

Pursuing Happiness: Where to Look, Where Not to Look. Published in *Psychology Today*, pp. 32–35, 66–67.

Savor the moment; take control of your time, and more secrets of the happiest people.

By David G. Myers, published on July 1, 1993 - last reviewed on June 20, 2012

During its first century, psychology focused far more on negative emotions such as depression, anger, and anxiety than on positive emotions such as happiness and satisfaction. Even today, our texts say more about suffering than about joy.

That is now changing. A new cadre of researchers is offering a fresh perspective on an old puzzle: Who are the happy people? Does happiness favor those of a particular age, sex, or race? Does wealth enhance well-being? Does happiness come with having certain traits? A particular job? Close friends? An active faith?

In 1993, I reported on what I found to be the four important traits of happy people: self-esteem, optimism, extroversion, and personal control. As an update, I offer the following material—gleaned from studies of several hundred thousand people in 16 countries—which hopefully offer further insight into happiness and what you can do to achieve it.

To begin with, if I wanted to predict whether you feel happy and find life satisfying, there are some things that, surprisingly, it would not help me to know. For example:

- Tell me your age, and you've given me no clue. We can forget tales of "midlife crisis," "empty-nest syndrome," and despondent old age. Actually, happiness is equally available to people at every age. Moreover, rates of depression, suicide, and divorce show no increase during the mythical midlife crisis years.
- Tell me your sex, and you've given me no clue. The sexes are prone to different sorts of misery. When troubled, men more often become alcoholic, while women more often ruminate and get depressed. Yet men and women are equally likely to declare themselves "very happy" and "satisfied" with life.
- Tell me your race, and you've given me no clue. African-Americans, for example, are only slightly less likely than European-Americans to feel very happy. Yet how could this be, given what everyone knows—that disadvantaged groups suffer impoverished self-esteem and resulting depression? It's because what "everyone knows" is wrong.

Social psychologists Jennifer Crocker and Brenda Major explain: "A host of studies conclude that blacks have levels of self-esteem equal to or higher than that of whites." The National Institute of Mental Health's study of Psychiatric Disorders in America similarly revealed that rates of depression and alcoholism among blacks and whites are roughly equal.

- Tell me your income, and—assuming you can afford life's necessities—I'm still in the dark as to whether you're a happy person. Most people suppose otherwise. They are not crass enough to say that money buys happiness. But they do think that 20 percent more money would make

them a little happier. And three in four students—nearly double the proportion in 1970—now begin college agreeing that its "very important" that they become "very well off financially."

Again, the findings astonish us: People in rich countries are not consistently happier than people in not-so-rich countries. (During the 1980s, the West Germans had double the incomes of the poorer Irish, who year after year reported more satisfaction with their lives,) And rich people—even those surveyed among *Forbes'* 100 wealthiest Americans—are only slightly happier than working-class folk.

So what would give us a clue about someone's level of happiness and how can we use this information to improve our inner well-being? Although there is no surefire "How to Be Happy" formula, here are a few suggestions:

- **Realize that enduring happiness doesn't, come from "making it."** What do you long for? Fame? Fortune? Unlimited leisure? Imagine that I could snap my fingers and give it to you. Would you now be happy? Indeed, you'd be euphoric, in the short run. But gradually you would adapt to your new circumstance and life would return to its normal mix of emotions. To recover the joy, you would now need an even higher high.

The consistent finding from dozens of studies is that objective life circumstances, once we've adapted to them, bear little relation to people's happiness. At one extreme, people with disabilities—even those paralyzed after car accidents—typically recover normal levels of day-to-day happiness. At the other extreme, people who've won a state lottery also settle back to their characteristic level of happiness.

Consider, too, how we have "made it." In 1957, per-person income, expressed in today's dollars, was less than \$8,000. Today it is \$16,000. With doubled incomes, we (at least those not left behind by the growing gap between rich and poor) now have double the material goods that money can buy—including twice as many cars per person. We also have microwave ovens, color TVs, VCRs, answering machines, and \$12 billion a year worth of brand-name athletic shoes.

So are we indeed happier? We are not. In 1957, 35 percent of Americans told the National Opinion Research Center they were "very happy." In 1991, only 31 percent said the same. Meanwhile, depression rates have soared.

Ergo, wealth is like health: Although its utter absence breeds misery, having it is no guarantee of happiness. There is no need to envy the rich. Happiness is less a matter of getting what we want than wanting what we have.

- **Savor the moment.** Happiness, said Benjamin Franklin, "is produced not so much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen as by the little advantages that occur every day."

As a future-oriented person, I periodically remind myself of Pascal's remark that we too often live as if the present were merely our means to the future. "So we never live, but we hope to live—and as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be so."

