



The Science of Happiness



Everyone benefits from investing in his or her own happiness. It is obvious that happiness is its own reward. Not so obvious is that scientific studies demonstrate that happiness generally precedes indicators of success. And positive emotions in the workplace are directly linked to better outcomes—improved productivity and profitability, reductions in absenteeism, and superior safety compliance.

Happiness first . . . then Success follows! Why is this true?

Happiness—the positive feelings of well-being—has a host of proven benefits, including:

- Better immune response
- Greater energy
- Increased creativity
- Improved cognition
- More likability
- Less worry and fear

These traits of happiness, when reasonably sustained, lead to higher levels of success. Happy people will generally get more from life—all of life:

- Career and income
- Health and longevity
- Friendship and marriage
- Personal meaning and purpose

There are evolutionary reasons for our “Negativity Bias”. We learn more potently from negative experiences. However, we can overcome this natural tendency by increasing our “Positivity Offset”—the conscious experience of less powerful, but more frequent positive stimuli. When our positive to negative emotional ratios are high enough (3 to 1 or more), we overcome the negativity bias. Then we flourish, experiencing all the benefits listed above.

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Practice Gratitude

Gratitude practices are proven, simple, and practical ways to achieve a greater positivity offset. Two effective practices to choose from are:

1. Every day write down 3 positive experiences from the past 24 hours; or
2. Every day make a descriptive journal entry about one positive experience from the past 24 hours.

These practices, when consistently undertaken, literally re-wire our brains so that our awareness of positive stimuli grows. In other words, our ability to be happy and optimistic results from growing new, strong neural pathways in the brain.

Build Social Relationships

Social relationships are critical to personal well-being. Try not to engage deeply or for long periods with people who spread negative energy. It is dangerously contagious! Invest in the people around you. Know that their emotions and yours transfer effortlessly. You can make other people—even strangers—happy by simply sharing your own positive emotional state.

Get Pleasures

Our 5 basic senses are powerful sources of happiness. Seeing beautiful art, hearing music or rainfall, tasting sweet or savory, touching soft and silky, and smelling fresh bread are all examples of activities that can make us happy. We run through life often busily missing the many moments in which sensory pleasure is available to us. This intervention simply calls on us to bring conscious awareness to these pleasures. You may actually schedule them into your day. If you have a typical mid-afternoon lull, perhaps that is the time you would benefit from a piece of chocolate or tuning into a favorite song. Beware, however, that sensory pleasures do not last long before the happiness you originally got from them fades to nothing. Research shows that the visual and auditory extravaganza that is TV typically makes you less happy after 27 minutes than when you first began watching.

Be Spiritual

We don't really know why people who self-identify as being religious/spiritual are happier than those who do not see themselves similarly, but they are, on average, MUCH happier. Perhaps it is because spiritual practices draw on some of the other happiness interventions we have learned. For example, spirituality is often expressed in churches/synagogues/temples/sanghas—where people gather and invest in relationship. As well, spirituality causes us to consider our values and we are encouraged to be altruistic and grateful. Perhaps most of all, spirituality brings us consciously into relationship with a universal connection that is much bigger than us, permeates all of creation and remains beautifully mysterious.

Savour Life

This is simply bringing awareness to past, present and future events and considering the benefits and pleasures we get from them. I gave the example of having my kids plan what they wanted to do prior to a Hawaiian vacation. They got very excited about surfing and snorkeling long before we got to Hawaii. They took into their present moment enjoyment that was scheduled for a future time. Present moment savouring is simply mindful awareness of what is good in the “now”. Reminiscing is considering past successes, happy times and deep experiences and reflecting on them. These types of savouring can be great sources of happiness when we consciously incorporate them into life.

Exercise

Exercise is obviously essential for a happy body. Science shows it is equally essential for our mental well-being. We don't need to be ultra-fit athletes, but we do need to regularly get our bodies moving—more is generally better.

Buy Experiences Rather Than Things

We talked about how “stuff” generally doesn’t make us happier. Experiences are most often enjoyed much more and create lasting, happy memories.

Discover Your Strengths and Values

Knowing your natural strengths and talents and then choosing multiple ways to use them every day can provide a significant boost to personal well-being. A great deal of research has been done on this topic. The positive psychology research agrees with what makes common sense—when we are doing activities we are naturally good at, we tend to be happy. Therefore, knowing what you are good at can be a real aid to living day to day life. Moreover, you can specifically gear your activity/career so that you are frequently engaged in activities that draw out your talents. Chosen values, when consciously lived into, give us deep satisfaction over the long run. Know your values! Live accordingly!

Practice Altruism

We are hard wired to be kind and generous. It makes us feel good. Committing acts of kindness instantly lifts the spirits. Opportunities for altruistic acts are all around you every day. What action can you take today to offer someone a little bit of help or an encouraging word? Can you make the cashier smile? Is there a charitable act you have been considering for a while? Take action!

Be Mindful

The tradition of meditating is most connected with Buddhism; however, modern secular mindfulness training is a thoroughly proven practice that can help anyone and does not require any religious belief. Mindfulness is simply consciously focusing attention on what is happening in the present moment; thereby taking a break from the mind’s constant chatter about the past and future.

Formal meditation practice is the best thing you can do to get more happiness. Even small moments of mindfulness make a big difference: eat a conscious bite of food, wash your hands with full attention to the sensations, take a slow, deep breath in and an even slower breath out.

If you learned something here, ask yourself if you can use it to make your life a little happier. If the answer is ‘YES’, spread that happiness everywhere you can because that will be its own happy-making reward! Teach the skills of happiness to someone you love.

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| Keynote Speaker | 1) Happiness & Success 2) Managing Change 3) Mindfulness and Well-being 4) Inspired Leadership |
| Workshops/Training | Infuse proven principles of positive psychology into the workplace |
| One-on-One Coach | Business action planning, career, health and wellness, and more |
| Best Selling Author | Whole Person Happiness: How to Be Well in Body, Mind and Spirit |

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