

Self-reflection theme: Everyday happiness



What Does Happiness Really Mean?

It's not the same for everyone

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Happiness is something that people seek to find, yet what defines happiness can vary from one person to the next. Typically, happiness is an emotional state characterized by feelings of joy, satisfaction, contentment, and fulfillment. While happiness has many different definitions, it is often described as involving positive emotions and life satisfaction.

When most people talk about the true meaning of happiness, they might be talking about how they feel in the present moment or referring to a more general sense of how they feel about life overall.

Because happiness tends to be such a broadly defined term, psychologists and other social scientists typically use the term '[subjective well-being](#)' when they talk about this emotional state. Just as it sounds, subjective well-being tends to focus on an individual's overall personal feelings about their life in the present.

Two key components of happiness (or subjective well-being) are:

- **The balance of emotions:** Everyone experiences both positive and negative emotions, feelings, and moods. Happiness is generally linked to experiencing more positive feelings than negative ones.
- **Life satisfaction:** This relates to how satisfied you feel with different areas of your life including your relationships, work, achievements, and other things that you consider important.

Another definition of happiness comes from the ancient philosopher Aristotle, who suggested that happiness is the one human desire, and all other human desires exist as a way to obtain happiness. He believed that there were four levels of happiness: happiness from immediate gratification, from comparison and achievement, from making positive contributions, and from achieving fulfillment.

Happiness, Aristotle suggested, could be achieved through the golden mean, which involves finding a balance between deficiency and excess.¹

Signs of Happiness

While perceptions of happiness may be different from one person to the next, there are some key signs that psychologists look for when measuring and assessing happiness.

Some key signs of happiness include:

- Feeling like you are living the life you wanted
- Going with the flow and a willingness to take life as it comes
- Feeling that the conditions of your life are good
- Enjoying positive, healthy relationships with other people
- Feeling that you have accomplished (or will accomplish) what you want in life
- Feeling satisfied with your life
- Feeling positive more than negative
- Being open to new ideas and experiences

- Practicing self-care and treating yourself with kindness and compassion
- Experiencing [gratitude](#)
- Feeling that you are living life with a sense of meaning and purpose
- Wanting to share your happiness and joy with others

One important thing to remember is that happiness isn't a state of constant [euphoria](#). Instead, happiness is an overall sense of experiencing more [positive emotions](#) than negative ones.

Happy people still feel the whole range of human emotions—anger, frustration, boredom, loneliness, and even sadness—from time to time. But even when faced with discomfort, they have an underlying sense of optimism that things will get better, that they can deal with what is happening, and that they will be able to feel happy again.

"Even people who have experienced terrible trauma can still also experience happiness," says [Hannah Owens, LMSW](#), "though it is important to recognize that it might be more difficult for them to obtain the balance generally associated with overall happiness, and that their happiness might look very different from others' who have not had to deal with such challenges."

Types of Happiness

There are many different ways of thinking about happiness. For example, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle made a distinction between two different kinds of happiness: *hedonia* and *eudaimonia*.

- **Hedonia:** Hedonic happiness is derived from pleasure. It is most often associated with doing what feels good, self-care, fulfilling desires, experiencing enjoyment, and feeling a sense of satisfaction.
- **Eudaimonia:** This type of happiness is derived from seeking virtue and meaning. Important components of eudaimonic well-being including feeling that your life has meaning, value, and purpose. It is associated more with fulfilling responsibilities, investing in long-term goals, concern for the welfare of other people, and living up to personal ideals.

Hedonia and eudaimonia are more commonly known today in psychology as pleasure and meaning, respectively. More recently, psychologists have suggested the addition of the third component that relates to **engagement**. These are feelings of commitment and participation in different areas of life.

Research suggests that happy people tend to rank pretty high on eudaimonic life satisfaction and better than average on their hedonic life satisfaction.²

All of these can play an important role in the overall experience of happiness, although the relative value of each can be highly subjective. Some activities may be both pleasurable and meaningful, while others might skew more one way or the other.

