

What Truly Makes Us Happy?



What makes life meaningful and happy? Is it the money you make, the house you live in, or the car that you drive? Does fame buy happiness?

Researchers have finally found the answer to where our happiness comes from, and the results on lifespan and health are astounding. Researchers have wanted to find the answers for decades, but each research fell through due to people dropping out of the study as they age, researchers passing away, or researchers getting distracted from their study. Harvard University is the first study on happiness that has succeeded, and their research even continues today after more than 75 years of answers.

Harvard began studying sophomores at the university that had high expectations for their future. They also studied children that grew up in a poor area in Boston, who had very low expectations for their futures. About half of the participants are continuing the research, with some of the participants being in their 90s. Researchers interviewed, visited and surveyed participants throughout their lives to truly understand what makes them happy. The results show that it is our relationships that make us happier and healthier.

3 Lessons About Relationships

1. *Social connections are really good for us.*

Data shows that loneliness truly does kill us. People that are more socially connected to family, friends and community are happier, physically healthier and live longer than people that are less connected to others. When people are more isolated than they would like to be, they are less happy, their health declines early in their mid-life, their brain functioning declines sooner and they live shorter lives than those that are not lonely. In fact, one in every five Americans report that they are lonely. Loneliness can kill people; it can be as serious as smoking or alcoholism.

2. *It's not the quantity of relationships but the quality of relationships.*

It is not whether or not you are in a committed relationship, but the quality of that relationship. Living a life full of conflict can be bad for our health, but living with good, stable relationships can be protective. The satisfaction in your relationships can determine your future regarding happiness and health.

3. *Relationships don't just protect our bodies; they also protect our brains.*

Being in a securely attached relationship in your 80s is protective. Your memories stay sharper for longer periods of time. People that aren't in trusting relationships often experience early memory decay. Researchers found that marital status can play a huge part in your health, especially in your 80s. Those that experienced physical pain but had a healthy marriage tended to not feel their physical pain as much as others and were able to continue through with their day. Those that had unhealthy marriages felt more emotional and physical pain.

George Vaillant led the study from 1966 to 2004 and noticed that relationships and lifestyles are what really predict a happy and healthy life. Vaillant wrote a book titled "Aging Well" where he describes the observations he made from the Harvard men. He named five factors that can help your happiness and health, which are physical activity, absence from alcohol abuse and smoking, having mature mechanisms to cope with life's ups and downs, a healthy weight and a stable marriage. The more factors that the subjects had in place, the better the odds of them living a longer, happier lives.

The study also proved that ancestry and genetics didn't play as big of a role in people's happiness as once thought. This proved to be less important to longevity than the satisfaction from relationships in midlife. The research also found that people's attitudes in their thirties can be changed, debunking the idea that people won't change their ways or attitudes in their midlife. Those that were "train wrecks" in their 20s were found to live happier and longer lives. Those that were happy in their 20s tended to have issues correlated with alcohol abuse, drugs, and smoking which led them to not be as happy in their later years and resulted in their health suffering.

What if you're not a naturally cheerful person? Are there ways in which you can make yourself happy? Research suggests that about 50% of our mood is genetic, 40% can be controlled by ourselves, and the remaining 10% is reliant on circumstances. So, you may not be able to control your entire mood, but you do have a lot of control with how happy you are or can be.

Professor Arthur Brooks of Harvard University explains that knowledge is power when it comes to happiness. If you learn how to be happy and have the tools to be happy then you can teach yourself to be happy more times than not. This doesn't necessarily mean that our "bad" days are out of the window, but we can alter a lot of our days by simply just learning what happiness is and how to manifest it.

Ways to Increase Your Happiness

Stay connected

As stated before, relationships are extremely important for your happiness and your health. Having meaningful connections with other people, whether this be a family member, spouse, or neighbor, can have drastic, positive effects on your mind and body.

Volunteer

Volunteering can bring a sense of purpose and meaning to your day. Individuals that are 70 years old or older receive a greater impact from volunteering.

Acts of Kindness

Helping others can truly boost your mood. This may take deliberate intention and planning, but the results are amazing for all that is involved. Being kind to others won't just boost your own mood, but it will also boost the moods of those that you helped.

Find your inner child

When you are older, you finally have the opportunity to enjoy the activities that you once did when you were a child or young adult. Picking up past hobbies, games, or sports can really help boost your mood.

Experience life

I know the saying goes "money can't buy happiness," but in some ways it can. You don't have to spend your money on luxurious trips or expensive tickets to a show; you can simply go out to eat at a restaurant you've never been to. These small (or large) expenses can have a lasting effect on your happiness, so think of it as more of an investment in yourself. Having new experiences creates happier memories which leads to a higher satisfaction in life, rather than buying items which only have temporary benefits.

Surround yourself with happy people

Research supports that happiness can be contagious and can spread through your social networks. Your upbeat mood can trigger a chain reaction and lead to it spreading to other people just from them forming a relationship with you. Then those individuals who also have an upbeat mood will spread it to other people in their lives and so.

Look at the green side of things

A study published in 2021 looked at the citizens that live in urban areas and their happiness when compared to the amount of green they were surrounded by. People's happiness correlated with the amount of green in their area, whether this from parks, rivers, or gardens. Creating your own green space can have a similar effect on your happiness. Other research supports that gardening can help your mindset in the same ways that physical activity can.

Change your routine

People feel happier when they have variety in their routine. Even the smallest changes can make a difference. Taking a different route home, listening to music when you usually don't, or adding

new hobbies to your day every few weeks can add some spice into your life without you feeling the monotonous routine of life.

Count your blessings

Set aside to remember all that you are grateful for. Journaling is a great way to not only increase your memory, but also look back on all the good in your life. It can be easy to dwell on the negativities, so try to focus on the positivity in your life.

Make fewer decisions

Research shows that when people are given more options, they encounter more stress and anxiety. If a decision doesn't bring significant consequences to you then limit the number of decisions you need to make. Save serious deliberations for significant issues, and don't look back on not focusing on other decisions after you have already decided to focus on more important things in your life.