

How to be Happier

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Boring Legal Stuff

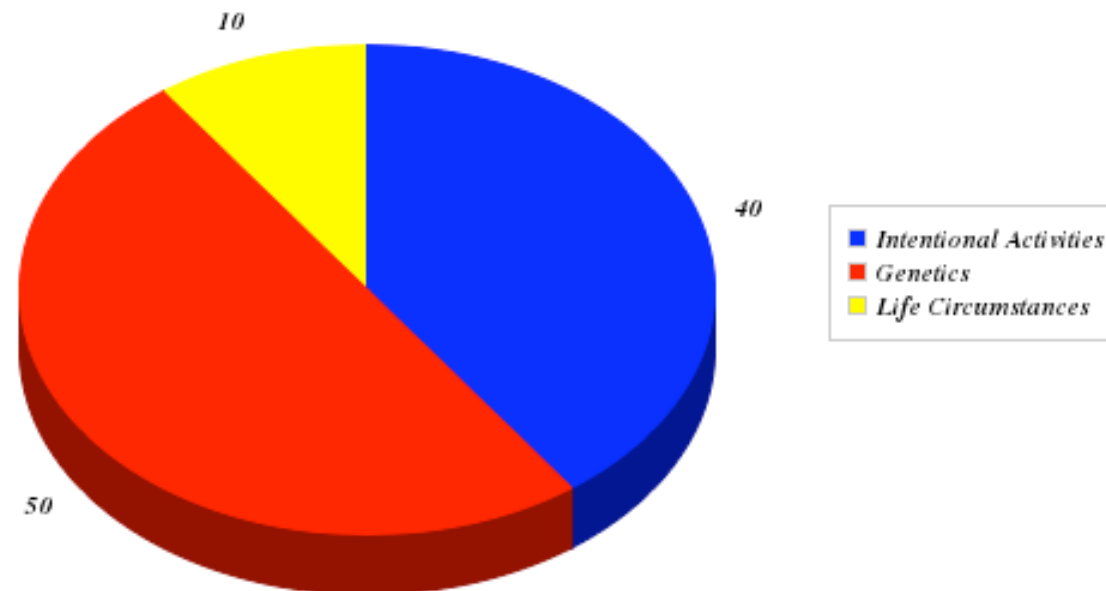
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Where does happiness come from?

Everyone intuitively knows what happiness is – and everyone wants it. But many people have the wrong about where it comes from. The aim of this little ebook is to briefly describe some findings from the scientific study of happiness, and to give you a better idea of how to be happier.

Most people think that happiness comes as a result of achieving certain circumstances in their lives; they think if they had a better job, a beautiful wife, a slim body, a new car, a big house etc. they'd be happier.

This is true to an extent – but not to a large one. Research shows that happiness comes from three sources – 10% from life circumstances, 50% from genetics, and 40% from intentional activities – as shown on the graph:



“We all live with the objective of being happy; our lives are all different and yet the same.”
– Anne Frank

Genetics

Your genes are the blueprint for how to build you. Just as the blueprint for a building will determine what features it will have, your DNA determines what features you will have; and this includes the amount of happiness you're likely to experience.

"Anybody who thinks money will make you happy, hasn't got money."
- David Geffen

Life Circumstances

Only 10% of your happiness is determined by your circumstances. This includes where you live, your gender, health, money, marital status, and so on. We can change all of these, but as they only take up 10% of the happiness pie, it doesn't seem like the most logical place to take action.

Intentional Activities

You can't change your genetics, and your circumstances can be difficult to change. Luckily, around 40% of your happiness comes from your intentional activities. These are actions you deliberately take, the way you think, and the way you respond to the world.

The "happiness formula" is:

Happiness = Genetics + Life Circumstances + Intentional Activities

So if you want to be happier, the best way is to focus on changing your intentional activities – not your circumstances.

Why Bother?

You might think: “Why should I bother putting all this effort into being happier, without changing my circumstances? Aren’t I just tricking myself into being content with no money, no partner, and a job I hate?”

Perhaps not, because another counter-intuitive finding is that not only does success bring happiness, but also happiness brings success. Happier people end up with better careers, earn more money, they’re luckier in love, have better social relationships, and have better health.

It seems that not only will changing your intentional actions make you happier, but it also gives you a better chance of improving your circumstances too.

Ahead are several suggestions, ways of changing your intentional activities, which have been shown in studies to increase happiness. Pick one you like, and try it for a few weeks.

“Sanity and happiness are an impossible combination.”
-Mark Twain

Social Interaction

Social relationships were essential to our ancestors' survival. For that reason, our brains evolved to 'reward' us with happiness when we make a new friend, or even just have an interesting conversation with someone.

Even people who prefer their own company become happier when forced talk and relate to new people.

If you're on a quest for success, like acquiring wealth and building a strong business, some people will tell you it's a bad idea to put too much time into this, if it's at the expense of spending time with your friends and family – "It's not what's really important, it won't make you happy," they say.

But they are actually right. Once you reach a certain amount of wealth, working to get more will only make you incrementally happier – while spending more time interacting with people and building relationships would be far more effective.

How to get more social ties into your life is a whole other ebook. Obvious ideas are to find work that involves human contact, join clubs, learn social skills, and generally, just get out more.

"I get by with a little help from my friends."
– The Beatles

Gratitude

Gratitude is a sense of thankfulness and appreciation aimed at something specific. As a positive emotion in itself, it's not too surprising that feeling grateful more often will bring more happiness; but there's more to it than that.

Gratitude can be used as a coping strategy, to reframe negative experiences in a positive way; e.g., you broke your leg, but you're grateful you didn't break your neck. When directed at experiences in the past, it serves to help savour them (also reminiscing about positive memories for 15 minutes a day has been shown to make people happier).

