter how small. Celebrate progress, successful interventions, and positive outcomes.
- Share these wins with your team or supervisor—they'll appreciate your enthusiasm and positivity.

Remember, happiness is multifaceted, and each person's journey is unique. By understanding these principles and incorporating practical steps, we can enhance our well-being and find happiness along the way!

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