



# Come On, Get Happy

Want to live a longer and better life? Increase your happiness! Contrary to old notions that happiness is shallow or naïve, there is a growing body of evidence that happiness is beneficial for morbidity (risk of illness), survival of illness and longevity (Diener & Chan 2011). Diener and Chan's research review suggests that high subjective well-being may add 4–10 years of life compared with low subjective well-being (and the years will also be more enjoyable than they would have been for less happy people, the authors note!).

So how do you become happier? Mary Monroe, a freelance writer in the Los Angeles area, shares some insights from happiness experts.

## Exercise Helps

"Exercise may well be the most effective instant happiness booster of all activities," says researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky in her book, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want* (Penguin 2007). A review of over 50 studies confirmed that there is sufficient evidence to show that even single sessions of activity can improve mood, and people who are more active are more likely to rate themselves and their mental well-being more positively (Fox 1999).

## Move From Negative to Positive

In addition to exercise, you need to take in good experiences to feel happier and

more confident. This helps you defeat the brain's negativity bias, which is like Velcro® for bad experiences but Teflon® for positive ones, notes Rick Hanson, PhD, in his book, *Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time* (New Harbinger 2011). Mental activity, such as meditation, can reshape the brain and help it focus on the positive.

## Train the Brain to Be Happy

You can also "trick" the brain to take in the good or to deeply savor positive experiences, says Hanson. He suggests that by holding positive experiences in awareness for 10, 20 or even 30 seconds, you can train your brain to remember them, helping to offset the natural inclination to forget the positive and remember the negative. ■

## References

- Diener, E., & Chan, M.Y. 2011. Happy people live longer: Subjective well-being contributes to health and longevity. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 3 (1), 1–43.
- Emmons, R. 2007. *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Fox, K.R. 1999. The influence of physical activity on mental well-being. *Public Health Nutrition*, 2 (3a), 411–18.
- Hanson, R. 2011. *Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Lyubomirsky, S. 2007. *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. New York: Penguin.
- Seligman, M.E.P. 2011. *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. New York: Free Press.

## CULTIVATE HAPPINESS

What helps someone become happier depends on the person, says researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky. "However, when we research strategies, the two that are often at the top of the list are physical activity and acts of kindness," she says. "They seem to work better because they're more tangible." In fact, doing a kindness produces the single most reliable momentary increase in well-being of any research method tested by Martin Seligman, PhD, widely recognized as the father of positive psychology (Seligman 2011). He recommends doing one wholly unexpected kind thing tomorrow and noticing what happens to your mood.

Elaine O'Brien, MAPP, a University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Leader and graduate student at Temple University, offers these additional strategies for fostering happiness:

**Express gratitude.** "Gratitude is one of the most powerful interventions for well-being," she says. "You can do simple things, such as write a letter of thanks to someone important in your life," notes O'Brien, who is a group fitness instructor and fitness presenter.

Or try this exercise from Robert A. Emmons's book *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2007): Bring attention to your breathing and, for five to eight breaths, say, "Thank you," silently.

**Focus on your strengths.** Identify your strengths and use them in new ways every day. You can take online tests at [www.authenticchappiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authenticchappiness.sas.upenn.edu), in the Values and Action Inventory section, to identify strengths such as wisdom, courage, fairness, leadership, home, humor or spirituality.

**Create meaning.** Talk with friends and family about what makes life meaningful for you. You can create meaning together, as a community, through food drives or charitable projects; and by acknowledging meaningful moments, such as anniversaries, graduations or other accomplishments.

happiness

This handout is a service of IDEA, the leading international membership association in the health and fitness industry, [www.idealife.com](http://www.idealife.com).

© 2013 by IDEA Fitness Journal. Reprint permission is granted to IDEA members by the copyright owner, IDEA Health & Fitness Inc., (800) 999-4332.