**Happiness**

Ten Evidence-Based Strategies for Cultivating Joy

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Your happiness, like your health, is genetically influenced. Research suggests that approximately 50% of our happiness is determined by our genetics, 40% is influenced by the choices we make, and the remaining 10% is a result of our life circumstances. Since 40% percent of **what makes us happy is within our control**, **we can influence our own happiness**. Here are some research- based suggestions for improving your mood and increasing your satisfaction with life.

**FEELING BLUE?**Schedule your free and confidential appointment with a campus counselor today!

**1) Set meaningful goals**

If you take control of your time, you will feel more in control of your life. People who set meaningful goals and become in engaged in accomplishing them often find meaning in their lives and feel more in control of their destiny. We generally underestimate how much we can accomplish in a year, given just a little progress every day. Researchers have found that young adults who valued intrinsic goals, such as personal growth, close relationships, and community involvement, were more satisfied with their lives than those who set extrinsic goals, such as attaining wealth and “achieving the look I’ve been after.”

Here are some tips for goal setting:



Be SMART

(S) Be Specific

(M) Make it Measurable

(A) Make sure that it is Attainable

(R) Be Realistic

(T) Set a timeframe **2) Become engaged in work and leisure that utilize your strengths**

Happy people often are in a zone called flow. They become absorbed in tasks that challenge but don’t overwhelm them. The most expensive forms of leisure (e.g. sitting on a yacht) often provide less flow experience than simpler forms, such as gardening, socializing, or craft work.

**3) Exercise**

Not only does exercise influence our physical health, it turns out exercise can have a powerful effect on our mental outlook and emotions as well. Exercise regulates stress hormones, such as cortisol, which moderates and dissipates negative emotions such as anxiety and anger. Exercise also boosts “feel good” chemicals like endorphins. Some research has found that aerobic exercise can lower the risk of depression, promote health and energy, and help alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety disorders.

4) **Give your body the sleep it wants**

Happy people live active lives yet reserve time for renewing sleep and solitude. Many people suffer from sleep debt, with resulting fatigue, diminished alertness, and gloomy moods. Don’t underestimate the importance of sleep!

**5) Think and act the way you want to feel**

Studies show that people who were manipulated into a smiling expression felt better. So put on a happy face. We can often act our way into a happier state of mind. Our minds are so powerful that we can “think greater than the way that we feel.” By changing our thinking, the chemical messengers in our brain will release signals that will respond to the way that we are thinking. Go ahead and give it a try! \*Read articles at www.drjoedispenza.com to learn how you recondition your brain to become happy.

6) **Want what you have**   
Researchers are finding that people who want what they have are more satisfied with life than those who are seeking something new. Additionally, some of the things we think will make us happy don’t. More money, for example, is linked with happiness for those who don’t have their basic needs meet. However when a person’s basic needs are met, more money makes very little difference in an individual’s level of happiness. It’s easy for people to think that they’ll be happy once something they want happens. However, we are often disappointed, even when we do get what we want. So why is this?

Research suggests that people are not very good at predicting how happy or sad an event will make them or for how long. We overestimate the impact of a future event. In reality, we are very good at adapting to changing circumstances, so even though when we do get something we want, we may be happier for a short time, but then we often revert back to our prior levels of happiness. Those people who appreciate and enjoy what they already have, whether it’s a car or a mate, report greater happiness.   
7) **Keep a Gratitude Journal**   
Research is finding that positive emotions can undo the effect of negative emotions and promote resilience, helping us bounce back. Researchers are also finding that positive emotions aren’t just the result of happiness; they also cause happiness, in an “upward spiral” of well-being. Keeping a gratitude journal is a proven way to heighten well-being. The positive effects from expressing gratitude can last for months. In one study, people who had completed gratitude exercises were happier and less depressed six months later. Try pausing each day to savor good moments, and to record positive events and why they occurred. Here are some Journaling tips:  
 **-Don’t just go through the motions.**   
Journaling is more effective if you first make the conscious decision to become happier and more grateful. Motivation to become happier plays a role in the efficacy of journaling.  
 **-Get personal.**   
Focusing on *people* to whom you are grateful has more of an impact than focusing on *things* for which you are grateful.

**-Go for depth over breadth.**   
Elaborating in detail about a particular thing for which you’re grateful carries more benefits than a superficial list of many things.

**-Don’t overdo it.**   
Writing occasionally (once or twice per week) is more beneficial than daily journaling. In fact, one study found that people who wrote in their gratitude journals once a week for six weeks reported boosts in happiness afterward; people who wrote three times per week didn’t. We adapt to positive events quickly, especially if we constantly focus on them.  
8) **Focus beyond self**Reach out to those in need. Express your gratitude to others. Say hello or smile to a stranger. Do a favor for a stranger. Cook a meal for someone. Send them a card. Buy some groceries and drop them off. Give a hug. Return a favor. Give a handmade gift. Tell someone what they are good at. Tell someone that you appreciate them. Pick up some trash off the street. Volunteer to help.   
9) **Nurture your spiritual self**  
Researchers have found the following positive effects among people who participate in religious practices, such as prayer and worship**:** Lower levels of stress, lower blood pressure, faster recovery from surgery, longer life, stronger immune systems, less alcohol and drug abuse, fewer divorces, happier marriages, and fewer episodes of depression.

Whether you consider yourself religious or not, experiencing positive emotions, finding meaning in something, creating hope, having a purpose, focusing on something other than yourself, and having a strong connection to a community are all linked to greater happiness. Participating in a religious community is one way to increase these factors in your life.

\*Interestingly, in other free societies, religion is not equated with happiness. A study of 18 democracies found that the more secular countries had higher levels of happiness and lower rates of violent crime, suicide, teen pregnancy, and abortion than the United States. These findings are leading researchers to focus on the important role of social support and connection.   
10) **Give priority to close relationships**   
Having supportive relationships contributes to daily positive emotions, and leads people to be more resilient in the face of adversity. People with strong ties to families and friends are consistently happier than those without social ties. Compared with unhappy people, happy people engage in less superficial small talk and more meaningful conversations. Nurture your closest relationships by not taking your loved ones for granted. This means displaying to them the sort of kindness you display to others, affirming them, playing together, and sharing together.

\* Did you know that happiness is contagious? Psychologist James H. Fowler studied the data of 5,000 people over 20 years and found that when one person in a social network became happy, the chances that a friend, sibling, spouse or next-door neighbor would become happy increased between 8 – 34%. On average, when one person was happier, their friend had a 15% chance of being happier, their friend’s friend had a 10% of being happier, and their friend’s friend’s friend had a 6% chance of being happier. Therefore, we may be influencing the mood and lives of people that we haven’t even met!

Digested from David G. Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Harper Paperbacks, 1993)