

The Science of Happiness

Here's one of the greatest paradoxes in the science of happiness: If you survey a group of older adults about who is happier, young or old people, most will say young people are happier—but they will be wrong.

Study after study from around the globe suggests that happiness over the lifespan follows a u-shaped—or perhaps smile-shaped—curve. Both young and old people are happier than the relative sad sacks of middle age. Some recent surveys in the U.S. even suggest older adults are now happier than stressed-out young adults, says Linda George, a professor of sociology at Duke University.

At age 71 herself, George says she is “very happy.”

Of course, not everyone is happy in old age—or at any age. And aging baby boomers, as a generation, appear less happy than their parents were at the same stage, George says. But science has some more good news: There are ways to protect and increase your happiness, even when faced with the challenges common in later years—everything from illness to loneliness to loss of purpose.

“It is possible for older people to get happier,” says Sara Orem, a life coach who teaches courses in gratitude and mindfulness at Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of California, Berkeley.

Orem, who left a corporate job to get a PhD at age 60, says her own efforts to find more joy have paid off. “I think I am much happier than I used to be,” she says.

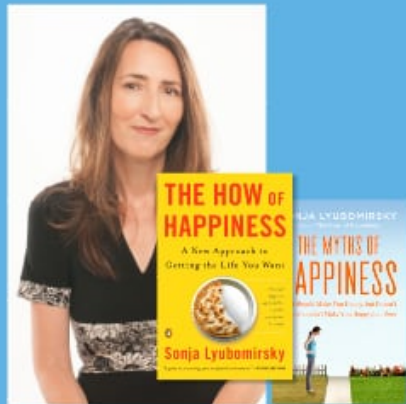


The Foundations of Happiness

Before you start seeking your own bliss, it helps to know what science has discovered about happiness.

First, if you suspect that some people are naturally happier than others, you are right. Genetic factors account for up to half of the difference in happiness between individuals, according to Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and author of two popular books—*The How of Happiness* and *The Myths of Happiness*.

SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY: Professor, Author, and Happiness Expert



Sonja Lyubomirsky

Sonja Lyubomirsky is a professor and vice chair of psychology at the University of California, Riverside. She has been studying how and why happiness can shift over time for more than 29 years. Lyubomirsky is currently exploring the potential of happiness-sustaining activities such as expressing gratitude, performing acts of kindness, and visualizing a positive future. Lyubomirsky's best-selling book, *The How of Happiness*, and her second book, *The Myths of Happiness*, have been published in 28 countries.

Her work has been written about in hundreds of articles, and she has appeared on numerous TV and radio shows, including CNN News, Sirius XM's the "Michelangelo Signorile Show," and *Today*.

"When you look around you, you see that some people are happier than others. But that doesn't mean that we can't be happier," she says. "It just takes more effort for some people." The events in our lives also matter, but they matter less than you might think.

One famous study, published in 1978, found that recent lottery winners were not significantly happier than average folks. In the same study, researchers found that people paralyzed in accidents were slightly less happy than others, but not nearly as unhappy as might have been expected.

Subsequent studies have found stronger evidence that life events do matter. Researchers have found, for example, that a welcome divorce can boost well-being, while a disabling illness can dampen it.

But hedonic adaptation—the tendency of humans to return, more or less, to a happiness set point—is



always at work, Lyubomirsky says. That's one reason, she says, that many older people can remain happy. "Most people are more resilient than they think and can adapt to even major losses," she says.

The Secrets of Happy Aging

The common belief that older people are largely unhappy is grounded in sheer ageism, says George. "We have incredibly entrenched negative stereotypes about later life. The idea that most of us will become grumpy old men and bitter old ladies is just wrong," she says.

"We do have our aches and pains and losses, but most of us adjust and do just fine, at least until we hit a final decline. That period of decline usually is brief and at the very end of life," George says.

While it can be healthy for young people to worry about their futures, older people often thrive when they are able to focus on what really matters to them right now, says Alan Castel, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of *Better with Age: The Psychology of Successful Aging*.

"Our goal is not to be happy every moment of the day, but you need to be aware that you can be happy," Castel says. That attitude can make the difference, he says, when losses and setbacks occur.

Orem, the California life coach, says she has benefited from focusing on the good things in her life.

On a recent trip to London, she says, she and her husband realized they no longer had the stamina to walk long distances and use the subway.

"So, one day we took the bus, and it took an hour longer," she says. When she was younger, she would have been annoyed by the inconvenience. But that day, she says, "it was so pleasant, just sitting there and enjoying the view out the window." That kind of acceptance and appreciation, she says, can make aging a pleasure.



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Alan Castel

Ways to Get Happier

It's never too late to pick up new habits associated with being happier. Here are a few ways to increase happiness at any age, according to psychology professor Sonja Lyubomirsky and other happiness experts.

Write a gratitude letter. Research has shown time and time again that being grateful is good for your health, mood, and general well-being. In fact, it's one of the easiest things you can do to increase your mental health. Think about someone you appreciate and draft a letter to him or her. Through the note, tell the person how much he or she means to you, your recognition of what he or she has done for you, and how appreciative you are of his or her existence and actions. You don't even have to send the letter to get the benefits.

Count your blessings. Happy people know how important it is to savor the taste of delicious foods, reflect on the interesting conversation they just had, or appreciate being able to step outside and take in a breath of fresh air. Happy people also tend to avoid gossip and judging others. Some people find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal, but you don't have to write in it every day. In fact, some research suggests the sweet spot is once a week. Just take a few minutes to write down five things for which you are grateful.

Practice optimism. Think about your best possible future—the life you imagine if everything goes well over the next few years. Then spend 10 minutes writing continuously about what you imagine, using



as much detail as possible. And remember, no one wakes up feeling happy every day. Even the happiest of people are no exception. Happy people just work at it harder than the rest of us. They constantly evaluate their moods and make decisions with their happiness in mind.

Practice acts of kindness. Studies suggest that performing a variety of kind acts may have more impact than performing the same kind act repeatedly. People also seem to get a boost when they pick a day of the week to perform many random acts of kindness. In fact, according to a recent *Forbes* article, spending money on other people makes you much happier than spending it on yourself.

Use your strengths in a new way. People with a growth mindset believe they can improve. This makes them happier and better at handling difficulties. They embrace challenges and treat them as opportunities to learn something new. Think about your character strengths—traits such as bravery, creativity, and perseverance. Then identify a new way you could use that trait today. You might use your bravery to try a new hobby or your creativity to cook a new dish. Write about your experience and how it made you feel.





Meditate on positive feelings toward yourself and others. Metta bhavana, or loving-kindness meditation, is a method of developing compassion. It comes from the Buddhist tradition, but it can be adapted and practiced by anyone, regardless of religious affiliation. Loving-kindness meditation is essentially about cultivating love. The basic idea: You sit quietly and imagine loved ones sending you love and kindness; you then send love and kindness to them.

Do more of what you like. Most people “know what makes them happy and unhappy, and they do things that make them happy,” Lyubomirsky says. “They spend time with people they like.”

A caveat: These techniques work best for people who are eager to try them. Forcing a skeptic to start a gratitude journal or a meditation practice is not going to be productive. And different techniques will work better for some people than for others.

The road of life has high points and low points for all of us. But the good news is that there are things anyone can do to lift their happiness level. So, take a suggestion that appeals to you and give it a try. The only thing you have to lose is a frown.