

The 5-minute hack for happiness



“Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future,
concentrate the mind on the present moment.”

Buddha

Definition of happiness

Happiness in psychology has two references. First, happiness is an umbrella term for several theories of well-being. These theories cover intrinsically rewarding and valued experience, positive beliefs about self and the world, or positive psychological functioning. Second, happiness has been considered a basic emotion by most theorists within the psychology of emotions. This chapter will focus on happiness as well-being.

Introduction

Psychological theories of happiness build upon philosophical concepts such as hedonia, eudaimonia, and meaning in life as well as philosophical traditions of utilitarianism or moral philosophy. Scholars within the field of psychology have attempted to translate these philosophical concepts into empirical measurable constructs. For the sake of scientific accuracy, it is recommended to refer to a specific theory when the term happiness is used in the literature, because conceptualizations of happiness differ substantially. For instance, for some authors happiness is what people experience (Diener 2000; Kahneman 1999), whereas for others happiness is what people do and achieve (Waterman et al. 2010).

Happiness as a Psychological Construct

Is Happiness a Scientific Term?

Most authors use happiness as a valid psychological term within the well-being literature. While others consider happiness too unwieldy for a psychological term. However, the occurrence of the term happiness has been increasing in the psychological literature, especially following the emergence of positive psychology. Happiness is a pluralistic term, because it is defined in different ways depending on the context in which it is used and the type of professional group that introduces it into their terminology (e.g., psychologists, educators, or sociologists).

Categorization of Happiness Theories

Happiness theories can be sorted into hedonic with an emphasis on immediate subjective experience, eudaimonic with an emphasis on the pursuit of personal excellence, or mixed. Some theories provide extensive lists of substantial components of happiness that are relatively independent from each other, whereas others propose specific working mechanisms in which the listed components of happiness interact. Another distinction is between theories that emphasize subjective (with the subject as the final judge of whether they are happy or not) or objective (with the subject misled by cognitive biases in their judgments) perspective on the measurement of happiness. Given this variety of perspectives, happiness theories are similar to each other in terms of a family resemblance, i.e., they are connected by a series of overlapping constructs (each theory shares at least one component with some other theory) rather than one common feature.

Ingredients of Happiness

There are several theories of happiness in the literature that attempt to identify basic psychological elements that happiness consists of. The most notable theories include: subjective well-being, objective happiness, psychological well-being, eudaimonic well-being, authentic happiness/the well-being, social-psychological prosperity/ flourishing, or the onion theory of happiness. The subjective well-being theory argues that a happy individual experiences an abundance of positive feelings and few negative feelings – a balance that serves as the basis for the evaluation of life as very satisfactory. The objective happiness theory argues that broad cognitive evaluations of well-being (“Am I a happy person?”) are usually biased; thus, only the quality of immediate experience (in terms of good vs bad as the indicator of utility) is a valid measure of well-being. The well-being theory argues that a happy individual is characterized by several positive psychological characteristics such as autonomy, environmental mastery, or personal growth. The eudaimonic well-being theory argues that a happy individual is, above all, intensely engaged in self-exploration, self-expression, and the development of their best potential with positive emotions as an additional consequence or a by-product

of these pursuits. Social psychological prosperity theory lists elements of positive functioning across diverse domains that are constitutive to a very happy life such as having rewarding relationships, contributing to happiness of others, or being engaged in daily activities. Happiness theories proposed by Seligman (authentic happiness theory that evolved into the well-being theory) have distinguished components (“routes to happiness”) that constitute the full life: pleasure and positive emotions (the pleasant life), engagement or flow (the good life), and meaning (meaningful life). In his further works, Seligman has included components of achievements (conceptualized as the pursuit of them rather than their actual accomplishment) and social relationships. Happiness is described with a three-layer structure in the onion theory with the positive attractor (the will to live) as the core, the mid-layer of general subjective wellbeing, and the outer layer of current effective experience and satisfaction with specific life domains that reflects objective life events and circumstances.

