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Come on, Get Happy

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When it comes to our overall health and well-being, oftentimes we overlook a major component: happiness! Having a well-rounded strategy regarding our personal wellness is more important than one might think. Poor emotional health could be impacting many areas of your life and you may not even know it! Read on about some key strategies to becoming a happier person, and as David Cassidy might say, "Come on, get happy!"

7 Strategies to Becoming a Happier Person

A popular greeting card attributes this quote to Henry David Thoreau: "Happiness is like a butterfly: the more you chase it, the more it will elude you, but if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder."

With all due respect to the author of *Walden*, that just isn't so, according to a growing number of psychologists. You can choose to be happy, they say. You can chase down that elusive butterfly and get it to sit on your shoulder. How? In part, by simply making the effort to monitor the workings of your mind.

Research has shown that your talent for happiness is, to a large degree, determined by your genes. Psychology professor David T. Lykken, author of *Happiness: Its Nature and Nurture*, says that "trying to be happier is like trying to be taller." We each have a "happiness set point," he argues, and move away from it only slightly.

And yet, psychologists who study happiness -- including Lykken -- believe we can pursue happiness. We can do this by thwarting negative emotions such as pessimism, resentment, and anger. And we can foster positive emotions, such as empathy, serenity, and especially gratitude.

Happiness Strategy #1: Don't Worry, Choose Happy

The first step, however, is to make a conscious choice to boost your happiness. In his book, *The Conquest of Happiness*, published in 1930, the philosopher Bertrand Russell had this to say: "Happiness is not, except in very rare cases, something that drops into the mouth, like a ripe fruit. ... Happiness must be, for most men and women, an achievement rather than a gift of the gods, and in this achievement, effort, both inward and outward, must play a great part."

Today, psychologists who study happiness heartily agree. The intention to be happy is the first of The 9 Choices of Happy People listed by authors Rick Foster and Greg Hicks in their book of the same name.

"Intention is the active desire and commitment to be happy," they write. "It's the decision to consciously choose attitudes and behaviors that lead to happiness over unhappiness."

Tom G. Stevens, PhD, titled his book with the bold assertion, *You Can Choose to Be Happy*. "Choose to make happiness a top goal," Stevens tells WebMD. "Choose to take advantage of opportunities to learn how to be happy. For example, reprogram your beliefs and values. Learn good self-management skills, good interpersonal skills, and good career-related skills. Choose to be in environments and around people that increase your probability of happiness. The persons who become the happiest and grow the most are those who also make truth and their own personal growth primary values."

In short, we may be born with a happiness "set point," as Lykken calls it, but we are not stuck there. Happiness also depends on how we manage our emotions and our relationships with others.



Jon Haidt, author of *The Happiness Hypothesis*, teaches positive psychology. He actually assigns his students to make themselves happier during the semester.

"They have to say exactly what technique they will use," says Haidt, a professor at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. "They may choose to be more forgiving or more grateful. They may learn to identify negative thoughts so they can challenge them. For example, when someone crosses you, in your mind you build a case against that person, but that's very damaging to relationships. So they may learn to shut up their inner lawyer and stop building these cases against people."

Once you've decided to be happier, you can choose strategies for achieving happiness. Psychologists who study happiness tend to agree on ones like these.

Happiness Strategy #2: Cultivate Gratitude

In his book, *Authentic Happiness*, University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman encourages readers to perform a daily "gratitude exercise." It involves listing a few things that make them grateful. This shifts people away from bitterness and despair, he says, and promotes happiness.

Happiness Strategy #3: Foster Forgiveness

Holding a grudge and nursing grievances can affect physical as well as mental health, according to a rapidly growing body of research. One way to curtail these kinds of feelings is to foster forgiveness. This reduces the power of bad events to create bitterness and resentment, say Michael McCullough and Robert Emmons, happiness researchers who edited *The Psychology of Happiness*.



In his book, *Five Steps to Forgiveness*, clinical psychologist Everett Worthington Jr. offers a 5-step process he calls REACH. First, recall the hurt. Then empathize and try to understand the act from the perpetrator's point of view. Be altruistic by recalling a time in your life when you were forgiven. Commit to putting your forgiveness into words. You can do this either in a letter to the person you're forgiving or in your journal. Finally, try to hold on to the forgiveness. Don't dwell on your anger, hurt, and desire for vengeance.

The alternative to forgiveness is mulling over a transgression. This is a form of chronic stress, says Worthington.

"Rumination is the mental health bad boy," Worthington tells WebMD. "It's associated with almost everything bad in the mental health field -- obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, anxiety -- probably hives, too."

Happiness Strategy #4: Counteract Negative Thoughts & Feelings

As Jon Haidt puts it, improve your mental hygiene. In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Haidt compares the mind to a man riding an elephant. The elephant represents the powerful thoughts and feelings -- mostly unconscious -- that drive your behavior. The man, although much weaker, can exert control over the elephant, just as you can exert control over negative thoughts and feelings.

"The key is a commitment to doing the things necessary to retrain the elephant," Haidt says. "And the evidence suggests there's a lot you can do. It just takes work."

For example, you can practice meditation, rhythmic breathing, yoga, or relaxation techniques to quell anxiety and promote serenity. You can learn to recognize and challenge thoughts you have about being inadequate and helpless.

"If you learn techniques for identifying negative thoughts, then it's easier to challenge them," Haidt said. "Sometimes just reading David Burns' book, *Feeling Good*, can have a positive effect."



Happiness Strategy #5: Remember, Money Can't Buy Happiness

Research shows that once income climbs above the poverty level, more money brings very little extra happiness. Yet, "we keep assuming that because things aren't bringing us happiness, they're the wrong things, rather than recognizing that the pursuit itself is futile," writes Daniel Gilbert in his book, *Stumbling on Happiness*. "Regardless of what we achieve in the pursuit of stuff, it's never going to bring about an enduring state of happiness."

Happiness Strategy #6: Foster Friendship

There are few better antidotes to unhappiness than close friendships with people who care about you, says David G. Myers, author of *The Pursuit of Happiness*. One Australian study found that people over 70 who had the strongest network of friends lived much longer.

"Sadly, our increasingly individualistic society suffers from impoverished social connections, which some psychologists believe is a cause of today's epidemic levels of depression," Myers writes. "The social ties that bind also provide support in difficult times."

Happiness Strategy #7: Engage in Meaningful Activities

People are seldom happier, says psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, than when they're in the "flow." This is a state in which your mind becomes thoroughly absorbed in a meaningful task that challenges your abilities. Yet, he has found that the most common leisure time activity -- watching TV -- produces some of the lowest levels of happiness.



To get more out of life, we need to put more into it, says Csikszentmihalyi. "Active leisure that helps a person grow does not come easily," he writes in *Finding Flow*. "Each of the flow-producing activities requires an initial investment of attention before it begins to be enjoyable."

So it turns out that happiness can be a matter of choice - not just luck. Some people are lucky enough to possess genes that foster happiness. However, certain thought patterns and interpersonal skills definitely help people become an "epicure of experience," says David Lykken, whose name, in Norwegian, means "the happiness."

Sources: Tom Valeo, Web MD, <http://www.webmd.com>

GotHealth Tip of the Day



GotHealth?

Tip: It's hard to make healthy choices when you're stressed. If you never seem to have time to take care of yourself, you might need to look at your priorities. Where does your time go? An activity log is a good way to track what you do throughout your day. Try it for a week to see what happens to all those precious hours. Then, work on scheduling the important stuff, like family meals, exercise and relaxation. It's okay to pencil in a "break" for 10 minutes here and there. After a while, life should feel less stressful and more balanced.