

20 Secrets to Living a Happier Life

There's an unfortunate reason why happiness is often elusive -- our brains simply aren't wired that way. Instead, our brains have evolved to survive, to protect ourselves, to keep us safe. Sure, we have moments of elation and periods of contentment and bliss. But many of us are plagued with persistent negative emotions -- we are just plain stuck in the "blahs."

How do we find more joy in our life? Like anything else, it takes practice to cultivate ongoing happiness. In a sense, we have to reset our baseline. It won't happen overnight, but here are the top 20 things you can do every day to discover the secrets of being happier.

1. Focus on the positive.

To find long-term happiness, you need to retrain your brain from a negative mindset to a positive mindset. Try these things: Spend one to two minutes looking for positives in your life. Do this three times a day for 45 days, and your brain will start doing it automatically.

Choose a positive mantra for the day -- something you will repeat to yourself, such as "Today is beautiful" or "I feel grateful for all I have."

And when things go south, take a moment to try and see it from a positive light. Never underestimate the importance of recognizing the silver linings in life.

2. Celebrate little victories.

Life is full of ups and downs, but in between we have a lot of little victories that go unnoticed. Take a moment to celebrate these small wins.

Did you check off all the things on your to-do list that you've been procrastinating on? Yay! Did you finally clear out a thousand emails that have been filling up your inbox? Woohoo! Take pleasure in these little achievements. They add up!

3. Find your work-life balance.

Work takes up a lot of our day, but it shouldn't be the only thing we do. It's important to pursue activities and interests beyond our job. Do you have a hobby? Are you spending time with friends and loved ones? Are you getting exercise? Creating balance in your life will reduce stress and give you other outlets to express yourself and have fun.

4. Practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness meditation works by bringing your awareness and attention to the present moment. It's about being nonjudgmental and accepting how you are feeling. Practicing mindfulness means being present, aware and curious. Accepting what we are going through decreases stress and helps us see situations for what they are. Through mindfulness, we can find peace and affirmation in ourselves.

5. Be creative.

You may think of artists as being moody and depressed, but studies show that engaging in creative activities on a regular basis actually makes you happier. Those who spend time using their imagination and being creative have more enthusiasm and are more likely to have feelings of long-term happiness and well-being. Such creative activities can include writing, painting, drawing and musical performance.

6. Accept imperfection.

Many of us strive for perfection -- we desire to push ourselves to be our best. But in order to be truly happy, you must embrace the imperfection that is part of life. Perfection is impossible, and holding ourselves and others to these standards is futile. We will always end up feeling let down. Accept that life is imperfect and recognize that there is beauty and grace in that imperfection.

7. Do what you love.

It's pretty hard to maintain happiness if you hate your job. Don't waste the best years of your life in a joyless job, even if it's paying the bills. What are you interested in? What are you truly passionate about? Focus on building a career in an area that motivates you and will provide you with a high level of satisfaction, and your happiness factor will go up exponentially.

8. Spend wisely.

It's tempting to believe that the more money you have, the happier you'll be. But the reality is, it's how you spend your money that helps you feel happier. The key is to do it wisely. Spending money on experiences -- travel, dining, concerts and so on -- can make us happier because we are sharing those experiences with others. Happiness connected to material possessions fades, but experiences help us define our purpose and passions in life.

9. Live in the moment.

Our thoughts and feelings often revolve around the past or the future. Reality is what you are experiencing in this very moment; what you are going through right now. Sometimes we want to escape that reality. But when we stay in the present, we are fully engaged in our lives. Endeavor to live in the moment, and you'll begin to have a deeper appreciation for your life.

10. Cultivate gratitude.

Find ways to cultivate gratitude on a daily basis. Giving thanks and being grateful for all you have will make you happier and more content.

Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what you have received in life.

Those gifts may be tangible or intangible. When you spend time each day acknowledging all that is good in life, you'll see there is more good than you realize, and you'll find that sadness, anxiety and depression are diminished.

11. Give back.

Be generous with your time and your money. Give to others in need. Give to those you love and care for. Those who give back have a sense of selflessness and humanitarianism. Those who are generous in spending money on others tend to have good health, perhaps because giving has a feel-good effect that lowers blood pressure and stress.

12. Surprise yourself.

It's hard to feel happy if you are bored or feeling blah about life. Part of feeling happy is feeling stimulated, interested and a little surprised by life. So surprise yourself by setting goals outside your comfort zone. Put yourself in new or unexpected situations. Set goals for yourself and then work to achieve them. And remember to enjoy the ride!

13. Listen to and engage with music.

Listening to music lifts our spirits. It makes us feel better, in part because listening to music causes our brains to release dopamine, a neurochemical connected to pleasure and reward. Those who engage with music through dance or through attending concerts report high levels of happiness and a sense of well-being.

14. You do you.

One of the best things you can do to boost your happiness is to just be yourself. That means not being dependent on the approval of others, but accepting yourself for who you are. Spend some time getting to know yourself. What defines you? What do you believe in? Who are you, underneath it all? Search for ways to be comfortable in your own skin.

15. Build meaningful relationships.

Happiness, love, friendship and community go hand in hand. As humans, we have a fundamental need to interact and connect with others. We naturally seek our tribe -- the people who will support us, understand us and be there for us through life's roller-coaster ride. Without meaningful relationships, we are lonely and isolated. We're happier when we pursue happiness with others.

16. Nothing compares to you.

Stop comparing yourself to everyone around you. Most importantly, stop comparing your things to all the things everyone else has. Social media has a way of making us feel like everyone else has it better than us. How often does scrolling through your newsfeed make you feel negative emotions? Allowing envy and resentment to take root robs us of appreciating what we have.

17. Stop worrying.

Constantly worrying about everything creates toxic anxiety, where your mind is steeped in negative, spiraling thoughts. Worries plague your mind and make you afraid and apprehensive about things you often have no control over. Sometimes we believe that if we worry enough, we can keep bad things from happening. But the truth is, you cannot experience joy or even contentment when you're consumed by worry.

18. Hang out with happy people.

Ever hang out with a gloomy person and leave feeling bummed? That's because moods can be contagious. It turns out that feelings can be transferred from one person to another, and the more we share experiences with one another, the more our emotions and behaviors become synchronized. One secret to long-term happiness is surrounding yourself with others who are also happy.

19. Spend time in nature.

Some researchers believe that today's ultra-wired generation is actually suffering from a nature-deficit disorder. Studies have shown that the more time we spend in nature, and the more we relate to the natural world around us, the greater our sense of happiness. Our connection to nature also plays a role in maintaining positive mental health.

20. Reminisce over happy memories.

Why do we love all things retro? Perhaps because nostalgia makes us happy. Nostalgic feelings, or reminiscing about our past, can help us reconnect with feelings of love and a sense of wonder and fulfillment. Our past shapes us and defines our identity. When we remember good times and happy memories, we can increase our self-confidence and feel closer to those around us.