

Following the Advice of Ancient Philosophers Can Make You Happier

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Reading about how to be happier will not make you happier – you have to practice, ideally every day. The ancient philosophers knew this, and prescribed rituals to train your mind to respond to life in a positive way
- › Techniques that can help raise your level of happiness include changing your perception or belief, asking yourself how you'd advise someone else in the same situation, and postponing your decision to act
- › Having a morning and evening ritual and practicing gratitude are important for happiness; 13 additional strategies that can help boost your happiness level are also reviewed

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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% of Americans achieve this critical ratio, which means 80% do not. Even worse, more recent research suggests nearly 25% of people experience no life enjoyment at all!²

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

As noted by Eric Barker in a Time article:³

"... [Y]ou've probably read a zillion articles about happiness online and you're not a zillion times happier. What gives? Reading ain't the same as doing. You wouldn't expect to read some martial arts books and then go kick ass like Bruce Lee, would you? All behavior, all changes, must be trained.

The ancient Stoics knew this. They didn't write stuff just to be read. They created rituals – exercises – to be performed to train your mind to respond properly to life so you could live it well ... And what's fascinating is that modern scientific research agrees with a surprising amount of what these guys were talking about 2000 years ago."

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.

Perception Is Everything

Wisdom of the ancients dictate that events are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. It is your belief about the event that upsets you, not the fact that it happened. Ryan Holiday, author of several books, including "The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living," offers the following clarification:⁴

"Shakespeare and the Stoics are saying that the world around us is indifferent, it is objective. The Stoics are saying, 'This happened to me,' is not the same as, 'This happened to me and that's bad.' They're saying if you stop at the first part, you will be much more resilient and much more able to make some good out of anything that happens."

Cognitive behavioral therapy is an adaptation of this philosophy and teaches you that the negative feelings you experience in response to life events are in fact rooted in your beliefs, most of which are either irrational or flawed.

While seeking the aid of a qualified mental health professional is certainly recommended if you suffer from depression or other mental health issues, for the run-of-the-mill upsets of daily life, you can raise your happiness level by shifting your focus from ruminations about what caused the situation to what your beliefs about it are.

Next, ask yourself whether you're actually thinking rationally about the issue. Is it true that you can never find another partner after a breakup, or is meeting someone else within the realm of possibility? Is your life really over because you lost your job, or is it possible you might find a job that suits you better or pays more?

Follow Your Own Advice

Another potent technique you can use to increase your positive-to-negative-emotion ratio is to ask yourself, "What would I recommend if this happened to someone else?"

and then follow your own advice. Barker highlights this technique with the following example:

"Traffic is terrible. Your friend is driving. He leans on the horn, punches the steering wheel, and shouts at the other drivers. You're like, 'Jeez, calm down. Why you getting so worked up? Chill.' The next day traffic is terrible but you're driving. So, of course, you lean on the horn, punch the steering wheel, and shout at the other drivers.

See the problem here, Sherlock? We all do it. But there's a lesson to be learned that the Stoics knew a few millennia ago. When something bad happens, ask yourself, 'What would I recommend if this happened to someone else?' And then do that. You'll probably be more rational. And it's harder to ignore the advice – because it's your own."

Dan Ariely, a professor at Duke University and author of "Predictably Irrational," explains that the reason this technique – which he calls "taking the outside perspective" – works so well is because when we make recommendations to others, we don't take our own current state of mind and emotions into account.

We're distanced emotionally from an event that happens to someone else, and that distance allows us to make saner, more reasonable decisions. By pretending we're giving advice to someone other than ourselves allows us to, temporarily at least, distance ourselves from emotions that cloud our judgment.

Discipline of Assent

Most of us have habits that contribute to our misery more than our happiness. Maybe you drink a bit too much, or eat things you know you'll regret later. The problem is, habits are really hard to break. Few have the iron willpower needed to change a bad habit overnight. So, what can you do? Here, the ancient philosophers suggested simply postpone your decision to act. As Epictetus said:

"Don't let the force of an impression when it first hits you knock you off your feet; just say to it, 'Hold on a moment; let me see who you are and what you represent. Let me put you to the test.'"

According to Barker:

"[M]odern research into breaking bad habits says the same thing. First catch yourself in the act, and then postpone: Those in the postponement condition actually ate significantly less than those in the self-denial condition. The result suggests that telling yourself I can have this later operates in the mind a bit like having it now.

