







# Make Happiness a Habit

If happiness is life's goal, how are you scoring? Could you be happier? Krishnamurti said the secret is to be happy no matter what happens. But this requires us to reboot our beliefs and hardwire our brains for happiness. **Caroline Robertson** explores how to clear killjoys and install inner joy.

## Happy, healthy, helpful

In 2012, 193 United Nations members resolved to prioritise happiness by declaring March 20th an International Day of Happiness. In line with Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) priority, these nations recognised that happier people are healthier, wealthier and more community conscious. Research conducted by psychologist Dr Ed Diener (alias 'Dr Happiness'), over decades on thousands of subjects in over 100 countries, concluded that happier people enjoyed longer lives, better health, richer relationships, more self-control, greater creativity, supported others and increased productivity. Coining the term SWB, or subjective wellbeing, Dr Diener and *Happy* the documentary has also proven that income isn't correlated with happiness but strong social ties are essential. Dr Diener's study discovered "students with the highest levels of happiness and the fewest signs of depression were those with strong ties to friends and family and commitment to spending time with them".

Perhaps the most poignant demonstration of strong community ties was the video posted for International Day of Happiness 2014 by Philippine's cyclone survivors dancing to Pharrell Williams' 'Happy', literally in rubble rooms without roofs. It showed that happiness is a state of mind, not a situation, as Martha Washington believed: "I am determined to be cheerful and happy in whatever situation I may find myself. For I have learned that the greater part of our misery or unhappiness is determined not by our circumstance but by our disposition."

## What is happiness?

*"To live happily is an inward power of the soul."* – Aristotle

Happiness has a range...from a Mona Lisa smile of contentment to the watermelon beam of ecstasy. It arises from satisfaction according to our perception and expectation of what should be. So the more we perceive positives and the more flexible our expectation, the happier we are. Which is why flexible, optimistic kids are so innately joyful. If we have very



rigid beliefs about how things should be and only see downsides then there's much greater scope for being in the dumps.

We can choose happiness when we view everything as an opportunity to grow and gain. As Anthony Robbins says, "Happiness is progress." Taken in this context there are no negatives in life, only experiences to evolve from. As Greg Neville, naturopathic psychotherapist and director of The Anti-depression Institute of Victoria explains: "Happiness occurs when a person's perception of life matches what they believe is needed. A wise person understands they need an education on reality, which is received constantly. Such wisdom is the secret to happiness rather than control over life."

Awareness and acceptance that all is for our ultimate benefit is pivotal to Eckhart Tolle's teachings on happiness. Once we attune to the perfection of the present, he advises, "The secret to happiness is letting go of judgment and resistance to the way things are. When we accept and align with what is...we are empowering ourselves with peace, tranquility and a sense of clarity that will allow us to make wise, non-reactive choices about our conditions."

Being responsive rather than reactive is key according to Dr Rick Hanson, author of *Hardwiring Happiness*. He says the "negativity bias" in our prehistoric brains leads us to focus on threats and danger. "The brain is like Velcro for negative experiences but Teflon for positive ones." As we blindly react to these perceived problems, they deepen neural pathways that build more negative responses in the brain, hindering happiness. The good news is that our brains have a malleable neuroplasticity that weaves positive threads into its fabric with repeated, intentional awareness of good impressions. The brain's laughing lobes soak up feel-good vibes like sponges, growing and firing more readily the more we feed them. With reinforcement, happy tracks play spontaneously in place of sad songs, just like an upbeat tune you can't get out of your head.

### Hip to be unhappy?

Why would we choose misery over joy? The same reason we like to listen to bad news rather than good news, we watch sad soaps instead of comedies, we get more attention from tears than laughter. The drama of distress plays into our idea that the planet is painful. Or somehow suffering is noble and deep. The more you're aware of this pain paradigm, the more you'll notice how some wallow in suffering, prolonging crying, complaining and criticising almost



## HAPPY HABITS

**The founder of positive psychology Dr Martin Seligman says 60 per cent of happiness is due to joyful genes and environment, the remaining 40 per cent is in our hands. Optimise your happiness quotient with these powerful practices.**

