

A Recipe for Happiness

It feels good to be happy. Laughing is fun. And most people like to have a good time. "If you ask people what they want for their children, most say, 'I want them to be happy,'" says psychologist and happiness researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky of the University of California, Riverside.

Not that long ago, however, joy wasn't considered serious enough for psychologists to study. These scientists traditionally helped people with depression or other mental illnesses. "When I started doing research on this 18 years ago," Lyubomirsky says, happiness "was not considered a scientific topic." But today, happiness is a hot subject of research. As part of a growing field called positive psychology, more and more researchers are looking for ways to help people become happier, even if they don't feel depressed to begin with. And there are plenty of reasons why happiness is a worthy goal. Recent studies suggest that, among other benefits, happy people are healthier, have more friends, and make more money than their sadder peers, Lyubomirsky says. And here's the really good news: Research now suggests that there are easy things people can do to make themselves happier.

The field of positive psychology has had to overcome significant obstacles. For one thing, it's difficult to scientifically measure happiness. It's also hard to compare one person's sense of well-being with another's. For example, if your best friend says she feels great, but she's crying a lot and acting more depressed than usual, would you rate her as happy or sad for the purposes of a scientific study? Likewise, on a scale of 1 to 10, how can we be sure that my "8" is happier than your "6"? "No one can tell you how happy you are," Lyubomirsky says. "Who's to say who's right?" In recent years, however, researchers have developed what they consider to be accurate measurements of happiness. One technique involves looking at how often people genuinely smile in their daily lives. It's easy to tell real smiles from the fake smiles people plaster on for photographs. Genuine smiles engage the corners of the eyes and involve muscles around the mouth that fake smilers can't control.

In their studies, scientists also tell people to describe how happy they feel. They ask subjects how satisfied they are with their lives. And they get people to describe everything they did over a course of a day and how they felt about each activity. Scientists also sometimes look at images of the brain for clues: An area called the left frontal cortex tends to work harder in people who are happier. This area "lights up," showing more activity in brain scans.

Scientists now know that people are born with a general tendency toward a certain level of happiness, and they tend to maintain that mood in their day-to-day lives. For example, you probably know kids who are bubbly and cheerful most of the time as well as kids who are generally more quiet and serious. About half of a person's "happiness quotient" comes from the personality he or she is born with. Extreme events, such as winning a lottery or being injured in an accident, can cause temporary bursts of happiness or sadness. But eventually, people return to about the same emotional state they're normally at. So, what about the other half of the happiness quotient? About 10 percent of that quotient depends on external circumstances, such as how much money people make or how healthy they are. The remain-

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Period:

ing 40 percent, says Lyubomirsky, is entirely up to you. What's more, her work suggests a few strategies for making yourself happier, no matter how happy or sad you are to begin with.

In one recent study, she and colleagues assigned more than 300 college students to complete one of three activities. For 15 minutes a week over 8 weeks, one group of these students wrote about what their lives would be like in the future if all their hopes and dreams came true. A second group spent the same amount of time writing letters to people who had done things in the past that the letter writers were grateful for. A third group of students simply listed everything they had done over the past 7 days. The objective of this experiment was to find out whether expressing optimism about the future or gratitude about the past could make a person happier. (The third group allowed the researchers to compare whether writing alone made a difference.) Results backed previous research, which had shown that expressing optimism and gratitude lead to an improved sense of well-being. But the improvement came about, Lyubomirsky adds, only for the students that were most motivated to do the activity. In other words, only people who really wanted to be happier were able to make that happen. The simple process of writing had no effect on wellbeing. Lyubomirsky found that motivated students maintained their improved sense of happiness for at least 9 months after the study ended. (After 9 months, she stopped checking.) "That is actually amazing," she says. "It is possible they might have changed their attitudes toward life" just by writing thank-you notes and having optimistic thoughts.

It's not always easy to be a kid. Between 15 and 20 percent of middle schoolers in the United States experience moderate to severe symptoms of depression, says Bruce Cuthbert, a psychologist at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. And research shows that, without help, stress and anxiety tend to get worse over time. If you don't feel happy today, that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you, Cuthbert says. But if you want to feel better, there are lots of things you can do to improve your mood. Studies have shown that the happiest people are those who frequently do kind things for both friends and strangers. Other research-backed happiness boosters include keeping a diary of your future dreams, setting and pursuing goals, making friends and family members a big part of your life, and exercising regularly. "Those are things anyone can do," Lyubomirsky says, "no matter how young you are."

BE HAPPY

R E S B V Q N O I T O M E P N
M Y K K O T X P V C O R T E X
P S S H G U A L O T T E R Y Y
D S I I N S A T I S F I E D S
G E Y M E V S V T S C Q P U I
R N S C I S A E L I M S O R N
A I I S H T J Y R C T I H T J
T P M E E O P U G T R U S U G
I P L D B R L O D E S N D S B
T A J F U L P O S I T I V E A
U H V E B T L E G H S A D Q T
D Q B F B D J E D Y Q R R R Q
E M J M L O N V W W I B E T Z
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| ATTITUDE | HAPPINESS | SERIOUS |
| BRAIN | HOPE | SMILE |
| BUBBLY | JOY | STRATEGY |
| CORTEX | LAUGH | WELLBEING |
| CRY | LOTTERY | |
| DEPRESSED | MOTIVATED | |
| DISTRESS | OPTIMISM | |
| DREAM | POSITIVE | |
| EMOTION | PSYCHOLOGY | |
| GENES | SAD | |
| GRATITUDE | SATISFIED | |

A Recipe for Happiness

Name:

Period:

1. On a scale from 1 to 10, how happy are you? Explain why you chose that number.
2. Do you think most people around you are slightly happy, extremely happy, or unhappy? Explain your reasoning.
3. What is "positive psychology"?
4. What are some benefits of being happy?
5. Why is it difficult to measure happiness?
6. Scientists have developed more accurate ways to measure happiness. Describe these techniques.
7. Which determines how happy you are: genes or external circumstances?
8. Name a research-backed happiness booster.
9. The article suggests that poets and artists, in addition to scientists, are interested in the subject of happiness. Compare how an artist might talk about happiness with how a scientist would talk about the subject. How do members of each profession approach the topic differently? Which type of person do you think understands happiness better? Why?
10. Why do you think teenagers are prone to depression?
11. The article offers several tips for becoming happier. Are these suggestions helpful to you? Why or why not?
12. Besides happiness, name two emotional states that might be useful for scientists to rate on a scale from 1 through 10. Name two states that would be difficult to rate or compare in a similar way. Why do ratings work well sometimes and fail other times as a tool for collecting scientific data?
13. Would you expect that scientists have conducted more research on sadness or happiness? Explain your answer.
14. Where does happiness come from? Is it located in the brain or somewhere else?