For example, volunteering for a cause you believe in might be more meaningful than pleasurable. Watching your favorite tv show, on the other hand, might rank lower in meaning and higher on pleasure.³

Some types of happiness that may fall under these three main categories include:

- **Joy:** A often relatively brief feeling that is felt in the present moment
- **Excitement:** A happy feeling that involves looking forward to something with positive anticipation
- **Gratitude:** A positive emotion that involves being thankful and appreciative
- **Pride:** A feeling of satisfaction in something that you have accomplished
- **Optimism:** This is a way of looking at life with a positive, upbeat outlook
- **Contentment:** This type of happiness involves a sense of satisfaction

How to Cultivate Happiness

While some people just tend to be naturally happier, there are things that you can do to cultivate your sense of happiness.

Pursue Intrinsic Goals: Achieving goals that you are intrinsically motivated to pursue, particularly ones that are focused on personal growth and community, can help boost happiness. Research suggests that pursuing these types of [intrinsically-motivated](#) goals can increase happiness more than pursuing extrinsic goals like gaining money or status.⁴

Enjoy the Moment: Studies have found that people tend to over earn—they become so focused on accumulating things that they lose track of actually enjoying what they are doing.⁵

So, rather than falling into the trap of mindlessly accumulating to the detriment of your own happiness, focus on practicing gratitude for the things you have and enjoying the process as you go.

Reframe Negative Thoughts: When you find yourself stuck in a pessimistic outlook or experiencing negativity, look for ways that you can reframe your thoughts in a more positive way.

People have a natural [negativity bias](#), or a tendency to pay more attention to bad things than to good things. This can have an impact on everything from how you make decisions to how you form impressions of other people. Discounting the positive—a cognitive distortion where people focus on the negative and ignore the positive—can also contribute to negative thoughts.

Reframing these negative perceptions isn't about ignoring the bad. Instead, it means trying to take a more balanced, realistic look at events. It allows you to notice patterns in your thinking and then challenge negative thoughts.

Avoid Social Comparison: Another way to cultivate happiness and to make sure that you are able to maintain your happiness, Owens says, is to stop comparing yourself to others.

"No two lives are alike, and focusing on what others have is a sure-fire way to feel envy and regret. Focus on the good things in your own life, and you'll be more likely to find contentment in them," she says.

Impact of Happiness

Why is happiness so important? Happiness has been shown to predict positive outcomes in many different areas of life including mental well-being, physical health, and overall longevity.

- Positive emotions increase satisfaction with life.
- Happiness helps people build stronger coping skills and emotional resources.
- Positive emotions are linked to better health and longevity. One study found that people who experienced more positive emotions than negative ones were more likely to have survived over a 13 year period.⁶
- Positive feelings increase resilience. Resilience helps people better manage stress and bounce back better when faced with setbacks. For example, one study found that happier people tend to have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol and that these benefits tend to persist over time.⁷
- People who report having a positive state of well-being are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors such as eating fruits and vegetables and engaging in regular physical exercise.⁸
- Being happy may help you get sick less often. Happier mental states are linked to increased immunity.⁹

How to Be a Happier Person

Some people seem to have a naturally higher baseline for happiness—one large-scale study of more than 2,000 twins suggested that around 50% of overall life satisfaction was due to genetics, 10% to external events, and 40% to individual activities.¹⁰

So while you might not be able to control what your “base level” of happiness is, there are things that you can do to make your life happier and more fulfilling. Even the happiest of individuals can feel down from time to time and happiness is something that all people need to consciously pursue.

Cultivate Strong Relationships

[Social support](#) is an essential part of well-being. Research has found that good social relationships are the strongest predictor of happiness. Having positive and supportive connections with people you care about can provide a buffer against stress, improve your health, and help you become a happier person.

In the Harvard Study of Adult Development, a longitudinal study that looked at participants over 80 years, researchers found that relationships and how happy people are in those relationships strongly impacted overall health.¹¹

So if you are trying to improve your happiness, cultivating solid social connections is a great place to start. Consider deepening your existing relationships and explore ways to make new friends.

Get Regular Exercise

Exercise is good for both your body and mind. Physical activity is linked to a range of physical and psychological benefits including improved mood. Numerous studies have shown that regular exercise may play a role in warding off symptoms of depression, but evidence also suggests that it may also help make people happier, too.

In one analysis of past research on the connection between physical activity and happiness, researchers found a consistent positive link.¹²

Even a little bit of exercise produces a happiness boost—people who were physically active for as little as 10 minutes a day or who worked out only once a week had higher levels of happiness than people who never exercised.

