

# Happiness

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*Happiness is  
the secret to  
all beauty.  
There is  
no beauty  
without  
happiness.*

Christian Dior

*People who are happy tend to live longer, more enjoyable lives.*

## **Understanding happiness – what does science tell us about happiness?**

Research has found that around half of our happiness levels can be attributed to things that are beyond our control – principally our genetics – and around half we can control. So what can we do to enjoy life more and live longer?

Happiness is defined as ‘the presence of positive emotions and the absence of negative emotions’ (Nelson-Coffey, 2017). Some people have greater levels of positive emotions and some have greater levels of negative emotions. Our balance of positive and negative emotions creates a baseline level of happiness. At times we are happier, and sometimes we are sadder, but we generally hover around and come back to our baseline happiness level – our happiness set-point. Happier people have more positive emotions, creating a higher happiness set-point. The good news is that we can change this set-point and find greater happiness.

The reason why we continue to return to our happiness set-point, and what is needed to change this, is explained by neuroscience. Our brain has different areas that are activated when we feel positive or negative emotions. The neural pathways that connect these areas get stronger the more they are used. This creates a pattern where the more we think a certain way, this way of thinking gets strengthened and we are more likely to keep on thinking that way. In other words, the more we think happy thoughts, the more we will come back to a high happiness set-point – and vice versa.



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Through our understanding of neuroplasticity, we know that we can retrain our brains – effectively rewiring our neural pathways to make them stronger in different areas. By practicing certain exercises or activities, we can strengthen the “happiness” areas of our brains, raising our happiness set-point.

#### **The brain’s “happy chemicals”**

- Oxytocin – *the bonding hormone* – decreases the level of stress hormones (primarily cortisol) and lowers your blood pressure response to anxiety-producing events. It reduces cravings of drug and alcohol addiction, as well as for sweets. It also has a positive influence on inflammation and wound healing.
- Endorphins – *the brain’s painkiller* – relieve pain, reduce stress, enhance the immune system and delay the aging process. They act similarly to drugs such as morphine and codeine, leading to feelings of euphoria, without the addiction or dependence.
- Serotonin – *the mood stabiliser* – it is found primarily in the body's stomach and intestines, but also in the brain, where it calms anxiety, relieves depression regulates anxiety and elevates happiness and mood.
- Dopamine – *the pleasure hormone* – promotes alertness and a feeling of enjoyment. It is released during pleasurable situations, leading to a desire to seek out more.

#### **How to be happier – what can you do to live a happy life?**

- Prosocial behaviour – doing kind acts for others

Acts of kindness are proven to be the most reliable means of increasing happiness. Doing something nice for another person has a greater and longer lasting benefit for your happiness level than doing something nice for yourself, or even doing something to improve the world. It doesn’t take much effort. Two hours per week dedicated to helping others is enough to make a big difference. Acts of kindness can be as simple as visiting an elderly relative.

- Hug

When we hug someone, there is a natural release of Oxytocin. Hugs decrease feelings of loneliness, combat fear, increase self-esteem, defuse tension and show appreciation. A ten second hug each day was found to lower the risk of heart disease, reduce stress, fight fatigue, boost the immune system, fight infections and ease depression. Hugs don’t have to be limited to people, as cuddling a pet can also work.

- Look for good things

We are far more likely to notice and remember something bad rather than something good. Psychologists refer to this as our negativity bias. Through neuroplasticity we can change the way our brain functions to reduce our focus on the bad. This requires a conscious effort to notice good things. Through practice, we can strengthen the neural pathways to the happy areas of our brain, and the more we practice this, the easier it gets. Try looking for the biggest smile when walking through a group of people. Whenever faced with a challenge, look for the silver lining. Keep a gratitude journal.



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- Practice gratitude

Gratitude is the act of reminding ourselves of positive things that make our lives better. This is a simple and highly effective way of reinforcing the neural pathways in the “happiness” areas of our brains. There are many ways to do this: e.g.

- keeping a journal of things you're grateful for
- telling a friend about good things that happen each day
- going out of your way to show gratitude when others help you

- Share your gratitude with those who have taught you important life lessons  
Reflect on those people who have had the biggest impact on your life. What have you learnt from them? Take all the positive learnings and write to each person, explaining what you have learnt and thanking them.

