

The Science of Being Happy by Patty Onderko

Surprisingly easy practices can mold you into a more cheerful, appreciative person—a person who loves their life

When the Positive Psychology movement took shape only 15 years ago, some considered it a lark or even a vanity project of the man who led it: Martin Seligman, Ph.D., author of *Authentic Happiness*, *Learned Optimism* and the then-newly elected president of the American Psychological Association. He wanted to switch the centuries-old direction of his profession from probing sadness to promoting happiness. While academics balked at first—after all, studying depression and pained childhoods had more gravitas than telling people to smile more (which actually works to increase personal positivity)—the research dollars Seligman raised and the solid findings he published got their attention.

These days, though still in its infancy, Positive Psychology has already created a veritable canon of tested and proven measures to increase one's subjective well-being (aka "happiness"). The idea that you're either a glass-half-full person or a glass-half-empty person has almost begun to feel quaint, because perhaps the most powerful message to arise from the new science of happiness is the idea that we can significantly change our outlook and life satisfaction no matter who we are, what we do, where we live or how much money we make. SUCCESS contributor Shawn Achor, an early Positive Psychology adopter out of Harvard University and author of *The Happiness Advantage*, sums up what we've learned about personal happiness over the past decade and a half: "We are not our genes, our environments or our childhoods. At least, we don't have to be. By changing our habits, we can trump even our genes." We can all be glass-half-full people if we want.

We've shared these gene-trumping habits numerous times in past issues of SUCCESS: Express gratitude regularly (keeping a journal helps); strengthen your social connections (through frequent quality time with friends and loved ones, and acts of kindness toward acquaintances and neighbors); volunteer; get in the "flow," that satisfying feeling of active engagement in one's work, art or sport (by figuring out your core strengths and how you can best utilize them); meditate; and exercise.

But the field is young, and new research reveals more nuances in human happiness, along with practical ways to achieve it, every year. So consider this an update in progress. Already practicing many of the tried-and-true happiness habits? Or are you only an 8 or 9 on the flourishing scale? (Test yourself at <http://goo.gl/M1Rjvy>.) Then add these strategies to your mix. Much of the research to follow comes from the mind-body school of thought, which contends that the way you think can transform the health of your body, and vice versa, in a feedback loop that you can control and spin in the direction you want. We're positive that you can spin it upward to reach that 10.

View stress as a challenge, not a threat.

We all know that stress is bad for our health and emotional well-being. But worrying about whether you're too stressed can be stressful in itself. And who among us isn't juggling at least a half-dozen

balls, none of which we can afford to drop? Stress-reduction strategies—meditation, massage, exercise, time with friends, etc.—are still great ideas, but some degree of stress will likely still be a part of your life no matter what. And that's OK. New research shows that stress can actually help us thrive as long as we're not afraid of it. The researchers, Achor and Alia Crum, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at Stanford University, worked with 380 managers from UBS, the financial services company, who are, presumably, a stressed-out lot.

Achor and Crum showed half of the UBS group an instructional video on all the possible benefits of stress. (Yes, there are some. "The experience of stress can enhance the development of mental toughness, heightened awareness, new perspectives, a sense of mastery, strengthened priorities, deeper relationships, greater appreciation for life and an increased sense of meaningfulness," they write.) The group that learned about the benefits of stress experienced a 23 percent drop in stress-related health issues, including headaches, backaches and fatigue, even though their stress levels remained the same. Their productivity on the job increased, and their life-satisfaction scores improved. The folks in the other group did not enjoy the same boosts in health, productivity and life satisfaction.

"This research shows us that while stress is inevitable, its effects upon our bodies and minds are not," Achor says. The managers who viewed stress as a challenge from which they could grow actually did! The next time you're under stress, try to view the pressure as potentially enhancing—and a sign of the rich life you lead—rather than debilitating.

Think young.

You really are as young, and young-looking, as you think you are, a new study shows. Researchers from Harvard and M.I.T. examined how superficial cues of age (gray hair, baldness, etc.) affect health and longevity. Women were invited to a hair salon where they had their hair colored and/or cut. The women who thought their new 'dos made them look younger lowered their blood pressures, while those who didn't think the trip to the salon changed their appearance maintained the same blood pressure. Next, strangers evaluated photos of the women in the study and revealed who they thought looked youngest. Consistently, the raters judged the women who believed themselves to look younger as actually being younger than women who thought they appeared to be their own age or older. The kicker: The hair of all the women was cropped out of all the photos.

The lesson: Confidence in your appearance may actually make you better-looking.

Other examples of how perception of age may speed up or slow down actual aging: Prematurely bald men are at greater risk for developing prostate cancer and coronary heart disease than men who aren't prematurely bald—possibly, the researchers hypothesize, because the bald men perceive themselves as older. The point is not that baldness causes or is a precursor to cancer, but that how you feel about it may play a part. Think of yourself as a sexy young Vin Diesel, Kelly Slater or Taye Diggs (all handsome, hairless men) instead of Great-Grandpa Eddie.

This same research found that women who have children late in life live longer than mothers who

had their kids earlier, perhaps because they are surrounded by more signs of youth—infants, playgrounds, school, other (younger) parents—as they age. Another lesson: Play, swing and slide, and make friends of all ages.

Cultivate a positivity bias.

Research has shown that if most of our interactions with others in a day are positive or neutral, and one is negative, come bedtime, most of us will dwell on that one bad experience instead of focusing on the pleasant ones, even though they were more frequent. It's a natural human psychological phenomenon called the "negativity bias": We give more weight to negative elements of our lives, and we spend more energy avoiding negative experiences than we do seeking positive ones.

