



# The Science of Happiness

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## EFAP Information

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## Objectives

- To develop a deeper understanding about happiness and the latest research in this field of study
- To increase your understanding of where you have greatest impact and influence to increase your happiness levels
- To learn research-based techniques and strategies for long-lasting happiness

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## How do we define happiness?

- Many different views on what happiness is:
  - Aristotle: Living a life of virtue
  - Utilitarian: Actions that bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number
  - Buddhist: Compassion, kindness
  - Western views: Individual, high-spirited
  - Eastern views: Communal, calm
- Scientists, in referring to happiness, look at **two** aspects: life satisfaction & positive affect – known collectively as “**subjective well-being**”

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## What does happiness look like?

- What are some of the characteristics and behaviours of genuinely happy people?
  - Are able to “live in the moment” and savour life’s everyday pleasures
  - Make a regular commitment to exercising
  - Imagine a hopeful future
  - Offer their help to others
  - Devote their time to nurturing relationships with family & friends
  - Cope well with life’s challenges
  - Have a strong sense of purpose & meaning

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## Benefits of happiness

- Happy people experience many benefits, some of these being:
  - Strong immune systems
  - Rich networks of social support
  - Resilience in the face of challenges
  - Well-liked by others
  - Physically healthy
  - Longer life expectancy
  - Reported higher engagement at work
  - Strong self-esteem and self-confidence
  - + + +

(Lyubomirsky, 2008)

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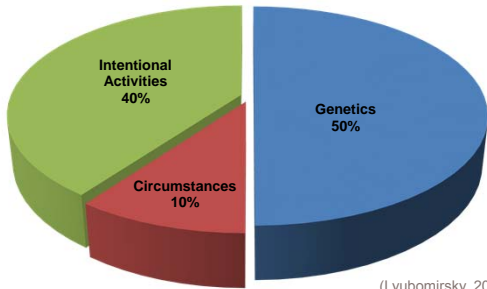
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## What makes us happy?



(Lyubomirsky, 2008)

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## The link between genetics & happiness



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## How life circumstances impact happiness

- Circumstances only account for **10%** of our happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2008)
- A study of the richest Americans (making more than \$10 million per year) report only slightly higher levels of happiness than the office workers they employ (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010)

**Why do circumstances have such little impact on our happiness?**



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## Happiness through intentional activities

- Accounts for **40%** of our happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2008)
- Within our ability to change regardless of circumstances or our happiness set-point
- Small changes can have a large impact



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## Happiness myths & misconceptions

1. Happiness requires a search – that we need to “find” happiness
2. In order to be happy, we need to change our circumstances
3. You are either born happy, or not – there is nothing that can be done to change this

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## How do we increase our happiness?

By focusing on the following research-based intentional activities where we have the greatest ability to influence our happiness levels:

1. Expressing Gratitude
2. Practicing Optimism
3. Avoiding Social Comparison
4. Performing Acts of Kindness
5. Nurturing Relationships
6. Learning to Forgive
7. Savouring Positive Experiences
8. Practicing Self-Care

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## Expressing gratitude

How does expressing gratitude impact our happiness?

1. It promotes the savoring of positive life experiences
2. Increases self esteem
3. Helps cope with stress and difficult life circumstances
4. Encourages moral and pro-social behaviour
5. Prevents adaption

(Lyubomirsky, 2008)

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## Exercise

There are many things, small and large that we might be grateful for.

Think back over the events of the past week and write down three things for which you are grateful.

**Doing this once a week is linked to optimal benefits.**

(Lyubomirsky, 2008)



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## Practicing optimism

- Optimism is the belief that **you have the ability to influence the events of your life**
- A **positive, hopeful attitude** in the face of adversity and challenges
- *Activity: My best possible future self*

(Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006)



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## Avoiding social comparison



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## Performing acts of kindness

- Studies have shown that performing an act of kindness for others can make us happy, even happier than doing something for ourselves (Lyubomirsky & Schkade, 2005)
- Association between kindness and happiness works as a “positive feedback loop”



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## Nurturing relationships

- The quality and quantity of one’s social connections is very strongly connected to our levels of happiness and well-being



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## Learning to forgive

Forgiveness is a willingness to:

- Refuse to hold onto the past
- Look below the surface of behaviours and feelings
- Let go of negative emotion that blocks our healing process

It is a **choice** to release past grievances that compromise the future by clouding our minds with negative thoughts and emotions

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## Savouring positive experiences

Recalling positive experiences allows us to relive the event and the positive emotions associated with it.

This allows us to maximize the benefits that these positive experiences have on our lives.

A few strategies we can employ that will help us savour positive experiences include:

- Staying present
- Celebrating positive experiences with others
- Engaging in "positive mental time travel"

(Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, & Mikolajczak, 2010)

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## Practicing self-care

Self-care refers to activities and practices that we can engage in on a **regular basis** to maintain and enhance our health & well-being such as:

Taking care of our **physical & emotional** health

Engaging in a regular **meditation** practice



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## Keys to sustaining long-lasting happiness

1. Commitment, effort & motivation
2. Variety to avoid adaptation
3. Rely on social networks to help you stick to your goals
4. Take a small 1<sup>st</sup> step: positive emotions help breed more positive emotions



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## Summary

- In order to increase our happiness, we need to make happiness a priority in our lives
- Schedule in time each day to engage in activities that are proven to boost positive emotions and increase feelings of happiness and well-being
- Remember that 40% of our happiness is within our control so rather than finding happiness, we need to take an active role and create happiness

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