



# Happiness

The pursuit of happiness is one of the fundamental values of our nation. The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Yet happiness often eludes us.

How do you exercise your right to happiness? Researchers examining issues such as how to increase happiness in your life and the skills you need to be happy have discovered that a large part of your happiness is within your control. Happiness can be learned. This guide will help you learn more about happiness and provide tips and strategies to help you increase your level of happiness

## What Is Happiness?

What does it mean to be happy? Happiness is defined by positive emotions such as pleasure, contentment, joy and satisfaction. Happy people frequently experience these positive emotions, and infrequently experience negative emotions, such as sadness, anxiety, and anger. This doesn't mean that happy people are always happy, but it does mean that they are happy more often than not.

Recent studies of twins suggest that approximately half of your ability for happiness may be inherent. This is due to innate tendencies that increase or decrease your ability to be happy, for example optimism or shyness. In addition, experts believe that each individual is born with a personal range of happiness that remains relatively fixed throughout life. While events may occur that create a temporary high or low, eventually, people revert to their personal range of happiness.

While that may seem daunting, consider the flip side. There's a lot of room to grow. Almost half of your personal happiness is within your control!

## Benefits of Happiness

The benefits of happiness go beyond just feeling good. Experts continue to find evidence that happiness is good *for* you. Numerous studies show that happy individuals are successful across different areas, including marriage, friendship, income, work performance, and health. Some of the many advantages linked to happiness include:

- Reduced stress
- Better overall physical health
- Better overall emotional health
- Longer lifespan
- More successful relationships
- Increased productivity
- Increased energy
- Greater creativity
- Reduced stress and anxiety
- Greater self-confidence
- Higher self-esteem
- Greater resilience
- Increased cooperativeness
- Deeper concentration

## What Causes Happiness

Research on happiness confirms that certain things are related to happiness. Yet some of what does, and does not, cause happiness may surprise you.

- **Relationships** are the greatest sources of happiness. Our bonds with family and friends nurture and support our personal happiness.
- **Religious faith** also strongly correlates with happiness. However, experts are not clear on whether it is the faith or the community aspect of religion that is the driving force behind the related happiness.
- **Self-esteem** is integral to leading a happy life. Studies have shown that people who have confidence in themselves lead and enjoy healthier, more productive and more fulfilling lives.
- **Age.** Research indicates that Americans grow happier as they grow older. Older adults have more perspective, which allows them to maintain their emotional equilibrium. Older adults also pursue goals more for their own satisfaction.
- **Good health** has been connected with happiness, but only to a point. Basic physical health makes us happy, but increases in health beyond that do not lead to increased happiness.
- **Money** is related to happiness but, as with health, only to an extent. Research shows that having enough money to meet your basic needs makes you happy. Once above the poverty level, however, additional money and possessions have very little effect in increasing happiness.
- **Pleasure/Gratification** the emotions that come with quick-fix pleasure/gratification activities, such as sex, drugs and alcohol, eating or buying something, are temporarily enjoyable but don't lead to happiness. Once the experience is over, or the novelty of the new item wears off, so does the enjoyment.

## Increasing Happiness

Experts agree that all of us can learn to raise our happiness levels. The key to lasting happiness is to look beyond quick-fixes to the elements of real happiness: engagement with loved ones, work or a passionate pursuit, and finding meaning from some higher purpose.

The following techniques may be helpful. Different methods are a better fit for different people. Find what works best for you and integrate it into your life. Ideally, your efforts will become habit over time.

### Make Relationships a Priority

Numerous studies have determined that interpersonal relationships are critical to well-being and one of the greatest sources of happiness. Yet recent studies indicate that Americans are becoming increasingly socially isolated even as the electronic age makes people more interconnected. Close, supportive interpersonal relationships are decreasing or absent.

To improve your personal happiness, you need to make relationships a priority. Here are some tips:

- **Seek opportunities for social involvement and participation.** The more people you have in your life, the more likely you are to have truly supportive relationships.
- **Develop your relationship skills and nurture relationships** that provide you with increased social support, a sense of belonging, an opportunity for personal growth. Spend time with friends and loved ones, remember important events, help friends when they're in need, and do other things that will strengthen relationships and make them supportive.

## Open Yourself to Happiness

Positive emotion refers to the range of happiness each person experiences. Mindfulness is sometimes defined as an awareness of, and openness to, what is taking place, both internally and externally, in the present. Many of the exercises that help you increase your level of positive emotion involve increasing your mindfulness of things—large and small—that bring you happiness.

