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Building your happiness muscle- a 7 week user's manual

I recently took an online course on the science of happiness from Yale University. In the course the delightful Laurie Santos outlined research that shows how we can build our happiness muscle. Before we get into the main points, here is a suggestion on how to use this user's manual: Each week offers one activity to practice for 7 days. To enhance your happiness "workout" you can record your activity and resulting experience or realization pertaining to the activity in an activity log. This can be a journal, a notebook or even a note in your mobile phone. Just like building real muscles, consistency and repetition is key, so do the exercises every day. It will help build your happiness muscle!

Let's get into the main points:

Week 1: Savouring

Think back to the last really nice cup of coffee that you had, or a recent walk in the woods or listening to your favourite music. Hopefully you were able to allow yourself to focus on the experience and enjoyed the moment. Savouring is a little more than "just" enjoying something. It is the act of stepping outside of the experience to review and appreciate it. In savouring, we are *really connected* to the moment that we are experiencing. Through savouring we are *intensifying the positive emotions* that arise when you do something you love. **As a challenge for building your happiness muscle, pick one activity each day that you will savour.** Ideas could be like the ones mentioned above, or a nice shower, or the way your most cozy sweater feels on your skin. To enhance the experience and savour it, try these ideas: 1) Imagine that you would report the experience to someone else. This allows you to become more aware of the fine nuances of the moment. 2) Become aware of how lucky you are to be able to do whatever the activity is. 3) Keep a souvenir, like a picture, a small item from the event of activity. Even the smell of your shower gel on your skin can evoke the experience you enjoyed. 4) Stay really present in the nice moment, avoiding distracting yourself with to-do's and temptations like the mobile phone. As mentioned to enhance your muscle building work-out **keep a daily note to track your savouring activity and the**



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positive impact it had. For bonus points allow yourself to dive into the experience of that nice event one more time in your memory as you write the activity down.

Week 2: Daily Gratitude Journal

Gratitude is everywhere these days. Simply put it is the act of being appreciative of something. Being grateful puts us into a positive emotional state- even our physiology changes when we become appreciative of the good things in life. And let's face it, there is enough negative stuff going on around us. The brain, in an effort to keep you safe, has you focussing more on the negative stuff and figuring out how to survive thus leaving little time for the good stuff. Research shows that taking time to experience gratitude can have a positive impact on your happiness and your health. To support these positive effects here is an activity that I often give my clients as homework and also practice myself. The exercise is simple: **For the next seven days, take 5-10 minutes each night to write down five things that you are grateful for.** These can be little things or big things. But you really have to focus on them and actually write them down. Again, **track your gratitude practice.** The activity especially fruitful when you can see an image of whatever you're grateful for and be mindful how being conscious of this image impacts your physiology.

Week 3: Random Acts of Kindness

The other day I was at the grocery store and overheard this lady ask her husband where a certain brand of yogurt was. He shrugged his shoulders and walked away. I happen to be walking past the dairy section and just happen to see that particular type of yogurt. So I said to her: "It's right here". It was the littlest thing for me to do, and it made her life a little easier. She thanked me and smiled which in turn made me feel good. Win-Win, right? So try it out: **Over the next seven days, perform seven acts of kindness beyond what you normally do.** Ideas are holding the door for someone, helping your colleague with something, bringing flowers to your mom, or buying someone a coffee. You can't go wrong with kindness, but make the main criteria that your action really helps or positively impacts another person. **And track your activity and how you feel.**



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Week 4: Make a Social Connection

Research shows that happy people spend more time with others and have a richer set of social connections than unhappy people. Studies even show that the simple act of talking to a stranger on the street can boost our mood more than we expect. Maybe you have already noticed these effects? So let's make it a conscious effort: **Over the next seven days, challenge yourself to make one new social connection per day.** For example, ask your new co-worker about her weekend, chat about the weather while you're waiting in line at the grocery store. But also seek out a more meaningful social connection! **At least once this week, take some time to connect with someone you care about**—a friend who's far away or a family member you haven't talked to in a while. The key is that you find the time to *genuinely connect* with another person. At the end of each day, **track your efforts and notice how you feel.**

Week 5: Exercise - or as we say in Germany “Sport!”