Individual Differences in Happiness

Large scale cross-cultural studies indicated that most individuals consider themselves rather happy. There are however meaningful differences in happiness that result from several factors. Research has established that individual differences of various components of happiness result mostly from:

- (a) genetic influences that sustain a level of well-being characteristic for a specific person (i.e., the happiness set-point)
- (b) intentional activity (e.g., how an individual regulates their positive emotions), and, to a lesser extent
- (c) life events (e.g., marriage) and circumstances (e.g., income).

Life events can cause positive and negative temporal (childbirth or widowhood, respectively) or lasting changes in well-being (marriage or disability). Personality is the main determinant of wellbeing due to its constant interaction with several aspects of human functioning such as life events and circumstances, emotional experience, and cognitive processing.

Several personality traits have been related to happiness, e.g., extroverts experience more life satisfaction, whereas individuals high on neuroticism experience less life satisfaction. Happiness-related personality traits evolve over time, e.g., individuals become more extroverted and more emotionally stable. Noteworthy, the influence of personality on happiness can be modified via intentional behavioural efforts. For instance, when less extroverted individuals intentionally try to initiate behaviours that are typical for extroverts, they temporarily improve their well-being. Various aspects of happiness (i.e., life satisfaction or positive emotions) can be successfully enhanced intentionally via happiness interventions or positive psychological interventions. These interventions are inspired by cognitive therapy methods and increase happiness through exercises that enhance positive emotions (e.g., gratitude), cognitions (e.g., optimism), or behaviours (e.g., kind acts).

More about happiness

Happiness is a psychological term with an increasing popularity that groups theories concerned with the essence of human wellbeing. There are several theories of happiness that cover a wide range of experience and functioning. These theories have been used to explain why some individuals are happier than others as well as to develop interventions to increase happiness. Individual differences in happiness are explained mostly by biological, personality, and social influences.

How to become happy

Next, we will present different easy ways to feel happy and enjoy life. You can try each one of them individually or together and you will surely see life in a better way.

Enjoy Nature in the City

How can you enjoy nature in the city?

1. Watch the leaves fall on a windy day.
2. Wake up early and listen to the silence.

3. Look at the clouds and try to find shapes and maybe even faces.
4. Listen to the birds chirping.
5. Check out some breathtaking photos on National Geographic.
6. Watch a butterfly flutter away.
7. Listen to the thunder on a rainy day.
8. Sit on a park bench and enjoy the greenery.
9. Walk barefoot on grass.

Be Grateful for What You Already Have

There's so much in life that we take for granted that many can only dream of. Let's remember how fortunate we are when we experience these ordinary moments.

10. Enjoy drinking a glass of water. Eight hundred million people in the world do not have access to clean water.
11. Be grateful for the food on your plate. Over eight hundred million people do not get enough to eat.
12. Be grateful for the people in your life.
13. Just be grateful that you are alive.
14. Think of ten other things you are grateful for.

Bring Out the Child in You

How difficult is it to regain that carefree nature of childhood when you are older? Go ahead, do something silly and have a good laugh!

15. Read an Archie comic book.
16. Blow soap bubbles.
17. Catch snowflakes with your tongue.
18. Take a walk in the rain.

19. Lick a fast melting ice-cream.

20. Practice your Kung Fu moves or air guitar in front of the mirror!

Enjoy a Hobby

Do you have time for hobbies?

21. Play a song on your guitar (or any instrument).

22. Listen to a song you love. (Keep a playlist in your phone).

23. Better still, sing aloud.

24. Learn a new dance move from YouTube.

25. Capture an urban scene with your camera phone.

26. Read your favorite part from that novel you really love.

27. Read a new book for just five minutes before you go to bed.

Take Care of Yourself

You might be giving time to your work, your ambitions, and your family. Are you taking good care of yourself?

28. Exercise for just five minutes—skip rope, jog, do five pushups and squats. Exercise releases endorphins, which make you happier.

29. Relish a delicious serving of fruits.

30. Pen down your thoughts in a journal.

31. Tidy up a corner of your house.

32. Meditate for five minutes.

Love Yourself

33. Think of five things that you love about who you are as a person.

34. Every night before going to bed, think of at least one thing you achieved on that day, however small or insignificant it might seem.

