

The Science of being HAPPY



Few psychologists studied positive emotions before the late 1990s, focusing instead on behaviour and thoughts or negative emotions.

Today, however, happiness is taken seriously as a science – positively speaking, that is.

Words by Alice Boyes & Donna Duggan

Positive psychology – the science of positive emotions such as joy, serenity, hope, pride, inspiration, awe, gratitude, interest, amusement and love – has become a powerful subfield of psychology over the past 10 years.

Dr Barbara Fredrickson, the Principal Investigator of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, along with other positive psychologists, has conducted research showing that positive emotions do far more than make you feel good. Increasing positive emotions creates an upward spiral that not only leads to greater future positive emotions but also has a multitude of other benefits.

People who experience a positivity ratio of 3:1 (at least three positive emotions to every negative one) are more creative, open, flexible, optimistic, accepting and purpose driven. They have better social relationships and physical health and are more resistant to developing psychological problems when they experience negative life events.

Research by Dr Sonja Lyubomirsky, Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Riverside, suggests that your degree of happiness is 50 per cent determined by genetics, 10 per cent by life circumstances and 40 per cent by intentional activity. What that means is some people need to work harder than others to experience a positivity ratio of 3:1, but it's possible that everyone can.

THE HOW OF HAPPINESS

For the past 20 years Dr Lyubomirsky has sought to answer the question, "Is it possible to become lastingly happier and, if so, how?" She has received a five-year, US\$1 million grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to conduct research into the possibility of sustaining increased happiness. Her answer is yes, it is possible, but it does take constant work.

While Dr Lyubomirsky has found that some people are genetically wired to have a sunny disposition, and that 10 per cent of happiness is dependent on life circumstances (whether you are rich or poor, healthy or unhealthy, married

or divorced and so on), your degree of happiness is significantly affected by your intentional activities.

"This means that an unhappy person can become a great deal happier, but he or she would do well to scrutinise carefully what precise behaviours and activities happy people choose to engage in," Dr Lyubomirsky suggested at the recent Happiness & Its Causes conference in Sydney.

"Also, people tend to adapt to what makes them happy," she said. "For example, people, on average, get a boost when they're first married, but this may last for only two years and then they go back to their happiness baseline. If we adapt to anything good that happens to us, how can we ever become happier?"

HAPPINESS STRATEGIES

To increase your positive emotions, first decide what specific emotions you most want to enhance. Calmness, peace and serenity? Fun, amusement and light-heartedness? Hope and optimism? Pride and confidence? Deciding on the positive emotions you specifically want to target will help you to choose an effective happiness strategy. Increasing your feelings of calmness and serenity, for example, requires a different strategy than does increasing your confidence.

Second, write down 15 ways that you could increase your opportunities to experience those specific emotions. Writing down your ideas is important because it will help you to come up with a broader range of strategies to try. From your list choose the one idea that seems most interesting to you and try it.

Some of the most well-researched techniques for increasing positive emotions include mindfulness meditation, spending time in nature, physical exercise, developing closer relationships and imagining a positive future. Dr Lyubomirsky's research has also found that regularly expressing gratitude for what you have, performing acts of kindness several times a week and cultivating optimism are all ways to boost and sustain happiness.

Physical exercise is one of the most powerful happiness strategies because



5 FAST FACTS HAPPY RESEARCH

1 To determine your positivity ratio take a free online test at Dr Barbara Fredrickson's website, positivityratio.com. To ensure you get an accurate result take the test on several days and see if there are any days when your positivity ratio falls below the critical 3:1 positive-to-negative experience.

2 Dr Sonja Lyubomirsky defines happiness as having two components: one is the experience of frequent positive emotions; the other is having a sense that your life is good.

3 Psychiatrist Dr Daniel J. Siegel has researched how human relationships can improve your social intelligence. Dr Siegel has found that from the moment you're born the loving gaze from your primary caregiver starts the firing of neural circuits in the brain that allows you to develop empathy for others.

4 Researchers from Harvard Medical School have found that happiness is contagious. People with the most social connections – friends, spouses, neighbours and relatives – are the happiest, the research shows.

5 The Gottman Institute in the US has released research suggesting how very beneficial it is for a child to develop emotional intelligence. To nurture a child's emotional intelligence, the parents, especially the father, need to be seen expressing their emotions.



5 TOP TIPS FOR HAPPINESS

1 Happy people, according to Dr Sonja Lyubomirsky, are deeply committed to a goal. "If you think about any type of goal that's worthwhile, it takes a lot of effort and commitment, and the same thing applies to happiness," she says.

2 If you're in a relationship, doing more activities together that feel exciting and energising for both of you is one of the best ways to boost personal and relationship happiness. For example, you could join a gym together or take couples dance classes.

3 Most people are good at setting goals but find it difficult to stay on the path to achieving them – not because the goals are not important, but because it's easy to become distracted. It's similar to building muscles; the only way you're likely to achieve a goal is to keep working at it.

4 You may need help to sustain positive change, which can be as simple as asking a supportive friend to remind you of your goals, hold you accountable for working towards them and cheer you on. In some circumstances you may need to call upon professional help.