To live in the present means, for me, taking delight in the day's magic moments, from morning tea and cereal, hunched over a manuscript, to the day's last moments, snuggling and talking with my wife. Happiness isn't somewhere off in the future, but in this morning's phone conversation with someone seeking advice, in this noon's meal with a friend, in this evening's bedtime story with a child, in tonight's curling up with a good book.

- **Take control of your time.** There is, nevertheless, a place for setting goals and managing time. Compared to those who've learned a sense of helplessness, those with an "internal locus of control" do better in school, cope better with stress, and live with greater well-being. Deprived of control over one's life—an experience studied in prisoners, nursing home patients, and people living under totalitarian regimes—people suffer lower morale and poorer health.

One way to feel more empowered is to master our use of time. For happy people, time is "filled and planned," says Oxford University psychologist Michael Argyle. "For unhappy people time is unfilled, open and uncommitted; they postpone things and are inefficient."

To manage time effectively, set big goals, then break them down into daily aims. Writing a book is, for me, too formidable and remote a goal. But writing two manuscript pages a day is easy enough. Repeat this little process 300 times over and, presto!, you have a book. Although we often overestimate how much we will accomplish in any given day (leaving us frustrated), we generally underestimate how much we can accomplish in a year, given just a little progress every day. Moreover, as each mini-deadline is met we get the delicious, confident feeling of being in control.

- **Act happy.** As I stated in my previous article, study after study reveals three traits (in addition to the above-mentioned personal control) that mark happy people's lives. First, they like themselves. They exhibit self-esteem by agreeing with such statements as "I'm a lot of fun to be with" and "I have good ideas." Second, they are positive thinkers. Writing from a place called Hope [College], it is fitting that I concede the power of hope-filled optimism. Third, they are outgoing. We could imagine opposite findings—that introverts would be happiest, living in peaceful solitude, or that pessimists would live with greater gladness as things keep turning out better than expected. But it's the sociable extroverts and the venturesome optimists who report more happiness.

Although self-esteem, optimism, and extroversion tend to be enduring traits, those who seek greater happiness can exploit one of social psychology's arch principles: We are as likely to act ourselves into a way of thinking as to think ourselves into action. In experiments, people who feign high self-esteem begin feeling better about themselves. Even when manipulated into a smiling expression, people feel better; when they scowl, the whole world seems to scowl back. So put on a happy face. Pretend optimism. Simulate outgoingness. Going through the motions can trigger the emotions.

- **Seek work and leisure that engage your skills.** Sometimes the challenges of work or home are too great, and we feel stressed. At other times, we're underchallenged and bored. In between these two states is a zone where we feel challenged, but not overmatched. We get absorbed. We

lose consciousness of time. We are in a state that University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow."

In his studies of writers, dancers, surgeons, chess players, mountain climbers, and the like, Csikszentmihalyi discovered that people find the flow experience satisfying. Even if we make a lower but livable wage, it pays to seek work that we find interesting and challenging.

The well-being that accompanies flow extends to leisure. Ironically, some of the most expensive forms of leisure are least likely to provide flow. Catch people sitting on a yacht or watching their big screen TV, and they typically don't feel all that great, for their skills aren't engaged. Catch them gardening, socializing, or writing a letter and you will likely find them feeling less apathetic and happier.

So off your duffs, couch potatoes. Pick up your camera. Tune that instrument. Sharpen those woodworking tools. Get out those quilting needles. Inflate the family basketball. Pull down a stimulating book. Oil the fishing reel. It's time to head out to the garden store. To invite friends over for tea. To pull down the Scrabble game. To go for a drive. Rather than vegetating in self-focused idleness, lose yourself in the flow of active work and play. "In every part and corner of our life, to lose oneself is to be a gainer," noted Robert Louis Stevenson. "To forget oneself is to be happy."

- **Join the "Movement" Movement.** A slew of studies reveal that aerobic exercise is an antidote for mild depression and anxiety. Repeated surveys show that people are more self-confident, unstressed, and in better spirits, if physically fit.

The new exercise research is producing such consistent and encouraging results and with such minimal cost and desirable side effects that most people seeking to boost their energy and well-being can benefit from at least a moderate regimen. Chuck, my 76-year-old friend, plays basketball daily with people half his age and younger. "If I don't exercise five times a week," he explains, "I begin to get the blahs. The stamina I get from exercising helps keep me optimistic about living." *"Mens sana in corpore sano."* Sound mind in a sound body.

- **Get rest.** Happy people live active, vigorous lives, yet they reserve time for renewing sleep and solitude. Today, however, many people suffer from shortened sleep, leaving them groggy and unable to get into flow. William Dement, director of Stanford University's Sleep Disorders Center, laments the "national sleep debt." Among the college students I have spent my adult life with, few behaviors strike me as more self-destructive than the typical late nights, with resulting fatigue, diminished alertness, and, not infrequently, failure and depression.

