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Following the Advice of Ancient Philosophers Can Make You Happier

By Dr. Mercola | September 14th, 2017

For many, happiness is elusive at best and at times near impossible. There's always something (or someone) pushing our buttons, making us feel less than joyful. According to Barbara Fredrickson, a psychologist and positive-emotions researcher, most Americans have two positive experiences for every negative one.

While that sounds good and well, this 2-to-1 positivity ratio is barely enough to get by. To flourish emotionally, Fredrickson's research¹ shows you need a 3-to-1 ratio. That is, you need to have three positive emotions for every negative emotion. Only 20 percent of Americans achieve this critical ratio, which means 80 percent do not. Even worse, more recent research suggests nearly 25 percent of people experience no life enjoyment at all!

The good news is, happiness can be learned. Part of the equation is training yourself to view life's events from a different perspective. Inconveniences and more serious troubles are unavoidable facts of life. What many fail to realize is that these events do not automatically bar you from being happy — unless you let them, that is.

Make Happiness-Boosting Rituals Part of Your Daily Routine

Disappointment, especially if you're constantly struggling with things "not going your way," can be a major source of stress, and centenarians — those who have crossed the threshold of 100 years of age — overwhelmingly cite stress as the most important thing to avoid. This does not mean they were blessed with carefree lives. "Avoidance" here really refers to the ability to manage your stress so that it doesn't end up wearing you down over time.

Rather than dwelling on negative events, most centenarians figured out how to let things go, and you can do that too. The key, as Barker notes, is consistently training yourself to let go of the negativity. This isn't something you do once and you're done. It's something you do each and every day, or however often you're triggered. One foundational principle is the realization that the way you feel about an event has everything to do with your perception of it.

Those Who Feel They Have Enough Are Usually Happier

Some even claim that the key to happiness is learning to appreciate "enough," and embracing a more minimalist lifestyle. The average credit card debt for Americans who carry a balance is \$16,000, and 38 percent of U.S. households carry some amount of credit card debt. The total outstanding consumer debt in the U.S. in 2016 alone was a staggering \$3.4 trillion.

Meanwhile, financial hardship and work stress are two significant contributors to depression and anxiety. The answer is pretty self-evident: Buy less. Many who have adopted the minimalist lifestyle claim they've been able to significantly reduce the amount of time they have to work to pay their bills, freeing up time for volunteer work, creative pursuits and taking care of their personal health, thereby dramatically raising their level of happiness and life satisfaction.

The key here is deciding what "enough" is. Consumption itself is not the problem; unchecked compulsory shopping is. It's like being on a hamster wheel — you keep shopping, thinking happiness and life satisfaction will come with it.

Yet it never does. Many times, accumulation of material goods is a symptom that you may be trying to fill a void in your life. Yet that void can never be filled by material things. More often than not, the void is silently asking for more love, connection and experiences that bring purpose and passionate engagement.

The Importance of Gratitude

The philosophers of old placed great emphasis on gratitude as a way of cultivating happiness and inner peace. Today, thousands of years later, the benefits of a thankful attitude have been firmly established through scientific study.

People who are thankful for what they have are better able to cope with stress, have more positive emotions and less anxiety, sleep better and have better heart health. Studies have also shown that gratitude can produce measurable effects on a number of systems in your body, including:

Mood neurotransmitters (serotonin and norepinephrine)	Inflammatory and immune systems (cytokines)
Reproductive hormones (testosterone)	Stress hormones (cortisol)
Social bonding hormones (oxytocin)	Blood pressure and cardiac and EEG rhythms
Cognitive and pleasure related neurotransmitters (dopamine)	Blood sugar

A team of researchers at UCLA showed that people with a deep sense of happiness and well-being had lower levels of inflammatory gene expression and stronger antiviral and antibody responses. This falls into the realm of epigenetics — changing the way your genes function by turning them off and on.

Part of your longevity may depend on the DNA you were born with, but an even larger part depends on epigenetics, over which you have more control. Indeed, research suggests your thoughts, feelings, emotions, diet and other lifestyle factors exert epigenetic influences every minute of every day, playing a central role in aging and disease.

Other Habits That Promote Happiness

In order to be happier, you might think the first step would be to eliminate negative experiences in your life, but often these are beyond your control. Instead, focus on increasing your positive experiences. This is something that virtually everyone can do. Even ordinary moments can be a source of great pleasure.

In many ways happiness is a choice, and you can create it and nourish it by implementing certain routines and daily practices. In fact, happy people tend to have habits that set them apart from their unhappy peers, such as letting go of grudges, treating people with kindness, dreaming big, not sweating the small stuff and much more. The following list includes "prescriptions" from psychologists that are known to boost your level of happiness.

Make happiness your goal

The first step toward greater happiness is to choose it. You need to believe that happiness is possible, and that you deserve it. (Hint: You do. Everyone does!) Research shows that the mere intention to become happier actually makes a big difference.

Identify what makes you happy

If it's been awhile since you've felt truly happy, you may have forgotten what it is that gets you there. Take time to reflect on what gives you joy, and not just the obvious, like your family, but also little things, hobbies and interests.

Make happiness a priority

Make a point to schedule your weeks around events (or ordinary activities) that make you feel happy and alive.

Savor pleasant moments

People who take the time to savor pleasant moments report higher levels of happiness, regardless of where the day takes them. If you don't already do this, keeping a daily diary of pleasant moments and whether or not you truly savored them, might help.

Ditch joyless distractions

There's only so much time in a day, so be sure to protect your attention and time from unnecessary and unproductive distractions. This includes texts, tweets and emails, which take you away from the true pleasures in life. If necessary, turn off social media completely.

Let every thought be a positive thought

Simply thinking about something positive, and smiling as a result, can make you happier and more upbeat. A genuine smile includes the facial muscles around your eyes, and can actually prompt brain changes linked to improved mood.

Prioritize experiences over things

Research suggests experiences make us happier than possessions; the "newness" of possessions wears off, as does the joy they bring you, but experiences improve your sense of vitality and "being alive," both during the experience and when you reflect back on it.

Have a backup plan for bad days

When you're having a bad day and your mood is sinking, have a plan in place to lift it back up. This could be calling a close friend, watching a comedy or going out for a jog — whatever works best for you.

Identify your sense of purpose

Happiness isn't about pleasure alone; it's also about having a sense of purpose. The term "eudaimonic well-being" originated with Aristotle, and describes the form of happiness that comes from activities that bring you a greater sense of purpose, life meaning or self-actualization. This could be your career, or it could be gleaned from volunteering or even taking a cooking class.

Socialize — Even with strangers

Having meaningful social relationships is important for happiness, but even people who engage in "social snacking" report greater happiness. Social snacking describes the little ways you connect with others, including strangers, on a daily basis.

Get away

Taking time away from the daily grind is important for helping you recharge. And while even a weekend getaway can give you a boost, a longer trip is better to help you create meaningful memories. These memories can be tapped into later to help boost your happiness. Experts recommend a two-week vacation, ideally, even if it's to a locale close to home.

Spend more time outdoors

Exposure to bright outdoor light is crucial for a positive mood, in part because regular exposure to sunlight will help to enhance your mood and energy through the release of endorphins. Getting sun exposure outdoors will also help you optimize your vitamin D levels. Vitamin D deficiency has long been associated with seasonal affective disorder (SAD), as well as more chronic depression.

Practice kindness

When people make a point to conduct three to five acts of kindness a week, something magical happens. They become happier. Simple kind acts — a compliment, letting someone ahead of you in line, paying for someone's coffee — are contagious and tend to make all of those involved feel good.