

What Makes Humans Happy?

Humans have an enduring belief that if we just do the right thing, happiness will follow – that additional happiness will be doled out to us because we earned it. "Happiness is not a reward – it is a consequence," instructs Robert Green Ingersoll, a Civil War-era orator. Many notable others, from Aristotle to the Buddha to Ursula K. LeGuin, agree with this sentiment.

New research takes a fresh look at this topic. Jennifer Aaker and Melanie Rudd at Stanford University and Cassie Mogilner find that happiness is indeed a consequence of the choices people make.

So what can people do to increase their happiness? Their answer is surprisingly simple: Spend your time wisely. Some of the ways people should spend their time are, in fact, surprising.

Spend Time with the Right People

The greatest happiness levels are associated with spending time with people we like. Socially connecting activities – such as hanging out with friends and family – are responsible for the happiest parts of the day. However, work is also an essential element in the time-happiness relationship.

Although spending time with bosses and co-workers tends to be associated with some of the lowest degrees of happiness, two of the biggest predictors of people's general happiness are whether they have a "best friend" at work and whether they like their boss. Therefore, people should try to reframe relationships and workplace goals such that colleagues become friends and time spent at work becomes happier.

Spend Time on the Right Activities

Certain activities are energizing, and others make us feel drained and defeated. To increase happiness, people should avoid spending time on the latter activities in favor of the former whenever possible.

Of course, the bills have to be paid, the bathroom cleaned, and it's sometimes a challenge to get through the day. But people need to reflect on how they are spending their time – the extent to which they mindlessly move from activity to activity without considering what they would really prefer to be doing.

For instance, when deciding how to spend the next hour, simply asking yourself the question, "Will what I do right now become more valuable over time?" could increase the likelihood that you behave in ways that are more in line with what will really make you happy.

Enjoy Experiences Without Spending Time Actually Doing Them

Research in the field of neuroscience has shown that the part of the brain responsible for feeling pleasure – the mesolimbic dopamine system – can be activated when merely thinking about something pleasurable, such as drinking a favorite brand of beer or driving a favorite type of sports car. In fact, this research shows that people sometimes enjoy anticipating an activity more than actually doing it.

For example, reading guidebooks in advance of a big vacation, and anticipating the food you will eat and the activities you will do while there, could actually give you more pleasure than the vacation itself.

In short, research suggests that we can be just as well – if not sometimes better – off if we imagine experiences without having them. So to increase happiness, spend plenty of time happily daydreaming.

Expand Your Time

Unlike money, time is inherently scarce. No one gets more than 24 hours per day.

In fact, there is a bidirectional relationship between time's scarcity and its value: Not only does having little time make it feel more valuable, but when time is more valuable, it is perceived as more scarce.

To increase happiness, it can make sense to focus on the here and now – because thinking about the present moment (versus the future) has been found to slow down the perceived passage of time. Simply breathing more deeply can have similar effects.

In one study, subjects who were instructed to take long and slow breaths (versus short and quick ones) for five minutes not only felt there was more time available to get things done, but also perceived their day as longer. And even though feeling time-constrained makes people less likely to take the time to help someone else, doing so actually makes people feel as though they have more spare time and gives them a sense of a more expansive future.

Therefore, if you can't afford to "buy" more discretionary time (e.g., by hiring a maid), focus on the present moment, breathe more slowly, and spend the little time that you have in helpful and meaningful ways.

Be Aware That Happiness Changes Over Time

As we age, we experience different levels of happiness, and how we experience happiness changes.

Recent research found that younger people are more likely to experience happiness as excitement, whereas older individuals are more likely to experience happiness as feeling peaceful.

Therefore, you should be aware that basing future decisions on your current perceptions of happiness may not lead to the maximum levels of happiness in the long run.

Finally, although the meaning of happiness may change, it does so in predictable patterns. Therefore, it is possible to anticipate such changes, and you should allow yourself to shift how you spend your time over the course of your life – as the meaning of happiness shifts.

Aaker points out: "The experiences people accumulate over the course of spending their limited time quite literally makes up each person's life. So if you take away anything from this research, it should be that spending time with the people you love doing the things you love is the best road to happiness."

Resources

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