

HOW TO BE HAPPY



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BITESIZE

Explore the science of happiness to boost wellbeing and cope with sadness

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

There is an old saying that happiness is like a butterfly. Pursue it and it will always be beyond your grasp, but sit down quietly, and it might just land upon you.

So what is this happiness thing anyway? For some people, happiness could mean to feel cheerful and upbeat, to enjoy the day and have a positive outlook. Yet other people talk about it in more profound terms, of deep satisfaction and a meaningful life.

So while each of us is pursuing happiness, we may each be going in different directions.

HAPPY HABITS

Recent studies suggest that if you are already fairly comfortable, what really affects your happiness is not big life changes, but changing your daily routine. Regular mood boosters are the key. Happiness, it seems, is a habit. So what can you do if you want to become happier?

Smile

Smiling is a signal of happiness, so seeing people smile can cheer you up, and if you force yourself to smile then your mood catches up.

Go outside

Daylight is good for boosting your mood, producing vitamin D and getting your mind going. Go outside and look at the sky.

See people

Spending time with people you love and trust is one of the best mood boosters there is. We tend to be happier when we are together.

Have fun

Many things can make you feel happier, but they all work much better if you enjoy them. Make time for fun, and happiness will follow.

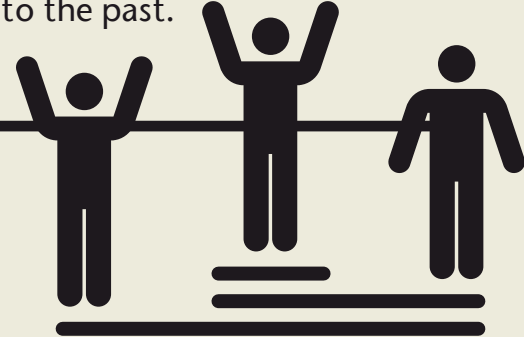
Plan fun

A 2010 study found that planning a holiday was more fun than going on holiday. Looking forward to things can give us hope and joy.

Psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman proposed that happiness with our choices lies not in how much we have, but in our **gains and losses**. When it comes to happiness, we focus on changes and ignore things that stay the same, the stable things we rely on.

This is why silver medallists often seem to be unhappy. Rather than being glad to be on the podium, they feel disappointed not to get gold. This is the challenge of happiness: we don't compare our lives to some abstract "gold standard", but to how we imagine our lives should be, a sense of making progress.

Happiness, it seems, is not a fixed point, but a matter of comparison - to other people, to expectations, to the past.



Keep busy

We like doing nothing, but we seem to be happier when we're busy, particularly doing something useful that uses our skills.

Help people

Happiness isn't a selfish exercise. Volunteering, feeling useful, helping people out, all seem to boost wellbeing. We're in this together.

Share the joy

A 2012 study found that happy memories lift your mood more if you share them with other people. Sharing happy times doubles the fun.

Be grateful

Grateful people tend to be happier and even healthier. Make a list of the things you're grateful for each day to build your happiness.

Have a good cry

Crying can actually cheer us up. A 2011 study found that intense crying put people in a better mood, particularly crying with others.



CHEER UP! 5 TIPS FOR OPTIMISTIC THINKING



Thinking positively seems to help us notice our successes, learn new things and build our skills and relationships. The influential positive psychologist Martin Seligman and his colleagues have proposed a few ways to train your mind to develop optimism and think more positively:

1. Focus on **what you have**, not what you don't have, and notice what's going well in life.
2. Focus on **what you can control**, where you can make progress and feel useful.
3. Think about **what you like** in life, the things you've achieved and what you love doing.
4. Think about **people who cheer you up** and give you energy, and spend time with them.
5. Do **things you enjoy**. Happy times can cheer you up, and make other people happy too.

HOW TO BE SAD

You don't need to be euphoric to be happy. Positive and negative emotions are part of a healthy mind, and being surrounded by happy people all the time can be depressing. A 2010 study found self-help books can make sensitive people feel insecure, and a 2009 study found self-help mantras can be bad for people with low self-esteem.

We mustn't blame people unfairly for their problems. Optimistic thinking is useful, but it is no substitute for improving people's lives.

And if all else fails, try hugging a teddy bear! It can reduce loneliness and make you like people again.



Psychologist Barry Schwartz says too much choice is making us unhappy. There is always something else to try, a path not taken, someone else who looks happier than we do.

There is no such thing as being perfectly happy. Happiness may not come from setting more ambitious goals, but appreciating what you have. So stop chasing the butterfly, and instead think about what a good life means for you - and once you find it, stop. Take joy in the moment, and maybe the butterfly will land on you.

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