- Identify and address areas you're unhappy with, writing down an issue and action to address each area daily. E.g. career, relationship, health, finances.
- Concentrate on what you can do, not what you can't.
- Love list. Brainstorm things you love to do and prioritise them.
- Smile often, it releases happy hormones.
- Express negativity in a misery minute then move on to solutions for a happy hour.
- Appreciate the beauty and love around you.
- Enjoy inspiring places, people, books, music, movies.
- See good in situations, yourself and others.
- Hang out with happy people.
- Do charity work or support someone.
- Vary your routine.
- Listen to your body's calls to stretch, strengthen, move, eat, drink, sleep, play.
- Positively reframe past painful experiences by emphasising good that came from them.
- Focus on commonalities with others to unite rather than divide you.
- Feel your flow by growing gifts in sports, music, drawing, dancing, writing or whatever appeals.
- Show yourself love with words, activities, appreciation, receiving.
- Surround yourself with beauty and comfort.
- Never compare yourself to others. Celebrate your specialness.
- Don't dwell on negative thoughts, worrying won't help.
- Analyse less. Satisfied people are less analytical according to a study by NSW psychologist Joseph Forgas.
- Be curious and adventurous. A 2007 study by Todd Kashdan and psychologist Michael Steger found that curious people experienced higher life satisfaction and engaged in more enjoyable activities.
- Don't hinder happiness until conditions are perfect. It's a fallacy to believe you'll only be happy when you can drive, have left school, are married, have kids, are slimmer etc...Happiness is here and now.
- Bounce back from the blues by focusing on your blessings, seeing the good in the bad, doing what you love and seeking supportive people.
- Believe it's your birthright to be happy. As Leo Tolstoy said, "If you want to be happy, be."





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"happiness is achievable if you know what to do and then do it."

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**Dr Sharp's**

## 6 steps to choosing happiness

01

**C** = Clarify  
your goals,  
direction and  
purpose.

03

**O** =  
Optimism

05

**S** = Strengths.  
Understand  
your talents and  
engage them.

06

**E** =  
Enjoy the  
moment!

04

**O** = Others.  
Value your  
relationships.

02

**H** =  
Healthy  
lifestyle

## 10 questions to snap out of sadness

1. Is it as bad as I think?
2. What good could come from this?
3. Is this permanent?
4. Am I ok right now?
5. How could I be happier?
6. Is my unhappiness affecting others adversely?
7. Who is worse off than me?
8. Have others suffered as I am and overcome it?
9. How would my life and myself look if I was happy?
10. Am I grateful for all I have?

as a pastime. This gets attention and emphasises an anti-joy attitude.

Whole subcultures have developed from this sad state. Think Beatniks, emos, tortured artists. Even those who over identify with 'survivor' support groups are perpetuating past pain, overshadowing aspects of their sunny lives now. Sadness illicit sympathy but happiness can cause envy and suspicion. Being exuberantly happy is often envied or judged as wacko, as when Tom Cruise ecstatically jumped on Oprah's couch. We can get pulled into the misery that likes company or believe it's cool to be self-deprecating. But the truth is happy and confident people are more attractive and fun to be around. Two separate studies in 1982 and 1990 found that cheerful people were perceived as more intelligent and appealing. Positive people tended to have better postures and broader smiles, which increased their mojo. Sadness spreads like a bad smell, creating negative repercussions, so it's important for individuals to try to overcome it not just for themselves but for the good of the whole community. Clinical depression is not so straightforward and benefits from professional therapy.

### Breathe in blessings

We can rewire our brain for happiness according to Dr Hanson. Following his simple steps, first you have a positive experience, enrich it, absorb it then link it to a negative experience. Taking time to

infuse the good in your present and past, you retrain your mind to focus on positives. This reinforces empowering mental pathways and pleasure brain centres, which are then more easily accessed and fired in the future. The more you receive, magnify and prolong positive impressions, the more happiness builds in your brain, stimulating norepinephrine and dopamine, which fosters new positive synapses and overrides negative ones. Extend mindfulness in the moment to what we think and say. Awareness of negative thoughts and words allows us to pause and replace them with

positive thoughts and words. When we clearly conjure up a happy experience, we can bring in a negative experience as a dull, blurred background picture. Then see and feel the positive experience shine through the painful one like the sun glowing through a grey sky. This dampens the distress in our cells, reducing the emotional impact. Highlight the good inside and outside and blessings will abound. **NH**

*Caroline Robertson is a naturopath and writer with 25 years experience. For consultations, health retreats and healing meditations please see [carolinerobertson.com.au](http://carolinerobertson.com.au)*

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