A popular gratitude exercise is called 'three good things'. It's simple; every night you write down three good things that happened to you that day, and why they happened. In one study, people who did this got happier and happier over a six-month trial. In another test, participants who expressed more gratitude ended up happier, in better physical health, and were spending more time exercising.

"Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful."

- Buddha

Meditation

There's a mystical image surrounding meditation – an image of people in orange robes, chanting “oohhmm” in the lotus position. Really, meditation is just a practical exercise for training the mind, just like you train the body. There are many different types, but the one most common one is called *mindfulness meditation*.

Mindfulness meditation involves directing your attention to something, typically your breathing, and trying not allow any thoughts to enter your head as you do so. If your mind wanders, you become aware of it, then bring your attention back to the breathing. You start by doing this for 20 minutes a day or so, and build up the time gradually.

Over time, you learn to control your mind, and quiet the internal voice that chatters away all day long to you. You gain better control over your attention, and your concentration improves.

Also, it makes you happier. In one study, people were given an 8-week program in mindfulness meditation. After the program, EEG scans measured increased activation in the left side of the anterior cortical area of the brain – the area associated with positive emotions. The participants were also given a flu vaccination at the end of the program, and the meditators had a stronger immune response than the control group!

“If you are doing mindfulness meditation, you are doing it with your ability to attend to the moment.”

– Daniel Goleman

I'm not qualified to explain how to do mindfulness meditation, but Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Wherever You Go, There You Are* is a popular introductory book, and you can find free articles and videos online too.

Beyond this, there are courses around the world teaching mindfulness meditation, many of which are free, so investigate this further if you are interested.

"Through meditation and by giving full attention to one thing at a time, we can learn to direct attention where we choose."

-Eknath Easwaran

Personal Strengths

You've heard the saying "Stick to your strengths," well it's actually pretty good advice. The more you work your strengths into your daily life, the happier you'll get.

But how do you know what your strengths are? There's a free test you can take at <http://www.authentichappiness.com>, which will put 24 possible strengths into rank order for you, and you'll discover your *signature strengths* – your top five.

Research has shown that people who deliberately make use of their signature strengths on a daily basis become happier. One study found a gradual and consistent increase in happiness over a six-month trial of this exercise.

The best way to do this is to integrate your signature strengths into your daily life. Find hobbies and interests that use them. Think about the tasks you do daily, and find ways to involve your strengths in them. If you're thinking about a career change, what career options make use of the strengths you already have? The more you put into this exercise, and the longer you do it for, the more you'll get out of it.

"Hide not your talents. They for use were made. What's a sundial in the shade?"
– Benjamin Franklin

Pursuing Goals

Some scientists believe that happiness is a system built into our brains to help us reach goals. When we move towards our goals, we become happier, and when we're lagging behind, we get less happy; even anxious. That's partly why humans like challenges. Well, most humans do; some prefer to simply sit and watch TV all day. But for most of us, making progress towards a goal will bring happiness along with it.

A study in the early 1990s found that the more committed to a goal you are, and the more attainable it seems and the happier you are when you reach it. Another in 2002 found that if you train people in how to set and reach goals, they experience more positive emotions, vitality, and wellbeing. So it seems that if you are committed to your goals and strategic about achieving them, you'll get more happiness from them.

There are resources to help you set and follow goals all over the internet, so look them up if you need help setting and pursuing goals. Of course, you should make sure your goals are appropriately challenging, and add something to your life.

"First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do."

– Epictetus

Acts of Kindness

Kindness, generosity, altruism, or whatever you want to call it, is the cornerstone of many religious and ethical systems. For some reason, performing acts of kindness makes the giver as well as the receiver happier.

Perhaps it increases the sense of interdependence in communities, which ends up being good for everyone. Or maybe it's because of the reciprocity principle – when you receive something, you are motivated to give back.

Whatever the reason, acts of kindness bring happiness to the giver. College students who were asked to perform five acts of kindness, one per week for six weeks were significantly happier at the end of it. In another study, people were either asked to perform the same act of kindness, or varied acts of kindness for ten weeks.

Interestingly, the group performing the same act did not see an increase in happiness. So maybe you must be a bit creative about your kindness for it to work for yourself.

“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

–Dalai Lama

Final Thoughts

- You're not supposed to do all of these exercises at once. It might be better to focus on one at a time, for a few weeks.
- These techniques are not 'one size fits all.' Try the ones that appeal to you the most first.
- Try the methods for at least a full week, preferably two. You need to do them regularly and consistently. If you're just looking for a quick pick me up, get a massage or something.
- You can't turn from a hard-core Eyeore into a major Tigger, but you can at least move in that direction.
- The biggest block to happiness is not in the external world, but in our own psychology. We're designed to survive, not to be happy: so if you want happiness, it might take a little work.
- True and complete happiness is impossible to achieve – it's not in the nature of happiness for it to be fully obtainable, so don't bother chasing it. That's why this ebook is called "How to be Happier" and not "How to Find True Happiness."
- Don't make happiness too big of a deal. It's just one part of life, other aspects need other emotions.

"A man doesn't know what happiness is until he's married. By then it's too late."
– Frank Sinatra, from 'The Joker Is Wild'

Further Reading

Read more psychology articles online at:

<http://www.generallythinking.com>

For more in-depth science-based advice on how to be happier, read:

The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want

by Sonja Lyubomirsky

For a quick and accessible read on the theory and research behind all the advice, see:

Happiness: The Science behind your Smile

by Daniel Nettle

“Knowing is not enough; we must apply!”
-Goethe

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