It satisfies the craving to some degree – and can be even more effective at suppressing the appetite than actually eating the treat. It takes willpower to turn down dessert, but apparently it's less stressful on the mind to say Later rather than Never. In the long run, you end up wanting less and also consuming less."

Once you've learned to postpone, the next step is to replace your bad habit with something healthier or more constructive. Trying to eliminate the habit simply will not work. Instead, when your cue to eat/drink/smoke/chew your nails or whatever bad habit you may be struggling with arises, insert a new routine in place of your old one.

Addressing Wants and Desires

One of the greatest contributors to unhappiness is our wants and desires – regardless of whether they're able to be fulfilled or not, because as soon as you get the thing you desire, another, newer, better thing will come along, fueling your desire to acquire yet again. Fulfilling desires is a never-ending cycle. Here, the old adage to "be grateful for what you have" is part of the prescription. Barker cites "The Daily Stoic," which says:

"Here's a lesson to test your mind's mettle: take part of a week in which you have only the most meager and cheap food, dress in shabby clothes, and ask yourself if this is really the worst that you feared." To which Barker adds, "And research shows doing that really works. But it ain't any kind of fun.

Luckily, there is a less painful way to get similar results. What's something you used to relish that you now take for granted? Did that first morning cup of coffee used to be a wonderful moment – and now it's just something you hastily gulp down? Well, skip it for three days ...

When I spoke to Harvard professor Mike Norton he said this is how you can regain appreciation for the things that you've taken for granted. Make them a treat ... Deprive yourself a bit – then savor the hell out of it. This is how you can stop wanting and start enjoying what you have."

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](#). In 2024, the average credit card debt for Americans who carry a balance is \$6,993,⁵ and 56% of U.S. households carry some amount of credit card debt at some point in time. The total outstanding consumer debt in the U.S. in 2024 alone was a staggering \$17.29 trillion.⁶

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 better⁷ and have better heart health.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

How to Cultivate Gratitude

Even if you don't often feel gratitude right now, know it can be cultivated and strengthened with practice. One way to harness the positive power of gratitude is to keep a gratitude journal where you write down what you're grateful for each day.

Avoiding getting sucked into bad news is the other side of this equation. You may have to limit your media exposure from time to time if you find it difficult to maintain a positive outlook in the face of worldly horrors. Other ways to cultivate gratitude include writing thank you notes, remembering to say "please" and "thank you," nonverbal actions such as smiling and giving hugs and expressing thanks through prayer or mindfulness meditation.

The [Emotional Freedom Techniques](#) (EFT) is another helpful tool. EFT is a form of psychological acupressure based on the energy meridians used in acupuncture. It's an effective way to quickly restore your inner balance and healing and helps rid your mind of negative thoughts and emotions. In the video below, EFT practitioner Julie Schiffman demonstrates how to tap for gratitude.

Reflect on Each Day

The ancient philosophers also prescribed morning and evening rituals aimed at guiding and improving your mental and emotional state. A beneficial morning ritual will help set the tone for your day, while the evening ritual allows you time to reflect on the day's events. The philosopher Seneca wrote about his evening review ritual as follows:

"When the light has been removed and my wife has fallen silent, aware of this habit that's now mine, I examine my entire day and go back over what I've done and said, hiding nothing from myself, passing nothing by. For why should I fear any consequence from my mistakes, when I'm able to say, 'See that you don't do it again, but now I forgive you.'"

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.¹¹

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.¹²

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.¹³ If you don't already do this, keeping a daily diary of pleasant moments and whether or not you truly savored them, might help.

You might be surprised at how much happiness is to be had in your everyday life. Try appreciating the scent of your coffee, relishing in the feeling of your soft bed or enjoying the sunrise before you start your day.

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.

Think keeping tabs on your Facebook friends equates to happiness? Think again. Research suggests the more time people spend on Facebook, the more their moment-to-moment happiness declines and the less satisfied with life they become.¹⁴

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.

In general, the more you mingle and chat with the people around you, the more cheerful and brighter your mood is likely to be.

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.¹⁵ 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.

In Japan, the practice known as "forest bathing" has been part of the national health program since 1982, and the benefits of this kind of ecotherapy are now starting to become more widely recognized in the U.S.¹⁶ The aim is to slow down and unplug from the daily stresses by reconnecting with nature.

Estimates suggest the average American spends anywhere between 80% and 99% of their life indoors — a lifestyle trend that has led to what some now refer to as "nature deficit disorder."¹⁷ Spending more time in nature can go a long way toward increasing your sense of well-being and satisfaction.

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.

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