

## At Least 9 Ways to Get Happy Now

Maybe we are all in the midst of our daily grind with what seems to be a lot of ‘busy work’, to-do lists, deadlines, driving, cleaning, family activities, etc. Perhaps you are not even thinking about what you could do to feel happier. It might be there’s just no time for that, and so many of us are occupied with more important matters, or at least more pressing ones. However, if you were to stop to think about it, few things are more important than happiness. If you’re living day to day, simply going through the motions, it could be you’re missing out on really living *your* life. The exciting thing is that it’s relatively easy to feel happier. It’s literally a choice that virtually everyone can make, and you can work toward it just like you would work toward any other goal. The first step is making this choice - ***go ahead, do it!***

**There are 2 basic Kinds of Happiness and they can Produce Different Health Results:**

- **Hedonic** – characterized by happiness gleaned from pleasurable experiences and also associated with material possessions, including shopping, thrill-seeking, sexual activity, eating, letting loose...
- **Eudaimonic** – this form of happiness comes from activities that bring a greater sense of purpose, life meaning, or self-actualization and realization for a person.

Later we will touch on the benefits of the two types of happiness, but you may notice that the list below focuses almost exclusively on *eudaimonic* happiness. That is neat because there is very little cost in terms of \$ involved in the suggestions below. OK, so now, maybe you can try some of the simple happiness-boosting tips that follow

### Here are 9 Tips to Boost the Mood

#### 1. Get Up and Get Moving

Why not be like water? Even in a seemingly still pool it is moving! Excessive sitting and lack of exercise increase depression symptoms<sup>1</sup>, while increased physical activity may alleviate such symptoms and possibly even prevent future symptoms.<sup>2</sup> In great contrast to that **beta endorphins** (a neuropeptide) and **anandamide** (an endogenous **cannabinoid**) known as the “bliss compound,” both **increase** during and following exercise and may be partly responsible for why exercise literally makes you happy.<sup>3</sup>

#### 2. Get Outdoors and Get Grounded

Exposure to **bright natural light** is crucial for a **positive mood**, in part because regular exposure to sunlight helps to enhance your mood and energy through the release of **endorphins**.<sup>4</sup> Getting healthy 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 chronic depression.<sup>5,6</sup> One study found that it takes just 20 minutes outdoors to make most people happier. In addition, other research has shown that happiness is maximized when it’s 57°F outside - so keep an eye on the thermometer<sup>7</sup> Cold is very stimulating! Also, whenever possible walk **barefoot on the ground**, it actually grounds you and gives you energy. If you can’t get outdoors, at least open your shades and let the sunshine in. A brighter living or work area will help to boost your mood.

#### 3. Reach Out to Others

Call a friend or even send a friendly email. This will help you build closer bonds with others in the long run, and strong social ties are a key for well-being. One study even found that **relationships** are worth

more than \$100,000 in terms of life satisfaction, while actual changes in income buy very little happiness.<sup>8</sup> Even better, give or get a **hug** from someone. Hugging is known to lower levels of stress hormones like **cortisol** and stimulate **oxytocin**, the bonding hormone. Hugging also activates the orbitofrontal cortex in the brain which is linked to feelings of reward and compassion.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Complete a Task You've Been Avoiding

Procrastination and deferring, even of simple tasks, can add a bit of a strain. Often the thought or build-up to doing the aversive task (whatever it may be) is worse than actually doing it. However, completing even a simple task begins to enhance a sense of accomplishment and relief. It really makes us feel better! This usually creates momentum and allows us to move to another item on our list, which often has a very positive effect on our mood.

#### 5. Organize and De-clutter

A cluttered, disorganized environment can lead to **inner discord**. Set your timer for 10 minutes and tackle one spot that you wish were more clear of clutter, like your desk or maybe the kitchen counter. Go on, do it now!

#### 6. Do a Good Deed

Helping others and doing good deeds provide a natural mood boost. Even a quick kind gesture, like letting someone go ahead of you in line at the grocery store, is beneficial. If you have time, **volunteering** is also great for your mood; it can lower your risk of depression and anxiety<sup>10</sup>, and even boost your psychological well-being.<sup>11</sup> Not only does it keep you active and on your feet, but there's a definite social aspect as well, both of which contribute to happiness. Volunteering to help others also gives a sense of purpose and can lead to a type of euphoria related to the release of feel-good hormones in your body, again like **oxytocin**, while also lowering levels of stress hormones like **cortisol**. Aside from the possible chemical high, there is also a connection to others which achieves a higher level of satisfaction.

#### 7. Donate Something

Along the lines of doing a good deed, giving things away can help to create a positive environment. This includes material things, but alternatively we can donate our time or skills where they're needed most. Similar to decluttering, letting go of 'old things' can be surprisingly liberating.

#### 8. Smile

Putting on a fake smile may be better than a frown, but we all know it's not genuine. However, **thinking positive thoughts** and then **smiling** as a result can make you happier.<sup>12</sup> A genuine smile includes the facial muscles around your eyes and can actually prompt brain changes linked to increased mood. When you smile at others, they're also more likely to smile back in return, creating an ongoing **feedback loop** that obviously leads to more positive feeling in all of our lives.