- Communicate with kindness

Practice being sympathetic and empathetic to others. How often has someone taken what you have said the wrong way? Disputes are all too often due to miscommunication. Most people mean well. Make a conscious effort to think the best of others. Find positive and constructive explanations for behaviours and words that might normally upset you. Be understanding and forgiving. Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates: 1. Is it true? 2. Is it necessary? 3. Is it kind?

- Notice the stories you tell yourself

Practice kindness to yourself. We have a bad tendency to beat ourselves up over our mistakes and the wrongs we have experienced. This relates to our negativity bias. Catch yourself when a negative story begins, and nip it in the bud. Replace it immediately with a positive story or statement.

- Smile

Smiling – makes us feel good and it makes others feel good. However, don't fake smile. Instead, think positive thoughts to inspire smiling.

- Spend time with people who are happy

People who are perennially unhappy tend to drag us down. Conversely, being with happy people increases our own level of happiness.

- Spend more time with friends and family

Human beings are, by their nature, social creatures. We enjoy life more when we are sharing our experiences with others. Even introverts have higher happiness levels when they spend time with friends and family.

- Value your partner, friends and family  
We tend to take what we have for granted, forgetting how special the gift of friendship is. This leads us to undervalue those closest to us. Instead, treat each moment with those closest to you as though it is the first or last – the only moment (living in the present).

- Consciously let go of grudges

This is necessary to ‘...displace the sludge that builds up around the heart and keeps joy away’ (Kempton, 2007).



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- Practice mindfulness – Live in the present moment

Does your mind habitually dredge up past memories? Do you find yourself often worrying about what the future might bring? Those who “live in the past” risk being depressed and those who “live in the future” have a tendency to be anxious. This is due to the brain’s negativity bias. Mindfulness is a practice, strongly associated with meditation, that trains us to live in the present moment. Living in the present moment helps us to overcome this negativity bias. It is key to getting the most out of life – to enjoying life to the max.

- Meditate

Meditation clears our minds and calms us down. It is a proven effective way to reduce stress and anxiety and to increase happiness. Research shows that regular meditation can permanently rewire the brain to grow that area of the brain related to happiness.

- Exercise

Exercise releases endorphins and a chemical known as BDNF that work to protect the brain from stress and lead to a somewhat euphoric feeling afterwards. Research has found the most health benefits for sedentary people come from the first 20 minutes of movement.

- Practise yoga

Yoga combines the benefits of exercise, meditation and many of the other suggestions outlined here. Yoga has been found to be superior to meditation or other forms of exercise for producing those internal body chemistry changes that are associated with greater happiness. A more detailed discussion of yoga and happiness is provided below.

- Sleep

Ensure you get enough sleep. Lack of sleep results in greater negativity. This is because sleep deprivation affects the part of the brain associated with happy memories (the hippocampus) more than the part of the brain associated with negativity (the amygdala). While our sleep needs vary from one person to another, there is good scientific evidence explaining why people are likely to be more grumpy when they don’t get enough sleep.

- Spend more time outside and more time in nature

There are numerous studies that show time spent outdoors, and particularly in nature, correlates with improved health and happiness. Spending some time outside during daylight hours is important for our physical and mental health, due to the role this plays in resetting our circadian rhythms. We can further improve our wellbeing with as little as 15 minutes in a natural setting, such as a park or forest.

- Plan a holiday

Even if you can’t take the holiday any time soon, simply planning the holiday can increase your happiness level. Research shows the highest happiness occurs in the planning stage of a holiday, due to enjoying the sense of anticipation. After the holiday, happiness drops back to baseline levels for most people. Whenever a boost in happiness is needed, spend some time planning the next holiday.



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- Prioritise experiences over possessions

Attaching our happiness to the things we own is guaranteed to lead to disappointment. We will constantly be seeking a more luxurious car, a newer phone, a bigger house, the newest trend in clothing – we will never be satisfied. It is far wiser to spend our money on activities that create positive memories such as a holiday or helping others.

- Avoid perfectionism

Setting inappropriate expectations and goals will only lead to disappointment. Instead, set meaningful and achievable goals. Importantly, learn not to be attached to the results of your efforts – instead, find pleasure in the journey.

- Avoid comparisons

Comparing ourselves with others creates lose-lose situations. Regardless of whether we do better or worse than those with whom we compare ourselves, our ego suffers – either from being over-inflated, or from a sense of lacking self-worth. It is better to avoid any self-judgment and simply accept ourselves as we are. This is an essential foundation for lasting happiness.

