

Boost Your Happiness Levels!

Happiness. The word brings up old-school memories of Snoopy and Woodstock, lying on the doghouse roof, looking at the clouds. Many of us think happiness is some elusive goal, like a wisp in the wind, that we hope for but can't really guarantee. We let our emotions happen to us as they come, and we cross our fingers and say our prayers that they bring joy instead of grief.



But research supports that we can choose to be happy. The brain is a muscle, and we can train it into muscle memory for joy instead of sadness or anger, or other negative emotions. The more we practice the discipline of choosing joy or gratitude or peace, the less likely we are to go to the bad place when faced with difficult circumstances. Or at least, the faster and easier it will be to pull out of our negative mindset.

Boost Your Happiness

If your happiness quotient needs a boost, you're in luck. Below is a list of happiness-boosting practices that will help train your brain to give you glee instead of gloom.

- **Live Small**
Instead of waiting for happiness to show up in one grand gesture, focus on the little things that bring joy. A baby's laugh, a budding rose, even the sound of bacon crackling on the stove can be sources of pleasure. Make it a habit to stop a moment and focus on those small delights as they come.
- **Smile**
Make it your goal to smile at every person you see. This includes smiling at yourself in the mirror. When you smile, most people smile back, and this sends happy signals to your brain. It's also just a nice thing to do and will make people like you more.
- **Be friendly**
When it comes to making friends, cast a wide net. It often takes making an effort with ten or twenty (or more) people to find that one person you can really connect with. But the effort itself brings satisfaction as you learn more about others and offer them friendship and support. Eventually, you'll find one or two people who get you, and with whom you really enjoy spending time.
- **Do what you love**
Maybe you're fortunate to have a job you love. But even if your job is kind of meh, make time to paint or play tennis or swim or read great literature or whatever it is that makes your heart sing.
- **Practice gratitude**
Each day, set aside time to consider your blessings. Focusing on the things you're thankful for, no matter how large or small, has been shown to calm the nerves and put us in a more peaceful state of mind.

- **Try new things**
Set a goal and work toward it. It doesn't even matter if you reach it, as long as you take steps in that direction. Take a class. Learn a new skill. Visit that restaurant you've been meaning to try.
- **Be mindful**
Try to savor each moment. To savor, in this context, means to slow down and really enjoy something in a way that makes it last as long as possible. You can be mindful of your surroundings, or you can be mindful of the taste of the salmon and baked potato on your plate.
- **Take care of yourself**
When we're tired, run-down, and malnourished, it's easier to slip into depression and anxiety. We're also more irritable. By eating right, exercising, and getting plenty of rest, we increase our chances for happiness.
- **Go outside**
Research has proven that sounds and sights of nature put us in a more Zen state of mind. Sunlight is also a natural source of vitamin D which promotes healthy bones and teeth, supports the immune systems, and helps regulate insulin levels.
- **Let it go**
Holding on to anger, bitterness, sadness, or other negative emotions from your past hurts you more than anyone else. Each time you remember something bad from your past, breathe it in, then exhale slowly and picture that bad feeling leaving your body, never to return. (It helps. Really.)
- **Play**
Act silly. Dance in your kitchen. Chase your spouse around the living room, or speak in goofy voices with your kids. Laughter really is great medicine!

During this time filled with so many challenges, finding joy can seem difficult. But with practice and self-discipline, we can stop relying on external circumstances to bring fulfillment. Soon, we'll realize that we can bring happiness with us, wherever we go.