



PHILOSOPHY

# The Science Behind Happiness

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Are you happy right now? Whether yes or no, there are a myriad of reasons why you feel that way. A whole academic discipline has developed to find out what causes or obstructs happiness, and how to amplify it.

In modern day America, psychology professionals have their work cut out for them. Depression rates in the U.S. are 10 times what they were in the Great Depression, with no sign of easing up. Most 21st century Americans should be enjoying their prosperity but aren't significantly happier than those polled in the mid-1950s. The study of happiness, also known as "positive psychology," began in earnest in 1998 by Dr. Martin Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Since that time, the psychology profession embraced the concept; today there are more than 200 university courses across the U.S., a master's degree program at the University of Pennsylvania, and more than 1,000 articles published in peer reviewed journals on the subject.

For the past 60 years, the psychiatry profession functioned within the medical "disease-based" model, i.e. aiming to reduce or eliminate mental illness or distress. The focus was on etiology and pathology and the result, as Dr. Seligman aptly put it, was to get a patient from -5 to zero. He started to wonder under what conditions would humans flourish. How can we get from zero to +5?

Seeking a new tool to measure well-being, Dr. Seligman began to discuss with his colleagues the notion of measuring happiness in a qualitative fashion. Most of those with whom he spoke were dismissive of the concept. Seligman responded "If we can develop standardized subjective measures for depression and anxiety, then we can create them for happiness and well-being too!" So off he went. He realized that objective measures for populations also have great value. For example, University of Chicago's Dr. Norman Bradburn researched how macro level social changes (e.g. changes in education, employment patterns, urbanization or political tension) affected the lives of individual citizens and their collective sense of well-being. Mental health, Seligman reasoned, should be more than the absence of mental illness, and his profession was failing to address the positive side of living in today's society.

It's Not The Economy...

Leaders in the field of happiness all agree that having more money or possessions does not promote happiness to any great degree. When you buy a nice new pair of shoes, the "newness" of the shoes wears off relatively quickly; and your sense of enjoyment fades just as fast. Economist Richard Layard wrote *Gross National Happiness* measuring happiness of countries. He found that average income didn't correlate to level of happiness; however, there was a lower limit of income (above poverty level) that corresponds to a greater level of perceived happiness when a citizen's basic needs are met. What factors do in fact have a positive influence on happiness and general sense of well-being.

## What Makes Us Happy?

Questionnaires given to a broad spectrum of people of all ages and cultures began to develop a familiar pattern. Connections among people (friends/family/colleagues) scored high on the list. Religious faith seems to lift peoples' spirits, but it's hard to distinguish if that benefit comes from the actual practice of the religion or the sense of community that parishioners felt from attending services, etc.

Married people are shown to be slightly happier than singles, but it may be that they were happier to begin with and thus attracted a like-minded partner. Gloomy, cloudy and rainy days may make popular song lyrics, but a 1998 survey showed that Midwesterners thought that Californians are happier than the rest of Americans due to the sunny weather. Surveys show that happy and unhappy people have very similar life experiences. The key difference is that unhappy people tend to spend more than twice as much time as happy people ruminating on the negative events in their lives; happy people will seek out information and resources that brighten their overall outlook on life.

## Does Happiness Have A Genetic Component?

In a word, yes. David Lykken, a University of Minnesota researcher published a paper in 1996 studying twins and their sense of life satisfaction. He collected data from over 4,000 sets of identical twins born in Minnesota between 1936 and 1955 and concluded that 50 percent of a person's life satisfaction comes from genetic programming. We have a built-in happiness "set point" (think of a thermostat) similar to our set point for body weight. We may have transient situational ups and downs in our lives but will quickly return to our set point range. The good news is we have the remaining 50 percent to work with.

Even better, our set point was found NOT to be set in stone. Although Lykken made a statement in his 1997 paper that "trying to be happier is as futile as trying to be taller," further research led him to change his position eight years later. An interview with Lykken published in *Time* stated "It's clear that we can change our happiness level widely up and down" based on his most recent findings. Alex Lickerman made an interesting observation in his article in *Psychology Today* entitled *How to Reset Your Happiness Set Point*. He wrote, "If our self-esteem determines the value we assign to ourselves (that is, how much we like ourselves), our sense of purpose determines the value we assign to our lives (that is, how significant or important we find our lives to be). And while a healthy self-esteem is well known to be necessary for happiness, increasing it beyond what's considered "healthy" hasn't been correlated with further increases in happiness (perhaps because any level of self-love beyond "healthy" strays, almost by definition, into the realm of narcissism). In contrast, the greater the sense of purpose we feel, the happier we seem to become." He goes on to say that we're happiest when we're helping others (provided we offer it of our own free will). Moreover, he points out that altruism doesn't just correlate with an increase in happiness; it actually causes it, at least in the short term. Approximately 10% of our "total" happiness is due to our present circumstance, which makes us quite resilient during tough times in our lives.

## Can We Objectively Measure Happiness?

Electroencephalography (EEG) measurements demonstrate an increased left hemispheric brain glucose uptake when a person is in a good mood. Conversely, when a person is feeling depressed or dragged down by negative feelings, the right brain will be more active. Furthermore, the amygdala and cingulate cortex light up when visualizing a positive future. Researchers are still pondering how

to use these neurological measures for further happiness/well-being investigation.

Current research suggests that as we age, our dopamine receptor sites diminish. We can engage in a pleasurable activity, release dopamine, but still not feel uplifted, exemplary of the "been there, done that" syndrome. Luckily for us, studies are showing that simple daily activities can rebuild dopamine receptors. They will be addressed later in this article. Recent studies contradicting the dopamine receptor site reduction suggest that people get happier as they age because they exert more emotional control over their present circumstances. They have learned how to avoid/limit negative or stressful thoughts. Additionally, older people tend to put less emphasis on how they are viewed by others, and are less affected by criticism.

### Happiness Is Contagious

When you spend time with a friend who's truly happy, you typically leave feeling uplifted. Studies prove this to be true not only for you, but for your friends as well. Research into the "ripple factor" of happiness confirm that those people who spend time with happy people report feeling on average of 15% happier, their friends in turn report being 10% happier and the friends of friends benefit by 6%. The fourth tier gets nothing. Three levels deep isn't bad. Never underestimate the power of a kind word or time spent with someone who needs a friend.

Although there are extremely limited references to this topic in the Positive Psychology literature, physical health is obviously an important contributor to overall happiness. In addition to a healthy and varied diet, patients can benefit from supplementing with a variety of adaptogenic herbs, amino acids, vitamins and minerals. Talk to your patients about their mental health and help them find ways to achieve happiness in their lives - it will improve their physical health in countless ways.

### Resources:

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