5 Ask yourself, "Am I really ready for change?" If you're not ready, don't beat yourself up about it. Be clear about why you want to change. If you're not intrinsically motivated to reach your goals you could end up feeling worse about yourself than when you started.

it directly changes neurotransmitter activity in the brain. It affects some of the same neurotransmitters that antidepressant medications alter.

Because there is no single strategy that works for every individual, you'll need to self-experiment to find a strategy that's a good fit for you. Strategies can also wear off so you'll need to try new strategies from time to time.

BANISHING NEGATIVITY

Many strategies for increasing positive emotions will also work for decreasing negative ones. They include:

- Learning to dispute negative thoughts (cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), for example, is one type of therapy that has had success in helping people to change the way they think)
- Reducing gossip and sarcasm
- Assessing your media diet and reducing your intake of negatively toned news, information and entertainment
- Understanding and addressing your "negativity landmines", the situations or thoughts that most often trigger your negative emotions.

TRANSCENDING ADVERSITY

When the theme of happiness is discussed, often the point is raised that in some tragic circumstances positive emotions are just not possible.

In 2003 Ingrid Poulson's estranged husband killed their two young children and her father. Poulson now inspires others to transcend adversity through resilience. Her book, *Rise* (2008), is about how to respond when the worst thing that can happen in life does happen.

Poulson's advice for rising above adversity includes:

- Life goes on. "This statement may seem droll, perhaps a little heartless," she says, "but the truth is we can survive the most incredibly challenging things."
- "Why?" is the wrong question. Asking why won't get you anywhere. "Instead of looking at what was, we need to focus on what is," she suggests.
- Take care of the details. "Resilience," she says, "is built through the small steps we take, the practical everyday ways that we add value to our lives."

Regularly expressing gratitude, performing acts of kindness and cultivating optimism are all ways to boost and sustain happiness.

CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

Buddhist nun Ven. Robina Courtin is the founder of Liberation Prison Project, which supports the spiritual practice of thousands of people in US and Australian prisons. She believes we all have the potential to change for the better, to become happier, braver, wiser and kinder people.

According to Ven. Robina, the good qualities at the core of our being are what define us, while the negative qualities are like additives that can be removed. "When you check beneath emotions such as anger, you will often find something else going on, but we are often not taught how to identify and change emotions," she says.

"What is inside your mind is yours," she adds. "We all have the potential to develop happiness and lessen suffering. Clearly, external conditions play a major role in your life, but as long as you think they play the main role you'll be the victim, hopeless and paralysed."

Meditation is the tool recommended by the Buddhist philosophy to help you change yourself for the better. "What you need to do is sit down for five minutes and then focus your mind on the sensation of the breath as it moves through your nostrils," Ven. Robina advises. "Every time your mind wanders, bring it back to your breath. What you're training yourself to develop is concentration. You're training yourself to keep your mind focused on what you want it to focus on, rather than it just being dragged along from pillar to post.

"Like anything, meditation needs practice; being successful at it doesn't just happen overnight."



A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Dr Suzy Green, a clinical and coaching psychologist at the University of Sydney, believes there are many different measures of happiness. She acknowledges the strong debate about the difference between happiness and meaning. “Happiness is a key area within positive psychology but it’s only one area,” she says.

“In my experience, people don’t necessarily want happy, smiling faces,” she adds. “They want to know how they can have a meaningful life and what is their life’s purpose.”

Dr Green notes it is important to realise that when we talk about a meaningful life we may not always feel happy, and that’s OK. Negative emotions can have a positive effect on your life, too.

There are basically four main emotions: fear, anger, sadness and happiness. Only when they are taken to their clinical extreme can they have a negative impact on your life. Fear taken to its clinical extreme can lead to an anxiety disorder; anger can lead to rage; and sadness can lead to depression. Even happiness has a clinical extreme: mania.

Conversely, if you consider the healthy expressions of these emotions, fear can lead to caution, anger can lead to

assertiveness, and sadness can encourage reflection and problem-solving and allow you to experience empathy.

Leading a meaningful life means experiencing many different emotions. “As therapists we have been trained very well in how to cope with negative emotions, but historically we haven’t been trained to boost people’s positive emotions, which is why positive psychology has come at such a wonderful time,” Dr Green says. **MF**

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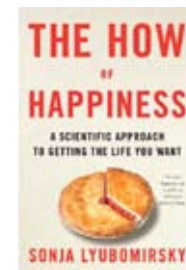


HAPPINESS

By Richard O’Connor

Random House, RRP \$28

Combining self-assessment exercises with the latest findings about happiness, this practical guide teaches you how to rewire your brain and develop the core life skills needed to experience more joy in your life.



THE HOW OF HAPPINESS

By Sonja Lyubomirsky

Penguin (2007)

Drawing upon her own groundbreaking research with thousands of women and men, Dr Lyubomirsky provides a detailed plan for increasing your happiness.



THE MINDFUL BRAIN

By Daniel J. Siegel

W. W. Norton & Co (2007)

Leading neurobiologist and psychiatrist Dr Siegel uses theory, science and anecdotal evidence to reveal how you can transform your brain and promote greater wellbeing.

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