

Happiness Habits

Psychologists are now studying what makes people happy. For many years it was considered too lightweight a topic for serious research but now “positive psychology” has become a force in helping people to develop and maintain positive emotions, thoughts and actions. On the leading edge of this research is Dr. Ed Diener who has been studying happiness for over twenty-five years. He found that 1/3 of people in America are “very happy” (per his Satisfaction with Life Scale, 1996) with the majority maintaining that they are “pretty happy”. Only one in ten responded as “not too happy”. Even those with major disabilities reported greater than average levels of happiness. Diener theorizes a major genetic component operating in that we are programmed to be happy and despite horrific life events, are able to return fairly quickly back to our “set point” of happiness.

Researchers now believe that genetic predisposition accounts for 50% of our happiness while only about 10% is affected by our life circumstances. That leaves a whopping 40% that is in our power to change. Having money is often viewed as necessary for happiness. Diener studied the correlation between income and happiness. In a 2004 study, he found that:

“over the past 50 years, income has climbed steadily in the United States, with the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita tripling, and yet life satisfaction has been virtually flat. Since WW II there has been a dramatic divergence between real income (after taxes and inflation) and life satisfaction in the US, and a similar pattern can be seen in the data from other nations such as Japan” (“Beyond Money”, APA, 2004).

Martin Seligman, Ph.D., known as “the father of positive psychology”, described three different kinds of happy lives in his 2004 Ted Talk. The first is the pleasant life, in which you fill your life with as many pleasures as you can. The second is the life of engagement, where you find a life in your work, parenting, love and leisure. The third is the meaningful life which consists of knowing your highest strengths and using them to belong to and in the service of something larger than yourself. He concluded that the first does not contribute to lasting fulfillment; optimal is the simultaneous pursuit of meaning and engagement.

Another prominent happiness researcher is Dr. Sonja Lyubomirskey, a psychology professor at the University of California, Riverside. She believes that each person has a happiness set point that is genetically determined. It rises and falls according to life events but then settles back to a pre-determined point due to a phenomena called “hedonic adaptation”, or the ability of people to adjust to change. Another term often used is resilience, or what enables us to adapt to adverse life events. Scientists have been studying resilience to attempt to isolate those characteristics promoting optimal health and well-being.

So what do happy people do to be happy? Diener has found that social relationships are highly correlated with happiness. In a 2002 cross-national study on the happiness of teenagers, he found that “the most salient characteristics shared by 10% of students with the highest levels of happiness and the fewest signs of depression were their strong ties to friends and family and commitment to spending time with them.” (“Very Happy People”, Psychological Science, 2002) Other researchers have found that happy people surround themselves with other happy people. They tend to accept themselves and others, having self and other compassion. They forgive themselves and others and, when in a couple, practice giving and selflessness towards their partners.

Happy people have an optimistic frame of reference, seeing problems as temporary, impersonal and solvable and reframing maladaptive thoughts and judgements. They cultivate gratitude and appreciate simple pleasures in life. They engage in healthy activities such as regular exercise, down time and getting enough sleep. They are spiritual and find ways to help others and promote the greater good. They laugh – a lot.

This is not an exhaustive list but a good beginning. It is important to remember that the pursuit of happiness for its own sake often leads to dissatisfaction. Negative emotions are also necessary and helpful, teaching us to change destructive patterns and to recognize and embrace lasting happiness. We are responsible for our own happiness. When we understand what to do for ourselves it sure takes the load off those around us. And it frees us to fulfill our life purpose. Create a better world: be happy.

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