

## **Choosing happy: popular science supports it and business leaders are catching on: deliberate happiness can reap countless physical, mental and emotional rewards--both now and in the future.**

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Once upon a time, the Peanuts gang sang to us about "Happiness," describing it as "finding a pencil," "knowing a secret," "telling the time." Today, the alternative rock band The Fray describes happiness as "a firecracker sitting on my headboard." Even the very source of definitions, Merriam-Webster, fails to offer perfect clarity, with a definition of happiness as "a state of well-being and contentment."

Perhaps the true meaning of happiness will always remain elusive--probably because it is not a one-size-fits-all sort of thing--yet, we can tell you with utmost certainty one thing that happiness is: a choice.

You need only look to the recent worldwide recession for proof. While some greedy CEOs were busy lamenting the loss of benefits and bonuses, other Americans were facing lost jobs, lost homes, lost dreams. But it didn't kill their spirits or their smiles, as they refused to be victims of their circumstances. Instead, many of these people were downright happy to still have their health, their families and their lives. They chose happiness over unhappiness, refusing to let the latter get the best of them.

Now that there's a light at the end of the tunnel and the economy is on the rebound, it seems more and more Americans not only want happiness but also realize it is within reach. At Harvard, where studies show an average four in five students suffer from depression, one of the most popular courses is positive psychology. And books centered on happiness quickly jump to the top of the New York Times Best-Seller list, including Tony Hsieh's *Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profits, Passion and Purpose* and Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project*.

As Ann Hampton Callaway sings, "It's hip to be happy"--and isn't it about time? Of course, this doesn't mean we should forget the lessons learned in recent years or that we shouldn't sympathize with people still feeling economic burdens. But, if you're reading this, you survived one of the worst crises in recent history, and that's certainly something to celebrate.

In fact, it's not just hip to be happy; it's an inalienable right, according to the founding document of our country. And the exact wording--"the pursuit of happiness"--is apropos, as happiness is a state that we must constantly strive to achieve. But you can catch it--if

you choose to try.

## **Happiness Is ... a Physical Reaction**

While the jury may still be out on the definition of happiness from spiritual and emotional standpoints, recent science has made huge breakthroughs in pinning down the physiological definition of happiness.

In *Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love & Wisdom*, neuropsychologist Rick Hanson and Dr. Richard Mendius focus on two questions: "What brain states underlie happiness, love and wisdom?" and "How can you stimulate and strengthen these positive brain states?"

Only within the last 40 years has the scientific community accepted the theory of neuroplasticity--that the brain can change over time. And that philosophy is at the heart of *Buddha's Brain*: "We can actually use the mind to change the brain. The simple truth is that how we focus our attention, how we intentionally direct the flow of energy and information through our neural circuits, can directly alter the brain's activity and its structure."

Much of what changes the brain over time are our experiences, so Hanson and Mendius argue that if we embrace and focus on positive experiences instead of negative ones, these will become part of the landscape of our brains.

"Every time you take in the good, you build a little bit of neural structure," they say. "Doing this a few times a day--for months and even years--will gradually change your brain, how you feel and act, in far-reaching ways."

They also point to the powerful effects of meditation, which activates the parasympathetic nervous system in several ways, including "withdrawing attention from stressful matters, relaxing and bringing awareness to the body." In the long term, regular meditation can actually increase gray matter in key parts of the brain, in turn improving "psychological functions associated with these regions, including attention, compassion and empathy." It can also lift mood, decrease stress-related Cortisol, strengthen the immune system and help a variety of medical conditions.

If you're puzzled about those four out of five depressed students at Harvard, so was Shawn Achor, a student and later a teacher at the Ivy League institution. But he focused on the one out of five, "the individuals who were truly flourishing, to see what exactly was giving them such an advantage over their peers. What was it that allowed these people to escape the gravitational pull of the norm? Could patterns be teased out of their lives and experience to help others in all walks of life to be more successful in an increasingly stressful and negative world?"

His findings are *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work*. Through his exposure to and

research in positive psychology (one of his mentors was Tal Ben-Shahar, the professor of the aforementioned psychology class), Achor concluded that the popular belief that success leads to happiness is actually true in the reverse, "that happiness leads to success in nearly every domain, including work, health, friendship, sociability, creativity and energy."

From a physical standpoint, Achor says this is because "our brains are literally hardwired to perform at their best not when they are negative or even neutral, but when they are positive." Achor cites Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden and Build Theory, which states that positive emotions "broaden the amount of possibilities we process, making us more thoughtful, creative and open to new ideas" and "help us build more intellectual, social and physical resources we can rely upon in the future."

The biological explanation is that feeling happy releases dopamine and serotonin, which "dial up the learning centers of our brains to higher levels. They help us organize new information, keep that information in the brain longer and retrieve it faster later on."

