

Seven Steps to Happiness

Happiness is proving elusive for many and depression rates are growing in the West, prompting psychology researchers to try to pinpoint exactly what makes us happy. Here are some of their findings.

1. **Be positive**, says *Barbara Fredrickson, University of North Carolina*. “Positivity makes you more attractive and resilient, with lower blood pressure, less pain, fewer colds, better sleep. Increase the number of positive emotions in your day, however fleeting. One can lead to another and so on, until you’re in an upward spiral of positivity. Take a moment to find the good in a situation. Don’t over-generalise (‘I can never hold down a relationship’), jump to conclusions (‘I’ll never finish this job’) or ruminate endlessly. Any healthy distraction – a run, a swim – that lifts your mood is good.”
2. **Be brave**, says *Daniel Gilbert, Harvard University*. “Studies show people regret not having done things much more than they regret things they did. Why? We can rationalise an excess of courage more easily than an excess of cowardice, because we can console ourselves by thinking of the things we learned from the experience. We hedge our bets when we should blunder forward. In fact, large-scale assaults on our happiness – a lost job or failed marriage – trigger our psychological defences (and hence promote our happiness) more than smaller annoyances. The paradoxical consequence is that it is sometimes easier to achieve a positive view of a very bad experience than a bad one. And yet we rarely choose action over inaction. Knowing we overestimate the impact of almost every life event makes me a bit braver and more relaxed because I know what I’m worrying about probably won’t matter as much as I think it will.”
3. **Meditate**, says Massachusetts psychologist and author *Daniel Goleman*. “Meditation helps us better manage our reactions to stress and recover more quickly from disturbing events. This is a key to happiness. One study took people in high-stress jobs and taught them meditation for eight weeks: they felt happier after and even remembered why they liked their work. Before, they were too stressed to see it. Beginners can benefit from meditation but it takes practice to see real benefits. I recently spent an evening with Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, the Tibetan lama dubbed ‘the happiest man in the world’. How did he do that way? Practice. Observing his behaviour, I noticed he recovered quickly from upsets and this is one way science measures a happy temperament. If you start to get upset, let go of the negative thought, deal with the problem – and then let go of that.”
4. **Be kind to yourself**, says *Paul Gilbert, University of Derby, UK*. “The way we relate to ourselves – kindly or critically – has a major influence on our wellbeing, contentment and ability to cope with setbacks. If you’re feeling self-critical, stop, take a few breaths, slow down and try to think of the ideal qualities you might have, such as kindness, warmth, gentleness. It doesn’t matter whether or not you actually have these qualities – like an actor taking on a part, feel yourself become them. In a journal, make a note of what happens to your self-criticism when you do this. Then turn your attention to what you’re about to do.”
5. **Put your pessimism to work**, says *Julie Norem, Wellesley College, Massachusetts*. “Defensive pessimists expect the worst and expend lots of energy mentally rehearsing how things might go wrong. But by doing this, they can improve the odds of achieving their goals. It’s a useful skill for everyone to learn. Imagine what might go wrong in a situation by focusing on



specifics. If you're terrified of public speaking, try to articulate whether you're afraid of fumbling with your notes or tripping on your way to the podium. Then imagine what happens next: if you drop your notes, will someone laugh? By doing this you shift the attention from feelings to facts, so you can plan effectively to avoid (or at least deal with) negative outcomes."

6. **Find a calling**, says *Jonathan Haidt, University of Virginia*. "Work less, earn less, accumulate less and 'consume' more family time, holidays and other enjoyable activities. Pursue goals but remember, it's the journey, not the end result that counts. If your work is not a calling, can you reframe it to see it as more than just a pay cheque? If not, try to find a noble purpose outside work – religion, teaching, political campaigning. Find activities that fully engage your attention and you're good at: singing in a choir, painting, paddling a kayak, restoring bushland or tutoring a friend. Happiness is not a shallow state of feeling chipper all the time, or something you can achieve directly. We need love, work and a connection to something larger. Get these conditions right, then wait."
7. **Act happy**, says *Sonja Lyubomirsky, University of California*. "My research compares happy and unhappy people, and underpinning this is the 40 per cent solution: the degree of happiness it is within our power to change through how we act and think. I've identified 12 happiness-enhancing activities – things happy people do naturally. They may sound corny but they're scientifically proven. You don't have to do them all – decide which fit you best. One, express gratitude. Two, cultivate optimism: visualise a future in which everything has turned out the way you want it, then write it down. Three, avoid obsessing over things or paying too much attention to what others are doing. Four, practise acts of kindness – more than you're used to. Five, make time for friends; be supportive and loyal. Six, develop coping strategies: write down your feelings when you're feeling upset and try to see that traumatic events often make us stronger. Seven, learn to forgive. Eight, immerse yourself in activities and be open to new ones. Nine, savour life's joys – linger over a pastry rather than mindlessly consuming it. Ten, work towards meaningful goals. Eleven, practise religion and spirituality. And finally, exercise. You won't see the results from these activities right away: life anything important, you have to work at it."

Source: Hannah Booth, The Sydney Morning Herald, Thursday 10 September 2009.

<http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/wellbeing/key-to-happiness-be-kind-exercise-20090909-fhnc.html>

Last viewed 2 September 2010.

