



THE SCIENCE OF TRUE *happiness*

It was the bestselling song of 2014, appears in billions of Google searches and fronts more book covers than you can shake a smiley emoji at. But, are we looking for the H-word in the right place? Experts say, perhaps. Get ready for a positivity makeover

By Alex Davies

For something we're all pursuing, 'happiness' sure is a tough word to pin down. We use it to describe everything from a couple's utter bliss on their wedding day to the simple satisfaction of sitting with a coffee on your favourite beach. Heck, you can even be happy with a spreadsheet that lands on your desk! (No... just us?) Turns out, experts have been thinking the same. Over the past few years, in a fairly young science called positive psychology, they've been investigating the specifics of being 'happy'. The twist? Many now believe it's actually not *the* thing to pursue but, in fact, one of a number which, when combined, can enrich our lives mentally and physically. "Positive psychology focuses on thriving and flourishing, living our best life by doing good, having relationships, creating meaning and purpose," says Dr Tim Sharp, *Prevention* advisor, clinical psychologist and founder of The Happiness Institute. "Happiness describes various positive emotions like joy, calm, contentment and pride. These can be fleeting, but put together with the long-term best-life approach... there's a lot to learn but that's what we should aim for." Genetics do seem to play a part (some people are born with the disposition to be more optimistic, for example) but as Sharp explains, "It's definitely not 100% and we have a great deal of control over how we feel about our lives." Meet the latest approaches to help you feel, radiate and understand happiness more than ever. Smiles guaranteed!

Savour the small moments

Those hits of positive emotion? They can contribute to what's called hedonic happiness, that delicious pleasure you get from biting into an Adriano Zumbo brownie or a back rub from your partner. (The other big-picture, meaningful-life kind is called eudaimonic.) Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson directs the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the US. Her research suggests even these fleeting moments have benefits, and that together with us cultivating relationships and purpose, they help create an upward spiral towards long-term wellbeing.

YOUR MOVE: The joyful micro moments in life are easy to gloss over, so pay attention. Even give yourself a marker, like arriving at a particular place on your way home, where you pause for a minute and look around. "Observe the light, taste the coffee you're holding... take the opportunity to notice these things," says Sharp, who also rates this as a switch-off strategy after a hectic day.

Observe the light, taste the coffee you're holding... take the opportunity to notice the joyful micro moments in your life.

2 Utilise the ripple effect

A healthy mood can spread, reports a new study by University of Warwick in the UK, where researchers associated being surrounded by positive friends with helping to manage depression. The condition is of course more complex than that, but the idea that we influence each other highlights what psychologists call social and emotional contagion. "Basically, emotions are contagious," says Sharp. One fascinating reason? Mirror neurons. "If I look at a person and see facial expressions of a positive mood, a part of my brain notices and replicates that. Studies have actually found they light up as if we're experiencing the emotion ourselves." Incredible!

YOUR MOVE: Think about the friends and colleagues you spend time with. Who do you come away from feeling uplifted? "Actively seek out people and experiences that do this for you, as well as kickstarting the process by being that for others," recommends Sharp. The caveat? That's not to say you shouldn't support those in need, as we all are sometimes. In short, it's all about balance.

3 Remember to say thanks

Think of gratitude in two camps: the first, that warm emotion when someone does something kind (say, supports a long dreamed-of career move or takes you out to dinner). "We've seen that those who feel grateful in the moment are more likely to help others," explains Dr Lisa A. Williams, a senior lecturer at the University of New South Wales' School of Psychology. (Intriguingly, this help goes beyond simply returning a particular favour to also helping other people.) Her research also reveals that when we express gratitude by saying thank you, the person we thank is more likely to foster a longer-term connection with us. "The second type of gratitude is about a sense of appreciation for what you have in your life," says Williams. In one US study, this kind of 'thanksgiving' was linked with better mood and sleep, while there is research that connects gratitude to lower levels of inflammatory biomarkers related to cardiac health.

YOUR MOVE: Writing in a gratitude journal once or twice a week is associated with greater wellbeing, but how do you get the most from yours? Leading expert on gratitude Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, recommends quality over quantity (so, elaborating on a few items rather than making a list of many), focusing on people more than things, and reflecting on what your life would be like *without* some blessings. It's a simple but extremely effective happiness booster.

CAN YOU BE TOO HAPPY? YES YOU CAN!