But what if we could reverse this? Rick Hanson, Ph.D., author of *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence*, believes we can. The mind-body connection is so strong that not only can we influence our health through our outlook—as demonstrated by the stress and hairstyle studies mentioned above—but we can rewire our brains to respond and think in more productive ways. How? By "marinating in every good moment," Hanson says. Every time you have a pleasant experience, whether a hug from your child, a joke shared in the elevator with a co-worker or running into an old friend on the street, savor the interaction afterward. Think about how it made you feel, why it was so great and how lucky you are to have such moments in your life.

Try to stay with this good moment for long enough—12 or more seconds—so it transfers from short-term memory to long-term storage in your brain, Hanson says. By doing this a few times a day, he tells us, you "encourage the encoding process that will translate that ordinary positive experience into a bit of lasting neural structure and gradually weave these positive resources into the fabric of your brain." In other words, chip away at your negativity bias until you can focus on the positive without effort. Just as our neuroplasticity (the brain's ability to change) allows us to learn to use chopsticks or ride a bike, and then do both without thinking, so can we train ourselves to think more positively. Before-and-after brain scans of people who practice this exercise show physiological changes that reflect the shift away from the negativity bias.

Try not to ruminate so much.

Rumination—focused attention on bad feelings and experiences from the past—is a hallmark of depression. But rumination is a useless pattern of thinking that we all engage in, probably more than we should. And it's the opposite of encouraging positivity. When you're beating yourself up with questions like "Why did I say that to him?" or "How could I be so dumb?" you are "taking one more lap in hell," Hanson says. Explains Christine Carter, Ph.D., author of *Raising Happiness: 10 Simple Steps for More Joyful Kids and Happier Parents*: "You may think you are gaining insight when you ruminate, but what you're actually doing is re-triggering those negative emotions again and again and stimulating stress. Neurologically you are conditioning yourself to be afraid and to avoid those situations."

Instead, take it easy on yourself. So you had an embarrassing or humiliating moment. Acknowledge

it and honor your feelings, learn what you can from it, and then move on. Carter shares a trick that makes this process easier: Imagine your negative emotion—whether guilt, shame, rejection or anger—as an object that you are examining. What color is it? Does it have a texture? Is it spiky? Gelatinous? What shape is it? Where do you feel it? In your chest, belly, head? Everywhere? “The more you see it and hear it, the less loud it needs to be,” says Carter—and the easier it is to put aside.

Spend your money.

Just do it wisely. The party line in most Positive Psychology research has been that money can't buy happiness—at least once basic human needs are met. (One study found the cutoff to be \$75,000; above that, more money didn't make a difference in personal well-being.) But Daniel Gilbert, Ph.D., a Harvard psychology professor, (perhaps inspired by the financial success of his best-selling book *Stumbling on Happiness*) begs to differ. If money isn't making you happy, he wrote in a paper for the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, you probably aren't spending it right. “Money is an opportunity for happiness, but it is an opportunity that people routinely squander because the things they think will make them happy often don't.”

In an analysis of existing research, Gilbert and two colleagues dug up ways in which consumerism does boost well-being and life satisfaction. They found that the money best spent is on experiences rather than material goods. (There! We just settled your vacation versus new-couch-and-TV dilemma.) Money also translates to happiness when it's spent on others rather than on yourself. (Doting grandmothers have known this for centuries.) Finally, they discovered that buying many small pleasures—a fancy chocolate truffle here, a new song on iTunes there—increases happiness more than splurging on a few large ones.

Find meaning.

The ongoing Memory and Aging Project from Rush University Medical Center in Chicago has found that the biggest predictor of older people's health and life satisfaction as they age is their own self-reported sense of purpose in life. Possessing a strong sense of purpose was associated with increased ability to perform day-to-day activities and greater physical mobility. Seniors who had this strong sense of intention also had a lower risk of cognitive impairment and a slower rate of cognitive decline. They outlived their peers.

Another recent study showed that having a deep sense of purpose allows faster and easier recovery from negative events. “The ability to find meaning from life's experiences, especially when confronting life's challenges, may be a mechanism underlying resilience,” the study authors concluded.

For Carter, finding meaning and purpose in life is the key component to being happy. She admits that there is a bit of irony behind all the current happiness research: “In the end, it's not about what makes you happy. It's about what you have to offer others. Can you put others first? What is your social impact on the world? Living a life of purpose can be hard, and it has a long time frame when it

comes to happiness. But in the end, it's the best measure of a happy life." Yes, meditate and find flow and get coffee with friends and exercise and all those other proven positivity and well-being boosters, but do so with a sense of purpose that makes them more than just feel-good activities. "That's the difference between a pleasant life and a truly happy one," she says.

So if you've been waiting for a meaningful life purpose to come to you, like a calling, you may want to go after it instead. Is it making the world better through your work or volunteerism? Is it taking care of your children and family? Is it creating art? Is it appreciating nature and helping with conservation efforts? Is it simply being an active and contributing member of your community?

Sing.

While you're figuring out your purpose in life (no small trick!), don't forget to sing. Many studies suggest that singing—with others, in a choir, by yourself, in the shower, or in the car along to the radio—releases a slew of feel-good, pain-relieving, immunity-boosting chemicals in your body, including endorphins, serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin. It has also been shown to lower cortisol, the stress hormone. Best part: The effects are the same whether you're in tune or not. May we suggest a certain little ditty by Pharrell Williams?