

## The Secret to Happiness

It's in the Declaration of Independence: the right to the pursuit of happiness. We feel we deserve to be happy, and we strive for it in our lives. But what does being happy really mean, and how can we do it?

Happiness "is the overall sense of being satisfied with your life as a whole," says psychologist Ken M. Sheldon, Ph.D., associate professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Dr. Sheldon and Tim Kasser, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., say three top needs seem to drive happiness:

- Autonomy (a sense that you've chosen to do what you do)
- Competence (you're good at what you do)
- Relatedness (you feel close to others)

In general, if you're happy, you feel confident and in control. You're more optimistic, energetic, decisive and creative. You view the world as a safer place than those who aren't happy. You have high self-esteem and a sense of meaning to your life, and you're more capable of intimacy with others.

"You're happy if you're doing the things that you want (and you're doing them well), and doing what brings you closer to other people," says Dr. Kasser.

When you're happy, work and leisure activities use your strongest skills, you form close and supportive relationships, and you're more willing to help others in need. You're also healthier.

"Our body's immune system fights disease more effectively when we are happy rather than depressed," says social psychologist David G. Myers, Ph.D., professor at Michigan's Hope College and author of several books, including *The Pursuit of Happiness*.

Just as happiness affects our overall health, your genetic makeup decides how happy you'll be -- something shown by studies with separately raised twins.

"Our happiness fluctuates around our 'happiness set point,' which disposes some people to be ever upbeat, and others down," says Dr. Myers.

Your happiness potential is a bit like your cholesterol level. Both are influenced genetically, as well as by diet, sleep and exercise. Your emotional attitude and the quality of your relationships with others also affect happiness.

But being healthy doesn't mean you're happy, and vice versa. "There are plenty of people in poor health who are happy," says Dr. Sheldon. We humans tend to adapt to change, both positive and negative.

"That helps explain why, despite the realities of triumph and tragedy, million-dollar lottery winners and people who become paralyzed report, after a while, roughly similar levels of happiness as before," says Dr. Myers.

Whether you were happy or not in your past, you'll tend toward a similar degree of happiness today and in the future, no matter how your circumstances may change. However, "there's some indication that older people, above 60, are happier [than when they were younger]," says Dr. Sheldon. Why? Because, in their later years, they're likely to pursue goals based on personal fulfillment rather than obligation.

### Steps to a happier life

- Decide to be happy. Think and act happy, so you can create the state of mind for yourself and inspire it in others.
- Take control. If possible, take charge of your time to make effective change in your life.
- Set goals. Choose ones that urge you forward yet also let you realistically reach them.
- Engage your skills. Seek work and leisure activities that challenge your talents and abilities without overwhelming you.



- Be healthy. Eat well, exercise regularly and get plenty of sleep.
- Seek out others. Surround yourself with happy people and nurture these relationships.
- Reach out. Be compassionate and focus beyond yourself, to help those in greater need.
- Remain curious. Stay open to new people and experiences so you continue to grow.
- Keep perspective. Take a moment each day to reflect on the positive things in your life that can make you feel grateful.

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