35. Give yourself a hug. (It works.)

Do Something for Someone Else

Giving creates a feeling of abundance like few other things do.

36. Feed a stray dog or cat.

37. Help a neighbour with an errand.

38. Help out a co-worker with your expertise.

39. Send flowers and a card to that relative you haven't spoken to in years.

Connect with People

Work was an excuse for me to not find time for my loved ones. Does it really take much to cherish these relationships?

40. Call a friend and say hello. (Don't text!)

41. Cuddle with your partner in the morning.

42. Call your parents.

43. Remember a happy moment with your loved ones.

44. Forgive someone for a small offense. (This makes it easier to forgive people for the big offenses.)

45. Apologize to someone.

46. Look at old pictures that bring back memories.

Indulge Your Senses

No, you don't need to go to a spa!

47. Slowly sip a good cappuccino.

48. Listen to the sound of an ocean track (on the internet).

49. Sit in the sun (on your terrace or backyard).

50. Light aroma candles or incense sticks, like lavender or lemongrass.

51. Feel the wind in your hair as you drive.

Scientifically Happier in 5 Minutes a Day

Exercise #1: Three Good Things

Instructions

Write down three positive events in your day before you go to bed at night.

Tips and Examples

It will be easy to think about the highlight of your day. For me, this usually is having an interesting conversation, eating something good, or finishing some kind of task. However, finding the next 1–2 smaller “good things” might be much harder.

Obvious — My coworkers threw me a going-away party complete with cake, fruit, and presents.

Not so obvious — I got to use the exercise equipment in the gym without waiting, allowing me to complete my workout in under an hour.

Had to think pretty hard — My photography skills are getting better, and I’m learning how to adjust the camera settings quicker.

Doing this exercise will train you to see the smaller good things in life.

Tip: Try not to use events that you are generally grateful for (ex. I have good friends, I have a nice house, I am alive). The more specific you are about that particular day, the better.

Thinking positively is a skill that can be developed with practice. After doing this exercise for awhile, you will begin to notice the good things throughout your day, instead of recalling them at the end of each day.

Research

Scientists wanted to see if completing this exercise would boost happiness and reduce negativity. They designed an experiment and had half of the participants write down early memories (placebo) and half of the participants

to do the Three Good Things exercise. After a week of doing the exercise, the Three Good Things group became immediately less depressed. This effect lasted 6 months when compared to the control group.

Exercise #2: The Gratitude Letter

Instructions

Think about someone you appreciate or someone you have never had the chance to appropriately thank. Send a letter, shoot out an email, or personally read a thank you note to this person.

Examples and Tips

I recently wrote a 10-minute email to my high school statistics teacher that I hadn't talked to in a few years. I thanked her for 1) being a wonderful human being and mentor, and 2) being a great statistics teacher, which has helped me a ton with this positive psychology research and other college courses. The best part was I could feel her words smiling through the return email, telling me that I made her week, and I reminded her about why she continues to teach well into retirement age.

Tip: Try to integrate this idea into your daily life. I've been trying to do this by informally telling others what I appreciate about them and noticing the kindness of others.

Research

The research shows that writing a gratitude letter and delivering it can immediately boost happiness and decrease depression. These effects lasted for one month after they had written ONE gratitude letter. Writing a 10-minute gratitude letter and delivering it to your recipient can make you happier for up to a month.

Exercise #3: Mindful Savouring

Instructions

Once a day, take 2–3 minutes to slow down and actually enjoy an activity that you typically autopilot through.

Examples and Tips

I have recently been trying to savour music more. I usually use music to block myself out from the world, but I have been trying to take a few moments out of my week to actually listen to music. Now, I realize why people like music so much. I focused and beat of the percussion on a song I had listened to a thousand times before and felt like I was listening to something brand new.

Tip: Use your sensory feelings. For example, savour your morning shower and feel the drops hitting your skin. Smell and taste your morning coffee. Watch the sunset. Hear nature. Feel yourself laughing.

Research

Again, research shows that this exercise can boost your moods. This study found savouring the moment for 2 weeks resulted in participants significantly reducing negativity and increasing their happiness levels.

All three exercises take less than 5 minutes a day and can improve your moods immediately.