Show Gratitude

In one study, participants were asked to engage in a writing exercise for 10 to 20 minutes each night before bed.¹³ Some were instructed to write about daily hassles, some about neutral events, and some about things they were grateful for. The results found that people who had written about gratitude had increase positive emotions, increased subjective happiness, and improve life satisfaction.

As the authors of the study suggest, keeping a gratitude list is a relatively easy, affordable, simple, and pleasant way to boost your mood. Try setting aside a few minutes each night to write down or think about things in your life that you are grateful for.

[Want to Relieve Stress ASAP? Write in a Gratitude Journal](#)

Find a Sense of Purpose

Research has found that people who feel like they have a purpose have better well-being and feel more fulfilled.¹⁴ A sense of purpose involves seeing your life as having goals, direction, and meaning. It may help improve happiness by promoting healthier behaviors.

Some things you can do to help find a sense of purpose include:

- Explore your interests and passions
- Engage in [prosocial](#) and [altruistic](#) causes
- Work to address injustices
- Look for new things you might want to learn more about

This sense of purpose is influenced by a variety of factors, but it is also something that you can cultivate. It involves finding a goal that you care deeply about that will lead you to engage in productive, positive actions in order to work toward that goal.

Challenges of Finding Happiness

While seeking happiness is important, there are times when the pursuit of life satisfaction falls short. Some challenges to watch for include:

Valuing the Wrong Things: Money may not be able to buy happiness, but there is research that spending money on things like experiences can make you happier than spending it on material possessions.

One study, for example, found that spending money on things that buy time—such as spending money on time-saving services—can increase happiness and life satisfaction.¹⁵

Rather than overvaluing things such as money, status, or material possessions, pursuing goals that result in more free time or enjoyable experiences may have a higher happiness reward.

Not Seeking Social Support: [Social support](#) means having friends and loved ones that you can turn to for support. Research has found that perceived social support plays an important role in subjective well-being. For example, one study found that perceptions of social support were responsible for 43% of a person's level of happiness.¹⁶

It is important to remember that when it comes to social support, quality is more important than quantity. Having just a few very close and trusted friends will have a greater impact on your overall happiness than having many casual acquaintances.

Thinking of Happiness as an Endpoint: Happiness isn't a goal that you can simply reach and be done with. It is a constant pursuit that requires continual nurturing and sustenance.

One study found that people who tend to value happiness most also tended to feel the least satisfied with their lives.¹⁷ Essentially, happiness becomes such a lofty goal that it becomes virtually unattainable.

“Valuing happiness could be self-defeating because the more people value happiness, the more likely they will feel disappointed,” suggest the authors of the study.

Perhaps the lesson is to not make something as broadly defined as “happiness” your goal. Instead, focus on building and cultivating the sort of life and relationships that bring fulfillment and satisfaction to your life.

It is also important to consider how you personally define happiness. Happiness is a broad term that means different things to different people. Rather than looking at happiness as an endpoint, it can be more helpful to think about what happiness really means to you and then work on small things that will help you become happier. This can make achieving these goals more manageable and less overwhelming.

Moment of gratitude: Eudaimonia

Think of Eudaimonia, the source of happiness related to meaning, purpose, responsibility, etc. Think of some aspects of your life that gives you that feeling. It could be at school or at home. Take a second to appreciate it.

Moment of self-reflection: Components of happiness

The article suggests that there are three “pillars” of happiness: Hedonia, Eudaimonia, and Engagement. If you reflect on your life, which one do you think you are the best at? Which one do you think you might need more of?

Part 2: Videos (take notes of “important” sentences as needed)

Steven Kotler on flow (take notes on 5 motivators in particular)



Journaling on career satisfaction as a college student

When Steven Kotler describes flow, does that describe how you sometimes feel as a college student? Based on that video, what could you do to try to feel that way more often as a college student?

Ali Abdaal on his advice for someone who feels behind in life



Reflecting on your ideal day

Reflect on your ideal day. Do not make this a “perfect” day that assumes that you’re a perfect person. Instead, do it like Ali Abdaal recommends: Just assume you’re you, but if you had a really wonderful weekday you were perfectly happy with, what would it look like? Do you often have days like this? If not, why?