#### 9. Learn Something New

Is there a topic or a skill you wish you knew more about? Like hot air ballooning? Playing a musical instrument? Taking up a sport? Pick something that intrigues you, something you've always wanted to know more about, or that you're **passionate** about - not something you have to learn. You could start by spending just a few minutes every few days reading up on it, or testing out a newfound passion.

## OK, that's Nine. But there are More - Did You Know You Can Boost Your Mood with Your Diet?

What you eat or don't eat can have a significant impact on your mood. Hopefully this has become self-evident. While excess sugar has been linked to depression, certain foods are linked to positive emotions.

**Vegetables, Especially Leafy Greens** - Dark leafy greens like spinach are rich in **folate**. One 2012 study found people who consumed more folate had a lower risk of depression than those who ate less.<sup>13</sup>

Research from the University of Otago found that eating **fruits** and **vegetables** of any sort (except fruit juice and dried fruit) helped young adults calm their nerves.<sup>14</sup> Researcher found:<sup>15</sup> "On days when people ate more fruits and vegetables, they reported feeling calmer, happier, and more energetic than they normally did."

**Mushrooms** - Are rich in **selenium**, an antioxidant (deficiency linked to anxiety). Mushrooms are also a great source of **vitamin D**, which supports healthy mood. The best option to optimize your vitamin D levels is regular sun exposure; if that's not possible, get it from good food. **Kombucha** is a fermented mushroom tea, no wonder it's so good!

**Turmeric** – This is a spice composed of 95% **curcumin** (gives it the yellow-orange color), is a powerful anti-inflammatory, has neuroprotective properties and may enhance mood and possibly help with depression.

**Cocoa (Dark Chocolate)** - Like exercise, cocoa may trigger your brain to produce the "bliss compound" **anandamide**. It also contains other chemicals that prolong the "feel-good" aspects of anandamide and trigger **dopamine** release. Note: 'dark chocolate' requires at least **70% cocoa** – and ideally has zero refined sugar. Drinking 1.5 ounces daily made subjects feel calmer<sup>16</sup>, thus has anti-anxiety effects.

**Organic Black Coffee** - Research has shown that coffee triggers neural mechanisms that releases **brain-derived neurotrophic factor** (BDNF), activating your brain stem cells to convert into new neurons, thereby improving brain health. I knew good coffee was good for you. Interestingly, research also suggests that low BDNF levels may play a significant role in depression and that increasing neurogenesis has an antidepressant effect. One Harvard study even found women who drink four or more cups of coffee a day have a 20% lower risk of depression than those who drank little or none.<sup>17</sup>

**Green Tea** - Green tea contains **theanine**, an amino acid that crosses the blood-brain barrier and has beneficial psychoactive properties. Theanine increases levels of **gamma-aminobutyric acid** (GABA), **serotonin**, **dopamine**, and alpha wave activity, and may reduce mental and physical stress and produce feelings of relaxation.<sup>18</sup>

### **Think Positively! Positive Thoughts Reduce Stress and Enhance Your Health**

Feeling happy isn't only a matter of emotional health. Positive **thoughts** and **attitudes** are able to prompt changes in your body that strengthen your health, decrease pain and chronic disease, and provide stress relief. One study found, for instance, that happiness, optimism, life satisfaction, and other positive psychological attributes are associated with a lower risk of heart disease.<sup>19</sup>

It's even been scientifically shown that happiness **alters your genes**! 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 healing responses.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, if you're wondering how to maintain a state of happiness in the long run, **self-acceptance** appears to be one of the most important factors that can produce a more consistent sense of happiness.

In a survey of 5,000 people by the charity 'Action for Happiness', people were asked to rate themselves between 1 and 10 on 10 habits that are linked to happiness.<sup>21</sup> While all 10 habits were strongly linked to overall life satisfaction, **acceptance** was the strongest predictor. In all, the survey resulted in the following "10 Keys to Happier Living," which together spell out the acronym **GREAT DREAM**:

- Giving: do things for others.
- Relating: connect with people.
- Exercising: take care of your body.
- Appreciating: notice the world around you.
- Trying out: keep learning new things.
- Direction: have goals to look forward to.
- Resilience: find ways to bounce back.
- Emotion: take a positive and kind approach.
- Acceptance: be comfortable with who you are.
- Meaning: be part of something bigger.

Recall the 2 basic kinds of happiness: **Hedonic** and **Eudaimonic**. The word origins (etymology for these two words are as follows:

**Hedonistic** - from Greek hēdonikos "pleasurable," from hēdone "pleasure", meaning "of the nature of pleasure-seeking".

**Eudaimonic/Eudemonic** - From Greek eudaimonikos "conducive to happiness," from eudaimonia "happiness," from eu "good" + daimōn "guardian, genius".

Interestingly, while both of these categories are positive emotional states associated with happiness, studies have shown that the **gene expressions** they produced were not identical. Those subjects whose sense of happiness was rooted in the eudemonic category had favorable gene-expression profiles, while the hedonic well-being group produced gene profiles similar to those seen in people experiencing stress due to adversity. Hmmm.

A theory<sup>9</sup> as to these differences is that when a person is driven by materialistic values, their happiness depends on circumstances that may or may not be within their control. If you run into adversity, it can cause a great deal of stress because it impedes your perceived ability to be happy. On the other hand, those who are driven by a sense of "purpose" are largely buffered against the uncertainty that comes with adversity, and their happiness is not dependent on having or experiencing something that can be taken away or disappear at any moment.

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