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GUIDE

The Happiness Habits

Science-Backed Ways to Feel Better Every Day

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The Happiness Habits

Science-Backed Ways to Feel Better Every Day

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How to Use This Guide

Happiness advice is everywhere, and much of it is either obvious (“be grateful”) or overblown (“this one habit will change your life”). This guide takes a different approach. It explains what research on well-being actually shows, including where the evidence is strong, where it is modest and where famous findings did not hold up. Then it helps you build a small set of daily habits that fit your life and lift your mood over time.

Two promises up front. First, nothing here will make you happy all the time; that is not how emotions work, and trying to feel good constantly tends to backfire. Second, the effects of most happiness habits are real but modest. Modest effects, repeated daily for months, can add up to a noticeably better life.

What you will learn

- What predicts well-being, and how much your habits can realistically change it.
- Why good things stop feeling good (hedonic adaptation) and how to slow that down.
- How to practice gratitude, savoring, kindness and connection in ways that work.
- How flow and purpose feed a deeper kind of well-being.
- What the latest research says about money and happiness, and how to spend for well-being.
- How to turn all of it into habits, with a 30-day plan.

How to get the most from it

1. **Take the baseline in Chapter 1** so you can see change later.
2. **Try, then choose.** You will meet many practices. Try each briefly, then keep the few that suit you. Research suggests the fit between a person and a practice matters.
3. **Go small.** Two minutes done daily beats twenty minutes done once.

4. **Follow the 30-day plan** in Chapter 12, which introduces one area at a time.
5. **Be honest with yourself.** If a practice feels forced or empty after a fair trial, drop it.

TIP

About the examples and the research

The people in the example boxes are fictional composites. Research is described in plain language, with the names of researchers where we are confident of them, and with honest notes where findings are mixed or have failed to replicate.

CAUTION

If you are feeling persistently low

These habits are for everyday well-being. They are not a treatment for depression. If you have felt low, hopeless or unable to enjoy things for two weeks or more, please read the last section of this guide and talk to a doctor.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- This guide reports what well-being research shows, including its limits.
- Most happiness habits have modest effects that add up with daily practice.
- Try practices briefly, keep the ones that fit and build them into habits over 30 days.

CHAPTER 1

What Research Really Says About Happiness

01

Before building habits, it helps to know what you are aiming at and what is realistically within reach. “Happiness” can mean a pleasant mood, satisfaction with your life or a sense that your life is meaningful. Researchers measure all three, and they do not always move together.

Why it matters

If you aim at the wrong target (constant pleasure, say), you will be disappointed and may make choices that work against you. If you know which factors reliably predict well-being, you can put your effort where it is most likely to help.

Three kinds of well-being

1. **Life satisfaction:** how you judge your life overall. A common measure asks people to imagine a ladder from 0 (worst possible life) to 10 (best possible life) and say where they stand, a scale developed by Hadley Cantril and used in large international surveys.
2. **Emotional well-being:** how often you feel positive emotions (joy, contentment, interest) and how often negative ones (sadness, worry, anger) in daily life.
3. **Meaning and flourishing:** a sense of purpose, growth and engagement. Carol Ryff’s model of psychological well-being and Martin Seligman’s PERMA model (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment) both describe this broader kind of well-being.

What predicts well-being

Across many large studies, some factors come up again and again:

- **Close relationships:** among the most consistent predictors of both happiness and health.
- **Physical and mental health.**
- **Enough money** to meet needs and feel secure, with more money helping further for most people (Chapter 9 covers the nuance).
- **Meaningful activity:** work, caregiving, volunteering or projects that feel worthwhile.
- **A sense of control** over your own life and time.
- **Daily experiences:** in a well-known 2004 study by Daniel Kahneman and colleagues, working women reconstructed their previous day; socializing and intimate relationships were among the most enjoyable activities, and commuting among the least.

How much can you change?

You may have seen a pie chart claiming that 50 percent of happiness is genetic, 10 percent is circumstances and 40 percent is under your control. It came from a 2005 paper by Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon Sheldon and David Schkade and was widely repeated. Later researchers, including Nicholas Brown and Julia Rohrer, pointed out that the numbers cannot be split up that way, and the original authors have acknowledged the limitations. A more honest summary: genes influence your typical level of well-being substantially, circumstances matter more than the chart suggested, and your habits and choices make a real but not unlimited difference.

THE SCIENCE

Replication: why this guide is cautious

In 2015, a large project led by the Open Science Collaboration tried to repeat 100 published psychology studies; only about 36 percent of the repeats produced statistically significant results. Well-being research has had its own casualties, such as the idea that holding a pen in your teeth to force a smile reliably lifts mood (a large replication in 2016 did not find the effect; a later international study found that deliberately smiling had a small effect on mood, but the pen method itself did not). Reviews of positive psychology interventions, such as a 2019 re-analysis by Joseph White and colleagues, suggest their effects are real but smaller than early studies claimed. This guide favors findings that have held up, and says so when they are small.

A paradox to know about

Trying hard to be happy can make you less happy. In studies by Iris Mauss and colleagues, people who placed very high value on feeling happy were, in some situations, more disappointed and less happy, probably because they kept measuring themselves against an impossible standard. A healthier approach, studied by Lahnna Catalino, Sara Algoe and Barbara Fredrickson, is “prioritizing positivity”: building pleasant, meaningful activities into your days rather than monitoring how happy you feel.

EXAMPLE

Maya’s baseline

Maya, 38, a hospital administrator, felt “fine but flat”. On the baseline below she scored her life satisfaction at 6 and her positive days at about three in seven. Her notes showed a pattern: her best moments were nearly all with people (a long lunch with a colleague, her niece’s soccer game), and her worst were her commute and evenings alone with her phone. That pattern, more than any general advice, told her where to start.