



# The Type of Love That Makes People Happiest

Arthur C. Brooks | July 21, 2022

**Being happy isn't just about getting the details right. Here are some truths that transcend circumstance and time.**

More than two years have passed since I became The Atlantic's happiness correspondent. "How to Build a Life" launched on April 9, 2020, as an experiment: Could we reframe the misery and loneliness of the coronavirus pandemic's early days as an opportunity to think more about well-being? The experiment is still going strong: This column is my 100th.

"How to Build a Life" has covered procrastination and pet ownership, Ben Franklin and Aristotle, summer vacations and winter blues, elections and exercise—all through the lens of happiness. The lessons in each column are different, and that's exactly how things should be: We focus on millions of different things over the course of a day, week, year, and lifetime. The work of neuroscientists, social psychologists, behavioral economists, and philosophers can be trained on any number of subjects to show how our quotidian pursuits can help us in the pursuit of happiness.

But this is not to say that happiness is only about getting all the little details of life right. Each of us should also keep in mind some large truths from the science of happiness that can transcend circumstance and time, guiding us across all of our life's events, from the trivial to the momentous. These are, you might say, the three maxims of happiness.

## **Maxim 1: Mother Nature doesn't care if you are happy.**

Perhaps the greatest error people make about happiness is assuming it will come naturally if we follow our instincts—that is, If it feels good, do it. There's a simplistic sort of logic here: Humans desire lots of worldly rewards, like money, power, pleasure, and admiration. We also want to be happy. Thus, if we get that worldly stuff, we will be happy. But this is nature's cruelest hoax, perpetrated to make sure that we pass on our genes with no consideration of whether we enjoy doing so.

Your brain's reward system keeps you chasing earthly delights that will enhance your reproductive fitness in comparison with others. These fall broadly into the categories of money, power, pleasure, and honor, which the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas called substitutes for God. Whether you buy Aquinas's assessment or not, you can't really argue with him that these rewards overpromise and underdeliver happiness. They simply don't satisfy.

Happiness is your responsibility, not Mother Nature's. That means you need to curtail your worldly appetites, and instead pursue what truly brings enduring happiness: a faith or life philosophy, family relationships, real friendship, and meaningful work.

---

### **Maxim 2: Lasting happiness comes from habits, not hacks.**

We live in a culture of “hacking,” or finding shortcuts to achieve otherwise time-consuming goals or invade well-protected systems. The internet is full of “happiness hacks” that will supposedly boost your well-being in surprising ways, with little effort. And indeed, you can use small, easy actions to change your emotional state quickly, such as turning off the notifications on your phone, which I highly recommend. But for enduring happiness changes, you need habits, not hacks. And by habits, I don’t mean mindless routines; I mean mindful, daily practices to strengthen your relationships, deepen your wisdom, and uncover meaning in your life.

Happiness hacking tends to trivialize happiness as little more than a feeling, but this is an error. Happy feelings are evidence of happiness, which is a combination of enjoyment, satisfaction, and purpose. Improvement in these areas requires commitment and effort, like anything else that is worthwhile. But if you do the work, you will most definitely see substantial results.

### **Maxim 3: Happiness is love.**

In the early fifth century, Saint Augustine summarized all of human ethics in the dictum “Love and do what you will.” The happiest people have lives focused on love: of family, of friends, of others through work that serves, and in some cases of the divine as well. Research on people who wind up happy (and healthy) as they grow old shows that the most important part of life to cultivate is a series of stable, long-term love relationships.

Not everyone enjoys a love-filled life; it’s true. But here’s the best news: You have a great deal of control over this, because love is a decision and a commitment. Aquinas defines love as “to will the good of the other.” You can’t choose how much love you will get, but happiness depends more on how much you give. And what you give your love to matters just as much. Augustine taught that to be happy, a person “neither loves what he ought not love, nor fails to love what he ought to love.” Here’s a handy formula to go by: Happy people love people and use things; unhappy people use people and love things.

Three maxims isn’t so many to remember—the hard part is to live them. And the best way to do that is to share them with others. Just as teaching math helps you understand it deeply, almost nothing works better for elevating your happiness than teaching it to others. In fact, my own happiness levels have increased a whopping 60 percent since I started writing this column, as measured with common and well-validated assessments I ask my students to take. Every single day, I think of how I can share what I have learned in the scientific literature with the world, and make sure that I am putting these ideas to use in my own life.

Obviously, teaching requires students. Writing 100 columns depends on you reading and productively using the ideas therein—and filling me in on the results from time to time. And that raises one of the most important principles of happiness: gratitude, which powerfully improves well-being. So in that spirit, thank you for reading “How to Build a Life.” With love, I dedicate these past 100 lessons—and many more to come—to you, and wish you increasing happiness in the ongoing journey of your life.

---

© 2023 Arthur Brooks, as first published in *The Atlantic*

---

© 2023 ACB Ideas: This copyrighted material may ONLY be copied, reproduced, distributed, and/or transmitted if (i) solely for personal use in connection with educational or training purposes in accordance with the principles set forth in this material, and (ii) with complete attribution to ACB Ideas LLC. Under no circumstances may this material (in whole or in part or any derivative thereof) be used for commercial gain. Do not copy, reproduce, distribute, transmit, modify, create derivative works, or in any other way exploit any part of this material except as set forth above.