### **Happiness Is ... Self-Reinforcing**

When Peanuts' Lucy and Linus sang about the simple everyday activities--"climbing a tree" or "learning to whistle"--that can bring happiness, they were actually onto something. As Hanson and Mendius write in Buddha's Brain, "Small positive actions every day will add up to large changes over time, as you gradually build new neural structures."

That's what Rubin discovered in The Happiness Project, which has the subtitle, Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle and Generally Have More Fun. One dreary day on a city bus, the wife, mother and writer realized she wasn't focusing on the important things in life and decided to spend a year making her life--and herself--happier. But, since she couldn't uproot her existence for some Walden-esque sojourn, she committed to taking small steps.

"Making little changes in your ordinary day can have a dramatic impact on the happiness you feel on an everyday basis," she says. "Be mindful about your life and your choices. [These changes have] to be manageable."

Over the course of a year, Rubin found that the smallest things made the biggest difference. "For example, I started my kids' literature reading group, and I started my own blog," she says. "I have been struck by the number of people who say that making their bed made a huge difference, and that is about as small as it can get. If they make their bed, they start out the day on the right foot." She also found these seemingly minor accomplishments had a snowball effect, boosting her mood and building momentum to achieve even more positive feats.

Tony Hsieh also knows how important the little things can be. As CEO of Zappos, he helped grow the online company from almost no sales in 1999 to more than \$1 billion in

gross merchandise sales annually--and he counts company culture as his No. 1 priority.

In *Delivering Happiness*, he outlines how guests on the Zappos headquarters tour in Las Vegas (yes, they offer an open tour of their offices to the general public) are likely to see anything from "a popcorn machine or a coffee machine dressed up as a robot" to "employees dressed up as pirates, employees karaokeing, a nap room, a petting zoo or a hot dog social." After all, one of the company's 10 core values is, "Create fun and a little weirdness."

"Our belief is that if you get the culture right, most of the other stuff--like great customer service or building a great long-term brand or passionate employees and customers--will happen naturally on its own," says Hsieh, who was named 2009 SUCCESS Achiever of the Year primarily because of these principles.

Jamie Naughton, who leads Zappos' Cruise Ship Operations Department within Human Resources, agrees. "I think it matters a great deal if employees are happy because happy employees tend to do better work," she says of the "culture extras" she administers, such as employee recognition programs, parties and events, community involvement and employee communications. "Zappos takes happiness seriously, and it creates a more positive work environment, less absenteeism--people aren't having the Monday blues because they're excited about being at their job."

At the end of her yearlong experiment, Rubin was sold that happiness is indeed voluntary--and always within reach. "I really am happier," she says. "After all my research, I found out what I knew all along: I could change my life without changing my life. When I made the effort to reach out for them, I found that the ruby slippers had been on my feet all along; the bluebird was singing outside my kitchen window."

### **Can \$75,000 Buy Happiness?**

No, but a recent study reveals some interesting findings.

This fall, a Princeton study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States* set out to analyze the relationship between annual income and two factors: emotional well-being ("the emotional quality of an individual's everyday experience--the frequency and intensity of experiences of joy, stress, sadness, anger and affection) and life evaluation ("thoughts that people have about their life when they think about it").

Gauging the responses from 450,000 Americans in 2008 and 2009, the study determined that people's positive perceptions of their lives increased with income, but that their everyday feelings did not improve above an income of \$75,000 a year.

"More money does not necessarily buy more happiness, but less money is associated with emotional pain," the authors write. "Perhaps \$75,000 is a threshold beyond which further increases in income no longer improve individuals' ability to do what matters

most to their emotional well-being, such as spending time with people they like, avoiding pain and disease, and enjoying leisure."

However, they noted that the study didn't take into account the impact of a large gain or loss of money.

"What the data suggest is that above a certain level of stable income, individuals' emotional well-being is constrained by other factors in their temperament and life circumstances."

### **Find Your Happy Place**

While there's no cure-all for the blues, these simple, everyday actions, courtesy of Shawn Achor and Gretchen Rubin, can help you get closer to happiness now--and in the long term.

1. Sing in the morning.
2. Laugh out loud.
3. Keep a gratitude notebook.
4. Commit conscious acts of kindness.
5. Use good manners.
6. Exercise.
7. Tackle a nagging task.
8. Spend money--on experiences.
9. Exercise one of your greatest strengths.
10. Find an area of refuge.
11. Go to sleep earlier.
12. Take time for projects.
13. Start a collection.
14. Take time to be silly.
15. Embrace your social network.

16. Find something to look forward to.

### **Positive Power**

Shawn Achor's research showed that you don't need success to have happiness. Instead, happiness is a building block of success in all areas of life.

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