It's hard to believe it's actually possible, right? But in her TEDx talk 'The Dark Side of Happiness', University of Colorado Boulder psychologist June Gruber (also part of the Emodiversity Project talked about on p. 107) explains that increasing happiness is linked with better health—to a point. After a peak, it can become associated with risk taking and reduced creativity. She advises that instead of constantly chasing happiness, "instead accept your current emotion state as it is, accept whatever degree of happiness you may have in the moment and just let it come as it will."

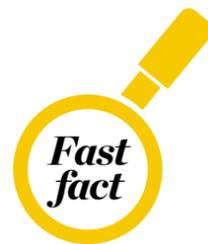
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4 Nurture nostalgia

Time to turn back the clock: looking to the past can influence how we feel about the future, according to a team at the University of Southampton in the UK. The experts there found recalling fond memories heightened self-esteem, which in turn helped people feel more optimistic. “The word ‘nostalgia’ can be seen as negative, that idea of dwelling on the past,” says Sharp, who prefers to call it ‘positive reminiscing’. Either way, think of it as a chance to reflect on and savour the past. Making this a regular part of your life can help you hold onto the resulting good mood for weeks, Sharp adds. Even if it’s just the boost of having a laugh over questionable hairstyles.

YOUR MOVE: Dig out photo albums so you can go over old pictures and share stories with a loved one (seriously, how can your brother-in-law *still* blame you for that post-wedding hangover?) Make sure you do it in a way that’s productive, though. “The risk with reminiscing is that you end up comparing the past to the present, and thinking of it as a better time,” warns Sharp. “So, talk about what the period or occasion brought to make your life what it is *now*.” Take that wedding, for instance: consider how the day added to your family and encouraged new relationships that are still strong. Or, that it crystallised the decision never to let your partner try his hand at public speaking again!



Contentment comes with years, say US researchers. Starting at 30, every age group gets progressively happier with time. Music to our ears!

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

5 Value emodiversity

Translation: variety and abundance of emotions, from hope and amusement to contempt, guilt, even sadness. Researchers from the US and Europe have joined forces for the Emodiversity Project, carrying out studies on more than 30,000 people. They discovered that recognising the range of things we feel is associated with mental and physical health. (Those with the highest emodiversity scores saw their docs 25% less than those with the lowest!) Why? It’s suggested it stops one emotion dominating, which could put your wellbeing off-kilter. And while you don’t want to seek out negative feelings, Sharp points out they make us human and are often useful — anxiety, for example, can stop us doing something reckless.

YOUR MOVE: Accepting your full emotional spectrum brings us to something most experts agree on: pursuing happiness 24/7 isn’t the answer. “You won’t feel it every minute of the day. If you’re always trying for that, you’ll be disappointed,” says Sharp. US researcher Lahna Catalino talks about ‘prioritising positivity’, organising your day to include things that lead to positive emotions. (Think calling a friend or time in the kitchen with Jamie Oliver’s new book.) So, rather than striving to feel good every second, you incorporate realistic, sustainable joy into your life. And who can argue with that? Especially when it means finding contentment and fulfilment (or whatever you want to call it) in everything from your family to that chocolate bit at the end of your Cornetto. Embrace those moments and live the best, most meaningful life you can. Now, that’s a happy place worth pursuing. **P**

5 HABITS OF HAPPY PEOPLE

Easy, expert-approved ways to get a smile hit today!

RISE AND SHINE

Newsflash: larks tend to be more satisfied than night-owls. Canadian scientists think it’s because early risers’ internal clocks are more in line with the socially accepted “typical day”, so they deal with it better.

SNACK ON WALNUTS

And upgrade your morning smoothie with flaxseed. Why? Both contain alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), low levels of which have been linked to a decrease in dopamine, the brain’s natural “joy” chemical.

PICK A PEPPY GYM BUDDY

Not only does exercise = feel-good endorphins, but smelling the sweat of happy people makes us feel good, too, according to a new Dutch study. Nice!

BE MONEY SMART

Spend on experiences rather than material things for the biggest happiness boost, reports *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. Overseas trip coming right up!

TAKE THE (DOG) LEAD

Animal lovers won’t be surprised that pets provide great emotional and social support according to research. Tempted? Adopt from a shelter and support Animals Australia’s mission to make sure puppies have a humane start to life (knowyourbestfriend.com).

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