

The Happiness Advantage

Happiness relates to how we feel, but it's more than just a passing mood. The fundamental reason happiness is so important is that a positive outlook can help us achieve our goals and live a healthier life. Happiness also gives us the potential to change many other lives just by being ourselves.

Negative emotions, such as fear and anger, help us get away from danger or defend ourselves. Positive emotions, such as enjoyment and hope, help us connect with others and build our capacity to cope when things go wrong.

In groundbreaking research, psychologist Barbara Fredrickson found that positive emotions:

- Broaden our thinking to make us more flexible, more creative and able to see the big picture
- Accumulate over time, which lets us build the resources of strength, resiliency and friendship we need to thrive
- Help our bodies and minds cope with stress



Health benefits of happiness

Several studies have concluded that happiness causes better health; good health causes happiness. Being happy:

- **Improves lifestyle habits important for overall health:** Happy people tend to eat healthier and be more physically active.
- **Boosts the immune system:** Studies have shown that individuals who are happier have better immune responses than those who aren't happy.
- **Protects the heart:** Happier people have shown to have better heart health than those who are less happy.
- **Combats stress:** Stress is not only upsetting on a psychological level but also triggers biological changes in our hormones and blood pressure. Happiness seems to temper these effects or, at least, help us recover more quickly.
- **Increases life expectancy and quality of life:** In a 2011 study, more than 4,000 English adults ages 52 to 79 reported how happy, excited and content they were multiple times in a single day. Here, happier people were 35 percent less likely to die over the course of about five years than their unhappier counterparts.
- **Improves sleep:** Sleep is important for concentration, productivity, performance and maintaining a healthy weight.

How to cultivate happiness

Based on research, psychologists say that roughly 50 percent of happiness is determined by genetics, 10 percent by life circumstances and 40 percent by daily activities. Here are some things you can do to cultivate happiness in your life:

- **Direct focus:** Make it a goal to simply add three smiles to each day. When you smile, your brain changes and you feel happier.
- **Practice gratitude:** Write down or say out loud three new things you're grateful for each day. They can be simple, such as "I'm grateful for this coffee" or "I'm grateful for the sunshine." Don't repeat any over the course of 21 days. Doing this trains your brain to see more positives in the world.
- **Spread positivity:** Each day, compliment three people. Say something such as "You have the best smile," or "You are so compassionate." It has to be a real compliment to work. When you do it, feel how it recharges you; realize you have the power to make the world a more positive place. The more meaningful and specific you are with others, often the greater the benefit.
- **Challenge yourself:** Perform one random act of kindness every day, like picking up someone's mail or getting coffee for a friend who's feeling drained. This is obviously good for the recipient, and often a bonus for you.
- **Get plenty of rest:** Research has shown that poor sleep is linked to less happiness. A study led by Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman found that getting just one more hour of sleep each night might have a greater effect on happiness than a \$60,000 raise.
- **Spend time outside:** People who are more connected to nature tend to experience more positive emotions. As little as five minutes spent outside can significantly improve your mood.
- **Practice paying attention:** People who practice mindfulness are more likely to be happy and enjoy greater life satisfaction than people who don't.
- **Watch how you spend and think about money:** Research shows that when we do nice things for others, including spending money on them, our brains light up in areas associated with pleasure and reward. Don't focus on material wealth, though. After our basic needs are met, research suggests that more money doesn't bring us more happiness. Spending money on experiences and activities that connect us socially, or giving to others, has been found to raise happiness levels.



Sources: theguardian.com*, huffingtonpost.com*, greatergood.berkeley.edu*, healthline.com*, pnas.org*

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