



What is Happiness? (from www.reachout.com.au)

Happiness can mean different things to different people. For example, for one person, it may mean being in a relationship, whereas for someone else it may mean feeling you have the ability to handle whatever life throws at you. While you might think that there are certain things that make you happy (or could make you happy if you had them), research has shown that there are certain common traits amongst happy people - and it isn't necessarily what you might have thought.

What makes happy people happy?

You might think that happy people have lots of money, are physically attractive, have great jobs, or own the latest gadgets. Or, you might just think happy people are plain lucky, and are born that way. Research suggests, however, that there are a number of variables that make a far greater contribution to happiness than external and more superficial factors. That doesn't mean that if you have a lot of money you won't be happy, or that having a lot of money is bad, it just means that other factors are more important in determining happiness. In fact, a strong positive relationship between job status / income / wealth and happiness only exists for those who live below the poverty line and/or who are unemployed. What distinguishes happy people, is that they have a different **attitude** - a different way of thinking about things and doing things. They interpret the world in a different way, and go about their lives in a different way.

Why is happiness important?

This might seem obvious - why wouldn't you want to be happy?! But the implications are greater than you might think. Happier people are generally healthier people - not only mentally, but also physically. So you can see that happiness is actually something that is really important, that you might want to increase if you can.

The "Happiness Equation"

It has been suggested that there are several factors that contribute towards our happiness. This is an 'equation for happiness' suggested by Martin Seligman, an American based psychologist considered the Father of positive psychology:

$$H = S + C + V$$

H = Happiness

S = Set range - (genetics: about 50%)

C = Circumstances (8-15%)

V = Voluntary Control - (past, present, future)

This all looks very scientific, and is actually based on research findings, but can be explained quite simply:

Set range / genetics - There is some evidence to support that we are all born with a certain set-point of happiness, determined by our genes. This is supposed to change only slightly, if at all, as we get older. This contributes towards around 50% of our level of happiness.

So, if something dramatic happens, for example, you win the lottery, or break up with your boyfriend or girlfriend, within a year or so (depending on the situation) your happiness level will return to its set point.

Circumstances - There is also some evidence to suggest that the circumstance we live in influence our level of happiness. You don't always have a lot of control over your circumstances (for example, we can't all live in mansions and drive new cars). Evidence suggests, however, that this accounts for only around 8-15% of our happiness levels, which really isn't that much.

Voluntary control - This third factor is the most important factor in the equation, because you can control it, and in the process control your happiness. It includes all aspects of your life over which you have a relatively high degree of control, including your thoughts and actions. This includes the way you choose to think about and act on the past, present, and future, and seems to have quite a significant impact on how happy you are - if you do the maths, it could be up to 42%!

Past - When thinking about the past, people who are happier pay attention to what is 'good' about the past, rather than focusing on the unhappy times. They are grateful, forgiving, and don't believe that the past will determine what happens in the future.

Future - When it comes to thinking about the future, happy people are flexibly optimistic - what this means is that they are optimistic (in a realistic sense) about how their future is going to be, but if it doesn't turn out that way, they know it's not going to be the end of the world either.

Present - The way you think about and act in the present is also essential in determining how happy you are. This might include things such as taking pleasure in life and your surroundings, building and being in meaningful relationships, and the way we react to things in life, good and bad.



Tips for Increasing your Happiness

There are lots of things you can do to increase your happiness. Here are a few suggestions for you to try out. If you want more suggestions check out the links to www.reachout.com.au

Be in the present - don't get distracted by the past or the future - What this means is to enjoy what is happening in your life now, and concentrating on being as happy now as possible rather than dwelling on bad things that may have happened in the past or worrying about what may or may not happen in the future. This doesn't mean to forget the past or not think about the future, but there are definitely more helpful ways of thinking about these times too, which may influence how happy or unhappy you are.

For example, you might be feeling stressed about your upcoming exams, especially since last time they didn't go too well. A useful way to bring you back to the present might be to think about one good thing that you did well last time you had exams - for example, you wrote a really good essay in one of your exams. That's great! Maybe you can do well in even more exams this time. Now think about what it is you have to do now to make this a possibility - you're back in the present.

Another example might be that you have a party on Saturday night and feel nervous because you struggle talking to new people and feel like you don't ever look quite as good as everyone else. To bring you back to the present think about someone that you get on really well with and what is it that makes it that way. When was the last time you felt great. Keeping that picture in your mind, think about how you can use that example to make the party fun. For more information, check out the gratitude fact sheet.

Take notice of the little things in life and in the world, and enjoy them - It may sound strange, but by paying attention to the things around you such as the natural environment, someone's smile, or how good your hot chocolate or coffee tastes in the morning, may actually increase your happiness - it can be the little things that make all the difference.

Build and maintain good quality relationships - This doesn't necessarily mean having a boyfriend or girlfriend, but includes family members, friends and social acquaintances, and work colleagues. You shouldn't need to have a boyfriend or girlfriend to be happy, but having quality relationships in general does increase your likelihood of being happy. One of the good things about having good quality relationships is that you're likely to be more active if you have them, and this is a significant contributor to happiness

Friends and family also act as social support, and can be a great place to turn to if you're not feeling great, for example if you're feeling sad or stressed, and they can help you work through those feelings. Their support can also protect you from a range of illnesses and health problems. Making friends isn't always easy, and can require quite a bit of effort. Improving and maintaining friendships you already have can require a lot of effort too, but the rewards can be huge. To build a good quality and strong relationship it is important that you establish good open communication, that you think positively about the other person in the relationship, and that you respect and trust that other person.

Train your mind - choose the way you think about things - Sometimes things happen in life which might seem like a disaster at first, but which aren't necessarily so. For example, you might have an assignment which is overdue, and although it might seem at first like a lost cause, you have a choice about how you think about the situation. You might just give up, and regret what's happened, or else you might finish the assignment, lose a few marks for getting it in late, and treat it as a learning experience for next time.

Use your strengths - Research has shown that focusing on your strengths leads to higher levels of health, happiness, and success. For more information, check out the fact sheet on using your strengths to optimise your happiness.

Plan for happiness - Happy and successful people tend to choose their happiness, and plan for it. If you want to be happier, you might want to develop your own happiness plan. First you'll have to ask yourself "What do I want in life?" This may be something that is obvious to you, or you may have no idea what you want out of life. What you want might also depend on the stage of life you're at, and may change over time.

Something you might do if you don't know what you want is to imagine what your life would be like if you were really happy. It may be just as it is now, or there may be certain things that stand out for you that are different - where you live, what you do, what your relationships are like.

Once you know what you want your life to be like, you can develop goals for yourself based on these desires. They might be really big goals that seem really unattainable, and it might be necessary to break them down into smaller goals, and develop an action plan so that the goal doesn't seem so overwhelming.

It is important that your goals are realistic and achievable, or else you may just be setting yourself up for failure, and make yourself unhappy instead of happy. Over time, you'll need to reassess your goals, and as your goals change you'll need to change your happiness plan accordingly.

Try it out!

Now that you know a few things that can help increase your happiness, why don't you try them out? It might not be easy at first, and may take some time. The rewards could be huge - not only in terms of making you happier, but for your general well-being as well.

Resources and Further Reading

The Happiness Handbook
Dr Timothy Sharp
The Happiness Institute

<http://www.thehappinessinstitute.com>

Authentic Happiness
Martin Seligman
Random House Australia (2002)

www.authentichappiness.org

Ms Kylie Cann, School Counsellor