

How to Be Happy: 10 Science-Backed Ways to Become a Happier Person

A boatload of research offers practical advice you can use to start being happier today.

BY JESSICA STILLMAN



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Science has landed a probe on a comet hurtling through space, wiped smallpox from the face of the earth, and split the atom. Surely research can come up with [a few ways to make humans happier](#).

Thanks to the advent of the relatively new field of positive psychology, science has been doing just that for the last decade or so. Researchers are churning out studies on the underpinnings of human flourishing, pinpointing what makes people truly happy, and offering actionable suggestions to help people [become the best](#), most joyful versions of themselves. Here are few of [the field's recent discoveries on how to be happy](#).

1. Practice gratitude.

You know that if you hit the gym and lift some weights, your muscles get stronger and it becomes easier to lift that same amount of weight over time. But did you know that positivity works much the same way?

According to research, consciously counting your blessings is a [workout for your brain's capacity for gratitude](#), making it easier to be more positive--and happier--going forward. ([Complaining](#) works in the opposite way, causing your brain to default to gloom.) How do you cultivate appreciation for the good things in your life? Here are [a few practical, science-backed ideas](#).

2. Focus on the now.

We usually think of daydreaming as a pleasurable activity, but recent studies show that [letting your mind wander can actually make you miserable](#). On the other hand, according to science, [paying careful attention to what you're doing](#) in the present moment boosts well-being--even if what you're doing is as boring as the dishes.

That might sound a little out there--who could possibly enjoy folding the laundry?--but it appears that focusing on the task at hand acts as [a simple form of mindfulness](#), calming the mind by blocking future worries or ruminations on the past in a way that's akin to meditation.

3. Exercise more.

Sorry couch potatoes, but the science is unequivocal: [Moving your body is a powerful happiness booster](#). According to one study, regular exercise actually works as well as the popular antidepressant Zoloft at relieving depression. Why? Like common mood-boosting drugs, working up a sweat increases the amount of neurotransmitters circulating in our brains. It also reduces stress, and, of course, keeps you healthy.

4. Get out in nature.

If humans are hardwired to need physical exercise in order to truly thrive, the same can be said of nature. Our species spent millions of years on the savannah, after all, and only a blink of the eye, in terms of evolutionary time, in cities. That's probably why study after study demonstrates that [getting out in nature has profoundly positive effects on our mood](#). Even putting a simple potted plant ([or even a picture of one!](#)) on your desk has been shown to boost happiness.

5. Be kind.

The point of generosity, as commonly understood, is helping others, but according to a raft of research, [lending a helping hand is also a huge happiness](#)

booster for the do-gooder. "There are now a plethora of data showing that when individuals engage in generous and altruistic behavior, they actually activate circuits in the brain that are key to fostering well-being," Richard Davidson, founder of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin and author of *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*, has explained.

6. Connect.

Humans are social animals, so it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that socializing makes us happier. For instance, one study revealed that, for those suffering through a grumpy day, [meeting with friends as soon as possible was a surefire mood booster](#).

Even connecting others seems to make us happier. Another bit of research out of the University of Virginia and Harvard demonstrated that [matchmaking also makes us happy](#) (both the romantic and professional types). So don't just call up one friend. Call up a few friends and introduce them.

7. Limit social media.

If connecting with friends is likely to boost your happiness, then any means you can utilize to plan get-togethers is great. Used for this sort of active purpose, Facebook and other social-media sites are likely to have a positive effect on your state of mind, but the same can't be said of passively browsing other people's feeds.

Looking at carefully curated and often highly distorted representations of other people's lives [has been shown to increase envy and loneliness](#), and decrease life satisfaction. One study even found that [quitting Facebook results in a boost in well-being](#). So be conscious of how you consume social media.

8. Tame your materialism.

Here's the bad news: A giant pile of studies shows that craving more and better stuff seriously dents your happiness. But there's good news, too. Science also shows it's entirely possible to [get a handle on your materialism and boost your well-being](#) by consciously reflecting on your values, keeping a careful eye on your spending, and turning away from advertising as much as possible.

9. Spend wisely.

Just because materialism is bad for your mental health doesn't mean spending money can *never* make you happier, however. While it's a bad idea to think that buying that bigger TV will have much of an effect on your mood for more than a few days, science has shown that [spending on experiences rather than stuff can help us squeeze more joy](#) out of our hard-earned cash.

Spending on travel, for instance, will purchase you the pleasure of planning the trip (which research reveals to be about [as enjoyable as the trip itself](#)), a chance to bond with your fellow travelers (see point No. 6 above), and a lifetime of happy memories to savor. It's a much better deal than nearly anything you could pick up at the mall.

10. Trim your commute.

When researchers rank activities for how happy they make us, one consistently comes in near the bottom of the list--commuting. It's no surprise that sitting in traffic is next to no one's idea of a good time, but the magnitude of misery commuting brings into your life might surprise you. "Driving in traffic is a different kind of hell every day," [Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert has commented](#).

No wonder, then, that experts strongly urge those considering buying a house far from their work to think carefully about the tradeoffs involved, and suggest those who [can swap bikes, trains, or their home office for that time in the car](#) consider doing so.