- **Gratitude Journal:** Using the sample worksheet at the end of this guide as a template, on a daily or weekly basis write down three to five things for which you are grateful. Anything that made you happy counts, from major events like a promotion or your baby's first steps, to small moments, like a walk outside on a beautiful day or hug from a loved one. People who consciously take time to count their blessings each week are not only happier; they are healthier, less stressed, more optimistic, and more likely to help others.
- **Happiness Journal:** Using the sample worksheet at the end of this guide as a template, each day write down three things that went well and why. Keeping a daily journal brings a deeper awareness of what you do that makes you happy. You gain a better appreciation of your daily happy moments and the choices you made. By reflecting on activities that deterred your happiness, you can become more mindful to make better choices.
- **Gratitude Visit:** Write a testimonial to someone you're grateful to and, if possible, read it to him or her in person. Studies show that people who do this are measurably happier up to a month later (although the benefits are gone after three months).

- **Mental Pictures:** Take a mental “snapshot” of moments that give you pleasure and savor them. This encourages you to live “in the moment” and be more open to moments in your life that give you joy.
- **Acts of Kindness.** Perform acts of kindness. Anything counts, whether large or small, random or planned. Acts of kindness connect you with others (a major source of happiness) and create positive feelings such as pride, contentment, satisfaction and generosity. Experts have found that doing five acts of kindness a week creates measurable increases in your happiness. And if you do them close together (e.g., all in one day), the increase is greater.

## Become More Engaged

A key element of happiness is to be engaged in your life. When you are doing something that fully engages you—for example, a challenging project at work, listening to music, reading a book or training for a marathon—you lose track of time. One expert describes this experience as “flow.” You may have also heard it called being “in the zone,” or “in the groove.” People who experience this level of engagement are happier than people who rarely do.

Key to becoming more engaged is identifying your personal strengths, as well as the goals that reflect your interests and values. Being clear about how your life aligns with your values, talents and unique gifts and using your strengths to do what you love and what has meaning to you engages you and creates satisfaction and happiness. The following exercises can help you identify your interests and put you on the road to enriching your life. At the end of this guide, you'll find “Discovering Your Interests Worksheets” that can help you keep track of your answers to each exercise and organize your thoughts.

- **Conduct an Inventory of Your Strengths.** As a first step, take an inventory of your strengths. These don't have to be job-related or technical skills (such as computer proficiency) rather they can be things like making people laugh, having a "green thumb" or being a good cook. Make a list of your strengths on the worksheet, and then ask yourself, "How can my strengths lead me to things that excite me?"
- **Ask Yourself, "What Makes My Time Fly?"** Using the worksheet, list activities you enjoy so much that you actually lose track of time and then think of where these activities might lead you. If you enjoy being with children, for example, does the notion of teaching or volunteering in the school system intrigue you? How about writing children's books or being a guide at the local children's museum? The list should be a "living" document, one that you refine and add to on a regular basis.

Once you've identified your interests, review the lists you've made on the worksheet and create a list of interest-based options—all of the activities and experiences that could unite you with your interests. If your interests include gardening, for example, your list might include building your own greenhouse, working at a nursery or gardening store, joining a gardening club or online chat group, or subscribing to gardening magazines or newsletters.

Don't stop to consider whether a particular option is practical, financially feasible or even worthwhile. Try to create the widest array of options possible because each option may trigger new and better ideas. In addition, the process of creating a list of options may help you clarify exactly what your interests are.

Then, pursue your interests! Select items from your options list that you can put into action now. Do the things on your "What Makes My Time Fly" list. Commit to pursuing your interests and you will not only begin to clarify what they really are, but you will also jumpstart the process of making you happy!

## Make Your Life Meaningful

Another element of happiness is meaningfulness—a sense of purpose, of making a difference, of leaving a legacy. Researchers have found that when you make a difference in the lives of others around you, you feel satisfaction, pride and a sense of well-being. Using your strengths for something greater than yourself—such as family, community, justice, a higher spiritual power, understanding, or integrity—not only gives your life meaning, it connects you with others. And experts agree that being connected is one of the greatest sources of personal happiness.

The following exercises can help you identify your values and what gives you a sense of purpose:

- **Best Possible Self.** Imagine, and write about, your best possible self in 10 years. In particular, describe your values, what you have accomplished, what you are doing and the people who are important in your life.
- **Story of Your Life.** Think about how you would want someone in the future to describe you to your great-great-grandchildren. Write a one-page description of yourself and your life, including your values and your personal qualities. Set it aside for a few days and then read it again with fresh eyes. Look at what you included. Then read between the lines and look at things that you are doing that you did *not* include and think about why you left them out.

