

Three Steps for a Happier Life



For centuries philosophers and scholars have studied what makes people happy. Today, we know more about happiness than ever before. For example, one consistent finding is that happy people enjoy healthy relationships with others (Vaillant, 2008). It turns out there are many simple things people can do to boost their feelings of happiness. This fact sheet provides three steps for a happier life.

A study of happiness was conducted with a sample of 180 nuns who were all living together in Milwaukee. The researchers found that even though the nuns lived similar lives, there were some nuns who lived longer, happier lives than other nuns. For example, one sister lived until she was 98, and was never sick. On the other hand, another sister had a stroke at age 59 and died shortly thereafter. So, what is the difference between the two nuns?

An examination of the essays the sisters wrote when they took their vows to become nuns revealed some clear and surprising news: One sister used language that was uplifting, happy, and joyful, whereas the other sister expressed no positive emotion. More of the essays were then reviewed. Researchers found 90% of sisters who expressed positive emotions in their essays were still alive at age 85, while 34% of the sisters who used no positive emotion were alive at that same age. Even at age 94, 54% of the positive group was still alive compared to 11% of the less positive group (Seligman, 2002).

Findings from similar studies has revealed a pattern of things happy healthy people do.

Here are three steps for a happier life:

Step 1- Notice the Good in Every Day: Past, Present, and Future

Like the nuns, using positive language and looking for the good in everyday life will help increase overall happiness. When noticing the good in life, it is important to find the positive in past, present, and future situations.

Past

Taking a deep look into the past can often bring up painful, depressing, or other uncomfortable emotions. Whatever the feeling attached to these memories, they are the experiences that made you, you. What did you learn from those experiences? How did they shape you into who you are now? How are you a stronger person because of those experiences? Re-labeling is a powerful tool for finding the good in the past. Take a negative experience, think about the above questions, and find the positive in the situation.

Another vital tool for finding good in the past is forgiving others. Forgiving someone who has wronged you can be challenging; however, the benefits of forgiveness are well worth it. Findings from research studies suggest that people who forgive others live a happier and healthier life than those who do not (Keltner, Marsh, & Smith, 2010). Because forgiveness may be a difficult task, Dr. Everett Worthington has developed a five-step process for forgiving others using the acronym REACH, which stands for:

R- Recall the hurt: In order to heal, you need to acknowledge you have been hurt and make the decision to fully forgive.

E- Empathize: Try to understand why whoever hurt you, did what they did.

A- Altruistic gift: Remember a time when you transgressed and were forgiven.

C- Commit: Write a note of forgiveness, or forgive publicly.

H- Hold onto forgiveness: Remind yourself that you have decided to forgive, reread notes of forgiveness when feeling doubt.

Remember, forgiving others will allow you to have less anger, less stress, more optimism, and better overall health (Seligman, 2002).

Present

One of the best ways to be optimistic about the present is to keep a journal. Writing down positive experiences often leads to increases in overall happiness. At the end of the day, take time to write down three things you were grateful for that day, or something that went well that day (Goddard & Marshall, 2013). This helps keep the mind focused on the positives of each day.

Keeping a grateful mindset is also related to increased happiness. Some studies indicate that people in wealthy countries are 10 times more likely to experience depression than 40 years ago. A possible explanation, one scholar argues, is that people today are more focused on pleasure rather than gratitude (Seligman, 2002). Some ideas to keep an attitude of gratitude in your present life include: take a walk and enjoy the beauty around you, celebrate the joys of others, call a friend, or notice meaningful things around you (Goddard & Marshall, 2013).

Future

Be optimistic about the future. Optimism and hope not only buffer against depression when negative events occur, but they are related to higher performance at work, and better overall physical health (Seligman, 2002). A continual optimistic view will help you battle whatever challenges come into your path.

The Blueprint for Happiness, a resource developed by Extension Specialists from the University of Arkansas (Goddard & Marshall, 2013) provides some tips for having an optimistic future:

- Have courage to face the future and whatever trials meet you. Confront your challenges head on; think of what has helped you be successful in the past and use these tools to conquer new challenges
- Accept what you can't change; there are some things and situations in life that are out of our control, and worrying about them only takes our time and energy. It is in our best interest to accept these things as they are and move forward with a positive mind set. There are things we can control as well, and when it comes to these situations we can manage them. When a difficult situation you can control arises, take all precautions to manage it and shape the life you desire.
- Our thinking and mindset plays a major role in our overall happiness. Controlling the way we think will help create a more peaceful life. Keeping positive thoughts on our mind and relabeling "what

if" situations to the best-case scenario can decrease stress and increase optimism.

Step #2- Find and Use Your Strengths

Martin Seligman, a famous psychologist, describes strengths as, "a trait - a psychological characteristic that is seen across different situations over time. Not a one-time display. It is valued in its own right and it often produces good consequences." We all have our quirks and personalities that make us unique and valuable people. Recognizing and using our individual strengths will help us live joyfully, be more productive, and continue to progress. One way to identify your strengths is to take a free strengths test, available at www.authentic happiness.org.

Step #3- Make Time for Service

Serving others is an important part of a happy life. Research suggests that when a person performs an act of service for someone else, their body, physiologically, responds the same as if they were receiving an award (Keltner et al., 2010). For many of us, we either think we are too busy to serve others or we fail to think about it at all. Here are several tips to help you think about service in different way.

- Serving others does not need to be a large time-consuming task. While some service involves a great deal of time and attention, such as being involved in your community or your child's school, there are simple ways of serving others such as smiling, opening a door, taking a meal to a friend who is ill, writing a note to a loved one, or carrying a stranger's groceries to their car. There are endless small ways to serve.
- Make time for service. Schedule a time once a week when you specifically plan on doing service. This way there is no excuse to not engage in service. You could also invite others to do service with you. Get a group of people together to do a service project for the community, a neighbor, or someone in need.
- Notice and appreciate the everyday service in your life. Did someone serve you today? Have you served someone else? Even the smallest acts of service count. Being grateful for these opportunities of service will give you a greater appreciation of service and its lasting benefits.

If you are having trouble thinking of ways to serve, there is a website designed to help people become involved in service. Justserve.org was developed to help people find

ways to serve in their community according to the amount of time they have to do service. It is a wonderful resource to keep handy.

Noticing the good in every day, finding and utilizing strengths, and making time for service can all contribute to improving overall happiness in your life. Share these steps with the people you love to increase their happiness as well. Just as the nuns story described earlier, it is important to have a positive optimistic outlook to live a long and happy life.

Resources

- Authenichappiness.org
- Justserve.org
- Actionforhappiness.org

References

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