

The Keys to Happiness

Today, science understands more than ever that there is a genetic component to happiness. We now know that some people are born more naturally happy than others. In addition, I believe that unhappiness is the default mood. Most of us are normally unhappy, and need to make an effort to achieve happiness. Despite genetics and our predisposition to despondency, there are ways to increase the happiness that we feel in our lives. Here are some keys:

Gratitude. I do not believe that it is possible to be happy without some measure of gratitude in your heart. I wrote about the importance of gratitude a few months ago. Virtually everyone has something for which to be grateful today. Even the poorest among us can still be thankful. While they may not be doing well in comparison to others today, they are very well off in a historical perspective. Abject poverty, misery, and disease comprise most of human history. In America today, few people face that level of deprivation.

Understand that expectations and goals are not the same. It is important to have very high goals, and you should always strive to be the best in anything you do. However, your expectations must be more reasonable. Every writer wants to be number one on any best seller list. Every sports team wants to win the championship. Millions of Americans secretly desire to be the U.S. President. But only one author, one team, and one person can achieve those goals at any one time. It is foolish to think that a successful author who never reached the number one spot is a failure. A winning season is a successful season, despite not winning the championship. In my lifetime, there have been only ten American presidents. No one would consider every other American during that span to be a failure.

Avoid negative people. It is difficult to avoid negative coworkers and relatives. There's always some uncle at a family gathering who enjoys getting under your skin. He will say negative things about your job, your hobby, or your life in general. Many Americans dread the holidays, because of certain relatives. Negative coworkers will also bring you down emotionally over time. Somehow, you must endure these people and spend as little time with them as possible, while spending as much time with more positive people.

Find religion. People who belong to a church, a synagogue, or anything spiritually-related are happier. Religion gives people a sense of belonging to something greater, and a purpose or meaning to life.

Stop obsessing with the negative and start appreciating the positive.

It appears to be a human instinct to focus on what is missing or what is wrong with our lives, and take for granted what is working or what is right. This especially includes loved ones, who too often are unappreciated.

Exercise and fitness play a role in our happiness. A healthy body, a healthy mind, and fitting into an old pair of jeans can bring you happiness. I dislike exercise as much as anyone. It makes me sweaty, sore, and tired. Yet, there is no denying that exercise makes me feel better about myself after a nice hot shower.

Stay current. It is fine to reminisce about the old days, but keeping up with society and culture, and learning new things brings you happiness. In many ways, there is nothing sadder than someone trapped in the past. Change is unavoidable. Likewise, it is important to forgive past transgressions directed toward you. If you can't forgive, then you at least need to move on with your life.

Donate money or time to worthy groups and causes. Remember, other people have troubles too. Helping them can bring you a sense of satisfaction, belonging, and self-worth. You will feel like you are accomplishing something. A bonus is learning that your personal problems may not be as serious in comparison.

Finally, never wait for some event to be happy. Learn to be happy now. Believing that the right job, the right person, or the right situation will finally make you happy are expectations that may never be met.

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