When you are done, think about any changes you might make in your life to allow these descriptions to someday be an accurate reflection of your life and personal priorities.

Improving happiness requires consistent effort. Happiness requires action: set goals and challenge yourself, take chances. It is work, but it isn't necessarily unpleasant work. And the payoff is worth it.



## Discovering Your Interests Worksheets

For your convenience, we've included these worksheets to help you complete the exercises discussed in this guide. They are designed to help you focus on discovering your interests, and to organize and list your thoughts. The exercises are intended to be a guide only; adapt them to your own needs as you see fit. If you need additional space, make copies as necessary.

### Inventory of Your Talents

#### My Talents

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#### Things That Excite Me

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### "What Makes My Time Fly?"

#### Activities That Make Time Fly

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#### Possible Application or Vocation

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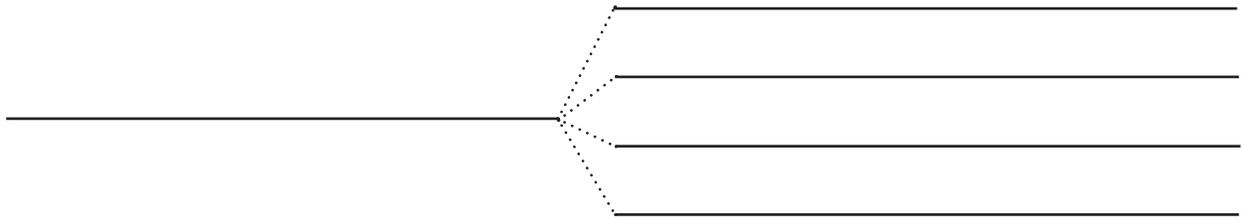
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# Interest-Based Options

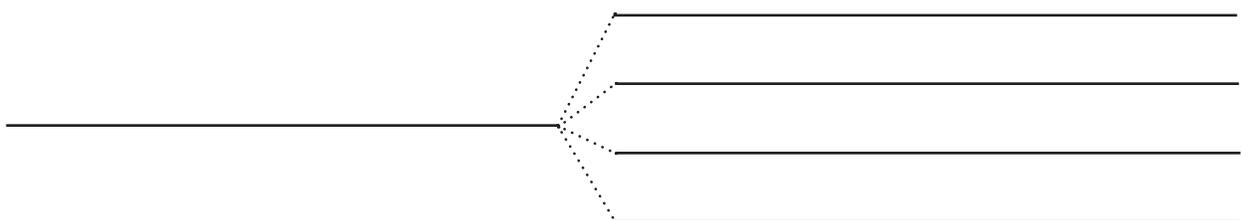
**Interest**

**Options**

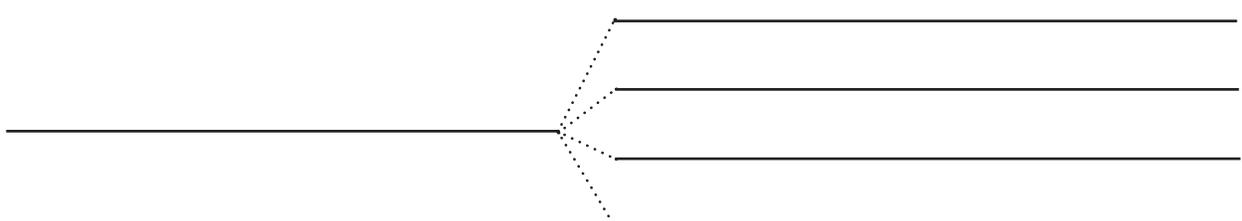
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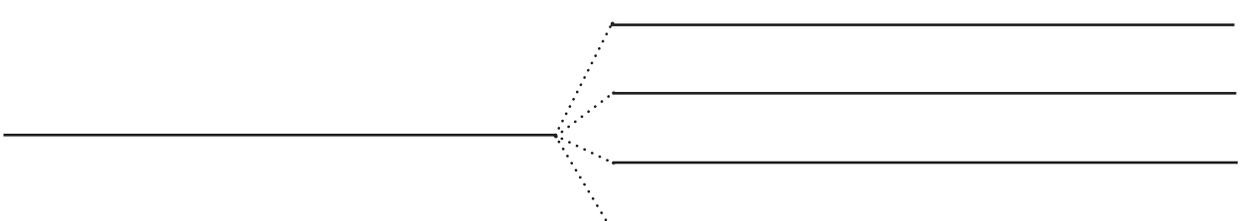
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