Research suggests that ~30 minutes a day of exercise can boost your mood in addition to making your body healthier. **For the next week, spend at least 30 minutes each day getting your body moving.** No excuses! Even if your instinct is to say: “I don’t have time to go to the gym” or even “I don’t have a gym membership” no problem: YouTube is a fantastic source of 30 minute exercise collections freely available to you **any time.** Even if you ride your bike to work instead of driving, that counts! Or get your kids together for a dance party in the living room. No one is expecting a marathon, it’s just about getting your body moving. Here, too, **log your activity.** You will feel healthier, happier and you may even notice your energy levels have increased at the end of the 7 day trial. This one seems to be a hard one to do for many people so a bonus tip on keeping up with exercise is to involve another person in your plan. It’s more fun to work out together and it keeps you accountable.

Week 6: Get some Sleep

I once heard someone describe how way back when we used to sleep in shorter increments but several times a day. This seems to make sense from an evolutionary perspective and may be why some people love naps so much. Whatever our prehistoric



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sleeping patterns may have been, I think everyone would agree that today people are generally not getting enough sleep. This has a profound impact on the levels of wellbeing and happiness. Research shows that sleep can improve mood more than we often expect. The challenge this week is to **get at least seven hours of sleep for at least four nights of the week**. I know, I know. People are busy, this week there is a lot going on, you have deadlines and errands and work and family and projects....But sleep allows us to do all of it better because in sleeping we digest all the psychic debris that accumulates as a result of all the many things we have to do. Sleep researcher Albrecht Vorster explains it this way: Sleep is like a hair dresser appointment where you get a wash, cut and set. In his research he found that protein debris gets *washed out* between the neural cells, nerve endings get *a trim*, and *set* in the sense that as we dream we make *new neural connections*, thus waking smarter than we were when we went to bed. (You can check out his interview in German on the HR Info podcast Schlafen with Albrecht Vorster <https://www.hr-inforadio.de/podcast/das-interview/albrecht-vorster--biologe-und-schlafforscher,podcast-episode-56978.html>) So pick four nights of this week, note them in your calendar, and catch up on sleep. To help you out here are some tips on sleep hygiene: Turn off all screen-based devices at least 1 hour before bed as the blue light tends to interfere with our melatonin cycles that are responsible for sleep. Dim lights in your room to simulate night time on sunny days, and avoid caffeine and alcohol on the days you're getting your sleep. Each morning **log your amount of sleep and note down how you are feeling** throughout the day.

Week 7: Meditate!

This may feel like the most daunting exercise for you but the simplicity of meditation is the beauty of it. Simply said, meditation is a practice of intentionally turning your attention away from distractive thoughts toward a single point of reference. Beginners may want to start with noticing the breath. According to “The Google” we take around 23,040 breaths per day. Most of these are unconscious, initiated by the sympathetic nervous system. Also according to “The Google” we have about 60-80,000 (!) thoughts per day. Most of these are initiated by the Ego. So instead of listening to all the mental charter start your mediation journey by becoming aware of



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the sensation and the changes in your body as each single breath enters and leaves the body. **For the next week, spend at least 10 minutes per day meditating and log your efforts.** Try to find a quiet spot where you won't be disturbed. Set yourself a timer and keep bringing your awareness to your breath when you notice that your mind has wandered off. And it will. All the time. And that is ok, no judgment, just breaths. If you are new to meditation, there are a couple of apps like Calm and Headspace that support your early steps. And remember—it's called a meditation practice. Lots of people find it hard at first, but stick with it! Practice. Research shows that meditation can have a number of positive benefits, including more positive moods and increased concentration.

Extra credit: The Gratitude Letter and Visit

This is a very special activity that allows you to increase not only your own but also someone else's happiness. **This week, write a letter of gratitude to someone you care about** You can start by thinking about one living person who has made a big difference in your life, but whom you never properly thanked. Give yourself a bit of time and write a heartfelt letter to that person explaining how he or she has touched your life. Try aiming for at least 300 words, as this allows you to deeply engage with the subject of gratitude towards the person. When your letter is finished, arrange to meet the person for a coffee. When you meet, you will read the letter to the person- if necessary this can also happen over the phone or Skype but typically an in-person visit is best. The important thing is that you read the letter out loud. Bring tissues.

I hope you have enjoyed the 7 week user's guide. Feel free to share your experiences!

Thanks and credit to Laurie Santos at Yale University for compiling the studies that allow us to build our happiness muscle!