



Flexing your happiness muscle

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Just like our bodies, sustained happiness requires exercise. Thankfully, experts say, there are many ways to develop a more positive outlook long-term.

Words **RACHEL SMITH**
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LITTLE MOMENTS OF JOY are everywhere, if you look for them: a good cup of coffee in the sun, lunch with a friend, finishing a book you never had time to read. And although experts say happiness is hard to measure, we certainly have piles of research telling us how to go from glum to good humour.

But genuine, long-term happiness isn't just a given, say experts. It can take some work and some tweaks to how you live your life.

"There are two types of happiness," says neuroscientist Dr Mark Williams. "There's the transient kind of happiness you get when someone smiles at you or says hello, or you receive a card, or eat an ice cream. It spikes, you get a rush of dopamine, then it goes.

"Longer-term happiness comes about from effort, like training for and running a marathon, or writing a book, or helping others – like volunteering. You get a huge amount of joy from meeting a big goal and we see that sustained, long-term happiness comes when you earn it."

Healthy habits and strong friendships can boost happiness, too, says Professor Melody Ding, an epidemiologist and population behavioural scientist at the University of Sydney. "Look at things like running clubs, for example," she says.



"Having a plan for the years ahead in terms of health, lifestyle and hobbies is hugely important."

PROFESSOR MELODY DING
Population behavioural scientist

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"They're so popular and this is because they give you a sense of belonging as well as exercise, which is really important for older people."

WHAT'S UP WITH FINLAND?

It's a great question, especially as Finland – a country known for its ice, snow and darkness – has just topped the World Happiness Report rankings for the seventh year running. What are they doing right? Free education, healthcare, generous parental leave,

low rates of poverty and homelessness are key, of course. But also, many Nordic countries embrace the concept of *lagom* – a Swedish word that means 'just the right amount'; being OK and even content with life's bare necessities.

Professor Ding, who has spent time in Scandinavian countries, agrees. "They're not as materialistic. They spend a lot of time outside; they're very active. They eat a healthy diet, drink moderately and life is simpler.

"Plus, there isn't this wealth disparity you see in Australia – where some people can't even afford to pay rent, while others have 10 properties. Nobody gains from that kind of inequality. You can have all the money in the world, but you can't buy happiness and wellbeing."

We can also learn a lot from the Blue Zones project, says Dr Williams. The Blue Zones are five locations around the world (including Okinawa, Japan, Sardinia in Italy and Ikaria in Greece) where people live well into their 90s and beyond. Longevity aside, they're also known for being much happier generally.

"People in the Blue Zones are often referred to as the people who forget to die," says Dr Williams. "We know that socialisation is a big part of it; people in the Blue Zones regularly get together, they never drink alone; they'll eat and

EASY HAPPINESS HACKS

By DR MARK WILLIAMS
Neuroscientist



1.

THE 3-2-1 POSITIVE RATIO

This is the idea that you reframe any negative thought into three positive ones. Take climate change. Instead of thinking, "We're all doomed", you might think about all the research and advances going into combating climate change that can benefit us as a society. If you do it enough, it can rewire your brain so you have a more positive outlook.

2.

SEE PEOPLE IN PERSON

Did you know that seeing people face to face makes you happier? When we're face to face, we touch each other, and if you kiss or cuddle someone or shake their hand, you release oxytocin in that person's brain and in your own. You also mirror each other's body language through the mirror neuron system, which releases serotonin. Face-to-face socialising is so important.

drink as part of a social event.

“They also have a cross-generational lifestyle, where older people will spend a lot of time with their grandchildren. We take on some of the principles in Australia, like bringing preschools into nursing homes and that kind of thing, but our alcohol culture isn’t so healthy, and there’s lots more we could do [to embrace Blue Zones principles].”

HAPPY RETIREMENT

Although some studies suggest that we get happier as we get older, Dr Williams and Professor Ding say that’s not always the case – and it’s really important to set up your ‘retirement environment’ before you take the leap away from the world of work.

“Having a purpose, a reason to get up in the morning, is key. Whether that’s becoming a grey nomad, volunteering in an op shop, joining an ocean swimming group or going to a Men’s Shed and building that beautiful cabinet you’ve always wanted,” says Dr Williams.

Professor Ding agrees. “We often talk about retirement in terms of financial planning, but having a plan for the years ahead in terms of health, lifestyle and hobbies is also hugely important. This is especially true if your main life’s identity has always been tied to your work.” ●

HOW TO MEDITATE FOR HAPPINESS

By JACQUI MANNING, *The Friendly Psychologist*

START SMALL

Go outside and look at the sky or a tree nearby. Focusing on the blues and greens of our natural world (no phone!) helps produce those calming chemicals in our body.

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TRY MEDITATING ON THE GO

Slow down your breathing on the bus or in the car. Inhale through your nose for a count of four, and exhale as slowly as you can (through your nose or mouth). Do two-to-four of these breaths as often as you think of it to slow your heart rate.

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DOWNLOAD APPS

It’s really useful to have an app on your phone with guided meditations you can listen along with. Calm, Headspace, Insight Timer and Smiling Mind are good places to start.

IF YOU MISS A DAY, YOU MISS A DAY

No need to add that to your pile of worries or beat yourself up. Pick it back up when you can – your body and mind will thank you!

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3.

START A GRATITUDE JOURNAL

Our brains are plastic and more likely to focus on things we do regularly. So if you sit down and force yourself every day to think of three things you’re grateful for, you’re putting your brain into that mindset and it’s more likely to think positive thoughts going forward.

4.

TURN OFF YOUR NOTIFICATIONS

Technology is great but we need to use it in a positive way for our mental health. Research actually shows if you turn off all your smartphone notifications you can improve your mental health within two weeks. Notifications keep us in a state of high alert and your brain can’t relax and get to a happier state if it’s constantly getting notified by texts, news apps and social media.

5.

IGNORE THE 24/7 NEWS CYCLE

It’s OK to return to the days when we just got our news once a day. If you’re constantly taking in negative news and information, that bombardment is unhealthy – and because our brains are constantly adapting to our environment, it makes that negative state the new norm.