

## Happiness can be good for your health

By Kim Krisberg

**H**appiness is more than just a state of mind. It can also be a path to better overall health and well-being.

Happiness can be described as feelings of joy and pleasure. Or it can mean having a sense of purpose. Or maybe it's as simple as having a high sense of satisfaction with your life.

It can be hard to draw a direct line from how happy someone is and how healthy they are. Are people unhappy because they're unhealthy or unhealthy because they're unhappy?

It's a tough question, but researchers are finding that good health and happiness can go hand-in-hand.

"I think the evidence has become strong now on this — happy people tend to be physically healthier," says Edward Diener, PhD, a longtime researcher in the field of positive psychology and a professor of social psychology at the University of Utah.

"Since a large amount of disease is now lifestyle-induced rather than infectious, it would seem that psychosocial well-being is a crucial thing, especially in light of the fact

that happy people are typically better at practicing healthy behaviors."

Research has shown a number of connections. In 2017, scientists looked at the link between well-being and death in more than a million people. It found that people who had a greater sense of well-being also had a lower risk of dying.

Other studies have found relationships between happiness and long- and short-term health. Higher levels of emotional well-being are helpful for some sick people, and happiness may help protect against coronary heart disease. Positive emotions have even been cited as lowering the risk of dying from diabetes.

Science has also found a connection between well-being and healthy behaviors.



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Well-being has been linked with higher physical activity levels, while eating a lot of fruits and vegetables has been tied to more happiness and life satisfaction. Of course, those behaviors might also help explain why happy people also tend to report positive health.

### Addressing happiness myths

So what makes people happy? It may not be what you think. First up, money. Having money — especially a lot of it — is associated with better health and a longer life. The science is clear on that. However, it's less clear on how much of a role money plays in creating happiness.

A 2018 study that looked at 1.7 million people around the world found that happiness is associated with a lot less money than you might think. In general, it found that people making between \$60,000 and \$75,000 a year are likely to be happy on a day-to-day basis. As income grew beyond levels associated with happiness, life satisfaction began to go down.

Another myth is that happiness is associated with youth. But again, research has debunked that idea. People get happier as they age. In fact, those over 50 are generally happier than they were during younger years.

And while children can fill a parent with joy and purpose, research has found that having children is not associated with greater overall happiness, especially for women.

### How you can be happier

If happiness can be a health booster, the next question is: How do I get happy? Happiness is a personal thing and it's connected with many other factors and opportunities in our lives. So it's hard to pin down surefire steps. But people who study happiness and positive psychology have some tips.

At the University of California-Berkeley, researchers at the Greater Good Science Center have collected research-based ways to help create happiness. They include walking and enjoying nature to meditation and expressive writing.

Among the tips for inspiring more happiness in your life:

- ◆ Take an intentional timeout each week for 15 minutes to focus on a positive event in your life and what allowed it to happen.
- ◆ Perform a weekly act of kindness, which can create a greater sense of personal well-being and happiness.
- ◆ Write a letter of gratitude to someone you never thanked and take time to personally deliver it to them.
- ◆ When you are out among people you don't know, strike up a conversation. Find out what interests them and get to know the person.
- ◆ Write down three things that went well for you each day for a week and explain why.
- ◆ Take a walk and notice the positive things around you.

Science shows a walk of just 20 minutes can lift your mood.

◆ Give up something you love for a period of time, then re-experience the pleasure of it when you begin it again.

◆ Pay attention to the nature that is around you every day and how it makes you feel.

"We are not just talking here about the absence of stress," Diener says, "but the presence of enjoyment of life, optimism and life satisfaction."



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