

Cultivating Happiness

The keys to happiness

Tip: Nurture and enjoy your relationships

Express gratitude

Tip: Focus on helping others and living with meaning

Take better care of your health

Tip: Train your brain to be more positive

Invest in quality time with the people you care about

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We all want to be happy. But is becoming happier even possible? These four tips can show you how to get more joy and satisfaction out of life.

Do you, like many people, have a mental list of things you think you need in order to be truly happy? There are many externals our society teaches us to chase: success, wealth, fame, power, good looks, romantic love. But are they really the keys to happiness?

The research says no, at least when it comes to long-term happiness. A prestigious award, a big raise, an exciting new relationship, a fancy new car, losing weight, these things can make us feel great at first, but the thrill doesn't last very long. Human beings are quick to adapt to new circumstances—a quality that has helped us survive and thrive. But it also means that the positive things that initially make us happier soon become our new normal and we return to our old happiness baseline.

However, researchers in the field of positive psychology have found that you can genuinely increase your happiness and overall satisfaction with life—and it doesn't require a winning lottery ticket or some other drastic change of circumstances. What it takes is an inner change of perspective and attitude. And that's truly good news, because it's something anyone can do.

Our brains are wired to notice and remember the things that are wrong. It's a survival mechanism that helped keep our cave-dwelling ancestors safe in a world where there were many physical threats. But in today's comparatively safe world, this biological predisposition to focus on the negative contributes to stress and unhappiness.

While we can't change our nature, we can train our brains to be more positive. This doesn't mean putting on a smiley face and whistling a happy tune no matter what's going on. You don't have to ignore reality or pretend things are wonderful even when they're not. But just as dwelling on negative things fuels unhappiness (and plays a big role in depression and anxiety), choosing to notice, appreciate, and anticipate goodness is a powerful happiness booster.

Teaching yourself to become more grateful can make a huge difference in your overall happiness. The research shows that gratitude helps you experience more positive emotions, decrease depression, feel better about yourself, improve your relationships, and strengthen your immune system. A recent study revealed that gratitude even makes you smarter about how you spend your money.

There are a number of simple exercises you can practice to increase and cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

Give sincere thanks to others. When someone goes above and beyond or does something to make your day easier, be quick to verbalize your thanks and appreciation. Not only will it make the person feel good, it will give you a happiness lift, too. It's an instant reward to see how expressing gratitude makes a positive difference in someone else's day. It makes you realize that we're all connected and that what you do matters.

Find the positive in a negative event from your past. Even the most painful circumstances can teach us positive lessons. Reevaluate a negative event from your past with an eye for what you learned or how you became stronger, wiser, or more compassionate. When you can find meaning in even the bad things you've experienced, you will be happier and more grateful.

Relationships are one of the biggest sources of happiness in our lives. Studies that look at happy people bear this out. The happier the person, the more likely that he or she has a large, supportive circle of family and friends, a fulfilling marriage, and a thriving social life.

That's why nurturing your relationships is one of the best emotional investments you can make. If you make an effort to cultivate and build your connections with others, you will soon reap the rewards of more positive emotions. And as you become happier, you will attract more people and higher-quality relationships, leading to even greater positivity and enjoyment. It's the happiness gift that keeps on giving.

It's not just the time spent with friends and family that matters; it's how you spend it. Mindlessly vegging out together in front of the TV isn't going to make you closer. People who are in happy relationships talk a lot. They share what's going on in their lives and how they feel. Follow their example and carve out time to talk and enjoy each other's company.

Take delight in the good fortune of others. One of the things that truly separate healthy, fulfilling relationships from the rest are how the partners respond to each other's good fortune and success. Do you show genuine enthusiasm and interest when your friend or family member experiences something good? Or do you ignore, criticize, or downplay the achievement, feel envious or threatened, or say a quick, "That's great," and then move on? If you'd like closer relationships, pay attention when the other person is excited. Ask questions, relive the experience with the other person, and express your excitement for him or her. Remember, happiness is contagious, so as you share the experience, their joy will become yours.

There is something truly fulfilling in helping others and feeling like your actions are making a difference for the better in the world. That's why people who assist those in need and give back to others and their communities tend to be happier. In addition, they also tend to have higher self-esteem and general psychological well-being.

Here are some ways to live a more altruistic, meaningful life:

Volunteer. Happiness is just one of the many [benefits of volunteering](#). You'll get the most out of the experience by volunteering for an organization that you believe in and that allows you to contribute in a meaningful way.

Go for the flow. Research shows that flow, a state of complete immersion and engagement in an activity, is closely associated with happiness. Flow happens when you're actively engaged in something that is intrinsically rewarding and challenging yet still attainable. Anything that completely captivates you and engages your full attention can be a flow activity.

Tip 4:

You can be happy even when you're suffering from illness or bad health, but that doesn't mean you should ignore the aspects of your health that are in your control. Exercise and sleep are particularly important when it comes to happiness.

Make exercise a regular habit

Exercise isn't just good for the body. It also [has a powerful effect on mental well-being](#). People who exercise regularly are happier across the board. Plus, they're also less stressed, angry, anxious, and depressed.

It doesn't really matter what kind of exercise you do, so long as you do it regularly. For best results, aim for an hour of exercise at least five days a week. If you find something you enjoy, you'll be more likely to stick to it. So don't think you're limited to going to the gym or lacing up jogging shoes. Find something that suits your lifestyle and preferences. It could be taking a dance class, shooting hoops, walking in nature, joining a community sports league, playing tennis, running with your dog, swimming laps at the pool, hiking, biking, or doing yoga in the park. If you're having trouble thinking of activities you enjoy, think back to when you were a kid. What sports or games did you like to play?

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