Poor time-management is part of the problem. Each diversion—a video game here, a bull session there, seems harmless enough. Yet, gradually, without intending sleeplessness, fatigue, and failure, the student veers toward falling behind and suffering the inevitable results.

A basic ingredient of energized, cheerful living is, therefore, to make time for enough sleep to awaken refreshed. In one study of Los Angeles County residents, people who made time for

seven to eight hours sleep a night were as likely to be depressed as those sleeping less (or more).

Research has even shown that a literal day of "REST"—that is, Restricted Environmental Stimulation Therapy—can work wonders. After a day of quiet on a comfortable bed in a dark, soundproofed room, people often emerge refreshed and with new self-control—an improved ability to stop smoking, to reduce drinking, to lose weight. Smaller doses of solitude, even a daily few minutes of meditation or prayer, can provide spiritual recharging for active living,

- **Give priority to close relationships.** There are few better antidotes for unhappiness than an intimate friendship with someone who cares deeply about you. People who can name several close, supportive friends—friends with whom they freely share their ups and downs—live with greater health and happiness. In experiments, people relax as they confide painful experiences. Like confession, confiding is good for the soul.

Sadly, our increasingly individualistic society suffers from impoverished social connections, which some psychologists believe is a cause of today's epidemic levels of depression. As of 1993, 24 percent of Americans live alone, up from 8 percent a half-century ago. Compared to 1960, the divorce rate has doubled. The proportion of children not living with two parents has more than doubled, to nearly 3 in 10. This is, as Ronald Reagan proclaimed, "the age of the individual."

In contrast to the interdependence valued in Asian societies, Americans celebrate independence: Be true to yourself. Seek your own bliss. Be authentically you. And don't be (shudder) codependent (by supporting, loving, and staying tied to a troubled partner). Humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers epitomized today's individualism: "The only question which matters is, 'Am I living in a way which is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?'"

Actually, that's not all that matters. A consensus is emerging from cross-cultural studies of individualism vs. collectivism, from gender scholarship on independence vs. connectedness, and from the new communitarian affirmation of shared values: to preserve our social fabric we need to balance me-thinking with we-thinking. The social ties that bind also provide support in difficult times.

For more than nine in 10 people, a significant close relationship is marriage. With other social bonds, broken marital relationships are a source of much unhappiness, while a supportive, committed companion is among life's greatest joys. To paraphrase Henry Ward Beecher, "a well-married person is winged; ill-matched, shackled." Three of four married people say their spouse is their best friend.

That helps explain why, during the 1970s and '80s, 39 percent of married adults (compared to only 24 percent of never-married adults) told the National Opinion Research Center they were "very happy." Without denying that divorce is sometimes a first step toward healing for those trapped in miserable relationships, a mountain of accumulating data reveal the benefits of an enduring, equitable, affectionate marriage.

So, don't forever shy away from commitment. If you're already married, resolve to nurture your relationship, to not take your partner for granted, to display to your spouse the sort of kindness that you display to others, to affirm your partner, to play together and share together. Resolve in such ways to act lovingly, and you both may find your affections rejuvenated.

- **Take care of the soul.** "Joy is the serious business of heaven," said C. S. Lewis. One surmises as much from reading the new research on faith and well-being. Actively religious people are much less likely to become delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce, or to commit suicide. They're even physically healthier, due perhaps to less smoking and drinking.

In Europe and North America, religiously active people are also happier. In one Gallup survey, highly spiritual people (who, for example, agree that "My religious faith is the most important influence in my life") were twice as likely as those lowest in spiritual commitment to declare themselves "very happy." In study after study, elderly people as well express more satisfaction with their lives if religiously active.

Other studies suggest that faith "buffers" a crisis. Those who've recently suffered divorce, unemployment, bereavement, or disability report greater well-being if they have a strong religious faith. Compared to religiously inactive widows, widows who worship regularly report more joy in their lives. Mothers of children with disabilities are less vulnerable to depression if sustained by a religious faith.

Faith doesn't promise immunity from suffering. But it does enable a strengthened walk through valleys of darkness. For many people, a religious faith places them within a network of social support—one of America's 294,000 local churches and synagogues. Their faith helps them define life's meaning and purpose. It enables feelings of ultimate acceptance. It motivates a focus beyond self (reflected in Gallup's report of doubled rates of charitable giving and volunteerism among weekly church attendees compared to non-attendees). And it offers a timeless spiritual perspective on the great enemy, death, and all of life's other woes.

Such psychological factors don't bear on the truth of any religious claim. But they have nudged more than a few people to take the leap of faith.

Digested from The Pursuit of Happiness (Avon Books; 1993) by David G. Myers, Ph.D. Copyright 1993 by the David and Carol Myers Foundation.