- Avoid maximising

If what you already have or are doing is working well, don't look for better options. If we are constantly seeking something better, we are never satisfied. We also miss the opportunity to enjoy the present moment.

- Live closer to work

Although this is not always practical, if you do have a choice in where you live – such as when you decide to move house, living closer to work can reduce travel time, thereby increasing leisure time. The trade-off for living closer to work, might mean having a smaller house, but research has found the hours saved and stress reduced will make you healthier and happier – more than compensating for having a smaller house.

- Find your purpose

Feeling aimless can detract from our enjoyment of life. We are much happier when we feel we are doing something meaningful. In yoga, we call this our dharma – our purpose in life. If you are not sure what your dharma is, it can be helpful to reflect on your strengths and your passions. If you are not sure about these, ask those people who know you best.

- Your gift

Shajen Joy Aziz and Demian Lichtenstein explain we all have a gift to give. To discover your gift, start by reflecting on your qualities. Ask yourself a few questions such as: “What do I like most about myself?” “What am I willing to do to be happy?” Think about your friends, reflecting on what their best qualities are – what their gifts are. Write to them, letting them know your thoughts on their gifts and asking them for their thoughts on your gift. Let this help guide you as you consider your assets – what you have to give to the world. Reflect on how you can use your assets, doing something meaningful.

- Don't go seeking joy – it will find you

Use the practices outlined here and know your happiness set-point will improve.



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## Yoga and Happiness

Yoga combines a number of features that all help to improve happiness. This includes the setting for yoga practice, the physical and breathing exercises, meditation and the philosophies of yoga.

The atmosphere created in a yoga studio – soft music, gentle lighting, welcoming smiles – creates the foundations for an experience that releases Oxytocin, reducing stress and helping us feel happier.

The stretching, bending and twisting in yoga asana has a physical affect that creates a healthier body and there is a direct link between healthy body and healthy mind.

Pranayama – yoga’s breath work – has an even greater influence on improving our health and happiness. This is due to the calming effect of slowing the breath, and how this activates the parasympathetic nervous system, with its “rest and digest” benefits.

As we get better at our yoga, we learn to move the mind into a meditative state throughout our practice, not just as we hold an Asana, but also as we flow from one Asana to another. We learn to move with our body and breath and the focus of our mind all in synchronisation. This trains our body and mind to develop a calm, relaxed state with mental clarity.

This progression reflects classical yoga’s progression from Asana (poses), to Pranayama (breath), to the meditative aspects of yoga (Pratyahara, Dharana and Dhyana) and, ultimately, the bliss of Samadhi.

The philosophy that underpins yoga (Yamas, Niyamas, etc) provides a beautiful foundation for ongoing happiness. Many teachers subtly weave this into their classes, sometimes theming a class around a particular Yama or Niyama. This philosophy teaches us to be kind to ourselves and others (Ahimsa), it teaches us to let go of those things such as negative thoughts that do not serve us (Aparigraha), to find happiness through our joy in life (Santosh) rather than through material things and with the aid of self-discovery (Svadyaya) it helps us progress along a path with meaningful direction (Isvara Pranidhana and Dharma).

In the Sanskrit language used by yoga, there are four words that describe different levels of happiness:

- Sukha – meaning “comfort” is a temporary happiness. It comes from having a pleasant experience.
- Santosha – meaning "contentment" is ongoing happiness. It is achieved when you realise you don't need anything more than you already have to be happy.
- Mudita – meaning "spiritual happiness" is the pure joy you experience when you see beauty in the smallest things. It comes from out of nowhere, like a message from our deeper self that has the power to change our state in an instant.
- Ananda – the “divine” is the ecstasy of feeling as one with the universe. It is the ultimate goal of yoga.



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The first level of happiness, Sukha, is linked to its opposite, Duhkha, which means suffering. Sukha and Duhkha follow one another in cycles. These ups and downs are the cycles that occur around our happiness baseline. Yoga teaches us how to overcome these cycles through a recipe of physical actions that change our body chemistry, along with guidance for our minds, to lead us along a path to Santosha, Mudita and Ananda.

### Further reading

Davis, T. (2018) *How to Be Happy: 23 Ways to Be Happier: The complete guide to boosting happiness in 2018, according to science.*

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/click-here-happiness/201801/how-be-happy-23-ways-be-happier>

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