

5 Proven Truths About Finding Happiness

...and 5 research-based ways to maintain it.

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Happiness is a state we all want to achieve, but it often seems elusive. Have you ever felt happy one moment and then thought that it won't last, which makes you feel less happy in the next moment? How frustrating is that?



What is happiness? Is it a state of mind, a mood, or a way of living? Is there a way to increase it?

While there is no magical way to make us happy forever, there is a science of happiness. And when we better understand the nature of happiness, we become more skillful at staying happier, longer.

5 Proven Truths About Happiness

1. About half of our happiness level is controllable.

According to *The How of Happiness* by researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky, about 40 percent of our happiness is under our control. The other 60 percent is predetermined by biological set points and recent life events. We are all born with different temperaments and, all else being equal, have a tendency to maintain a certain happiness level over our lifetimes, high or low. Some people are just "born happier" than others—think of a smiling baby versus a fussy baby. Life events like getting married, graduating from college, or being promoted can affect our happiness levels, but their effects diminish over time in a process known as "hedonic adaptation." What was novel and exciting yesterday

becomes "the new normal" today. We can, however, reduce the power of hedonic adaptation by deliberately practicing new attitudes and behaviors on a daily basis.

2. A happy life is different from a meaningful life.

Researchers like Roy Baumeister have compared people's perceptions of happiness versus meaningfulness. There is quite a lot of overlap between the two states: People who see their lives as meaningful are happier, and vice versa. But there are also differences: Happiness seems to be a transient state whereas meaningfulness is more enduring. We experience happiness in the present when our needs are satisfied, while meaningfulness involves tying together the past, present, and future in a way that makes sense and reinforces our positive attributes. For example, having more money may make you somewhat happier, but whether it makes your life more meaningful depends on how you spend it.

3. Quality relationships make us happier.

Harvard University psychiatrist Robert Waldinger conducted a 75-year multigenerational study of students at Harvard and people from Boston's poorest neighborhoods to determine the causes of health and happiness. He found that the quality of relationships was strongly connected to happiness. Lonely people were less happy and had poorer health, and people with higher-quality social ties were the happiest. But it wasn't just having a relationship, but having one with a stable and consistently caring person that made the difference. Having lots of acquaintances or being in a relationship with an unreliable or abusive partner did not make people happier.

4. Happy people are more successful.

New research shows that happier people are more productive at work, and more creative and energized than less happy peers. A recent study by economists at the University of Warwick found that workplace interventions to increase happiness made people 12 percent more productive. In another study, they found that employees who were unhappy due to recent life events were 10 percent less productive. Researcher Shawn Achor claims in a TEDx talk that it isn't success that makes us happy, but happiness that makes us successful. Optimism is the greatest predictor of success as an entrepreneur: It helps you tolerate the down times and maintain your vision even when things don't go your way. According to Achor, "Only 25 percent of job success is based upon IQ. Seventy-five percent is about how your brain believes your behavior matters, connects to other people, and manages stress."

5. There are proven ways to increase happiness.

1. Researchers have found that practicing certain actions, deliberately seeking out positive states of mind, and improving the quality of our relationships can make us happier. These habits require consistent efforts over time:
2. Savor your daily experiences. Pause to delight in the smell of a flower, the sight of a hummingbird, or, like Proust, the taste of a madeleine.
3. Get involved in meaningful volunteer activities. Research shows that giving to others can make the giver and the receiver feel happier (and seeing less fortunate people can make you more grateful for what you have).
4. Find a more optimistic point of view. Is there a way to look at your life with more hope or appreciation? Can you focus on your strengths and achievements rather than beating yourself up for your failures?
5. Practice gratitude. Research shows that writing daily or weekly gratitude diaries or writing letters of appreciation can improve your mood and health.
6. Meditate. Meditation actually changes areas of the brain related to managing stress and regulating mood. Long-term meditators are more able to find and maintain positive states like joy and compassion. Studies by Richard Davidson and colleagues found that long-term meditators also have increased brain activity in areas related to happiness.

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