

Ode to JOY



SO!
IS HAPPINESS
EVERYTHING IT'S
CRACKED UP TO BE?

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THERE'S NOTHING WORSE when you're feeling a little flat than meeting someone who is over-the-top, in-your-face, feel-like-I-could-fly-to-the-moon happy. You sit there, smiling wanly, feeling like you've failed a test of will. *Damn it, you think. What the hell is the matter with me? What am I doing wrong?*

The short answer is: nothing. There's nothing the matter with you. In fact, you're probably doing a lot of things right. But, just maybe, you could put things in place so that you start feeling better about your life more often.

Speak to happiness experts around the world, as we did for this article, and you'll likely come away with the following messages:

**Most of us are striving to be happy;
We mainly deserve to be happy;
We can learn tricks, strategies, ways of being – call them what you will – to more frequently experience a sense of joy or contentment.**

But before we discuss the "how to", let's get clear about what constitutes happiness. >>

TRUE HAPPINESS

The spirit of happiness

At its most shallow level, the pursuit of happiness is a recipe for dissatisfaction with life. We live in an age when even the quality of our relationships is apparently determined by the type of car we drive, how big our house is, what breakfast cereal we eat, or which mobile phone company we sign up with. Seeking immediate gratification is a long-term recipe for lack of meaning, fulfilment and value.

David Crosbie, CEO of the Mental Health Council of Australia

To achieve a level of contentment, it helps to be clear about what happiness is not. Many experts in the field agree, for example, that it's not necessarily about getting what we want.

ALICIA FORTINBERRY, author of *Creating Optimism* and *Raising an Optimistic Child* (both McGraw Hill, \$32.00), points out that our society values consumerism, fame and hierarchical power over the elements of true happiness, especially mutually supportive relationships, connection to nature and a sense of meaning and life purpose. "These skewed values put an unbearable strain on the family and workplace, resulting in fractured and even abusive relationships," she says. "The resulting stress and trauma affect our brain and nervous system, blocking us from our natural state of happiness, and all too often create depression and anxiety disorders."

Dr Sonja Lyubomirsky, professor of psychology at the University of California and author of *The How of Happiness* (Hachette, \$35), confirms what we long suspected: money doesn't make

Crosbie believes people need to feel good about themselves in order to be happy. They also need a sense of belonging, to feel valued, and have meaning in their lives.

you happy, either. "Research has clearly shown that there is a process of 'hedonic adaptation', where people get used to big bonuses, mammoth houses and fast cars – and the more they get, the bigger the boost they need to achieve the same sense of satisfaction."

She points out that humans keep "raising the bar" and constantly want more – and that, she says, inevitably leads to disappointment.

David Crosbie, CEO of the Mental Health Council of Australia, believes people need to feel good about themselves in order to be happy. They also need a sense of belonging, to feel valued, and to have meaning in their lives. He sees isolation and a loss of connectedness as the enemy of true happiness. "In some ways," he reflects, "sadness itself is an important part of fulfilment. If you accept the notion that deeper happiness is actually about fulfilment, then it makes sense to say sadness is an important part of being happy."

Crosbie is rapt by the results of the recent Act, Belong, Commit pilot study which was aimed at improving mental health in Western Australian communities. The research found that community engagement, keeping active and taking on challenges all have a remarkable impact on people's health and sense of wellbeing.

"When people become more physically active, when they volunteer for a good cause, or when they join a social group like a book or walking club, they start to feel better about themselves. That's why I encourage people to ... slow down a little, take time to engage, and give a little more of yourself to those who cross your path in life."

TONY BUZAN – originator of Mind Maps and a UK-based adviser to governments, businesses and educational institutions on thinking skills – believes happiness is an instinct as vital to our survival as the "fight or flight" response we have when confronted by danger. He also suggests that a human's degree of happiness is imprinted on their nervous system.

I seek to be fulfilled rather than happy. I enjoy my tears and my sense of compassion and connection. I also enjoy my attachments to family and friends, and relish challenge, particularly in my work. All of this means I live a life full of both joy and sorrow, disappointment and delight, frustration and fun. I have a sense of meaning through my work. And I love a cuddle; a quiet play on the piano; the delight of good food and wine; flying a kite with my youngest... all these things make me feel very fulfilled.

David Crosbie

"If you're happy, all manner of things happen in your body, brain and neurophysiology," he explains. "If you are happy, you are 'open' to experiences and ideas; your senses are more receptive. When you are happy, you take in more and learn more.

"Try learning something new when you're stressed – you can't," he says. "But when you're happy, you radiate. People want to be around you, and you feel more joyful, more fulfilled, more purposeful."

Dr Norman Doidge, a psychiatrist, researcher and author of *The Brain That Changes Itself* (Scribe, \$35), agrees that, based on everything scientists have learnt, a happy state is very good for the brain's health.

However, he doesn't believe that humans evolved to be happy; they evolved to survive. "Happiness is an outcome," he says, explaining how it is a product of luck and of accomplishing well-chosen goals, and we often have to suffer along the way to achieving them.

"If one scans the brain of a generally 'happy' person over time, one will find signs of suffering some times, and signs of contentment or pleasure at other times."

Doidge says Socrates argued that most people seek happiness, but that they all seek it in >>

the truth

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

How to grasp true happiness



Identify some of the strategies below that appeal to you and put them into practice. Your daily sense of contentment will grow...

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Express gratitude for what you have and convey appreciation to people you've never properly thanked

CULTIVATE OPTIMISM

Keep a journal in which you imagine and write about the best possible future for yourself, and practise looking at the bright side of every situation

AVOID SOCIAL COMPARISON

Use strategies such as distraction to cut down the time you dwell on your problems or time spent comparing yourself to others

PRACTISE ACTS OF KINDNESS

Do good things for friends or strangers, either directly or anonymously, spontaneously or planned

NURTURE RELATIONSHIPS

Invest time and energy in healing, cultivating, affirming and enjoying relationships that are important to you

CHOOSE ACTIVITIES THAT TRULY ENGAGE YOU

Increase the number of experiences at home and at work that you find challenging and absorbing

DEVELOP STRATEGIES FOR COPING

Practise ways to endure or surmount stress, hardship, or trauma

REPLAY AND SAVOUR LIFE'S JOYS

Pay close attention to and take delight in going over life's momentary pleasures and wonders

COMMIT TO YOUR GOALS

Pick up to three significant goals that are meaningful to you and devote time and effort to pursuing them

LEARN TO FORGIVE!

Keep a journal or write a letter in which you work on letting go of anger and resentment towards individuals who have hurt or wronged you

PRACTISE SPIRITUALITY

Become more involved in your church, temple or mosque; read and ponder spiritually themed books

TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY

Engage in physical activity and meditation – and smile and laugh a lot more!

FROM *THE HOW OF HAPPINESS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO GETTING THE LIFE YOU WANT* BY SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY (SPHERE, \$35). Visit www.thehowofhappiness.com.

The road to a happy life is by paying attention to relationships. While you can't change other people, you can set the conditions of the relationships you will have with them through clearly stating your boundaries. Your self-esteem will grow as a result, and you will bring more supportive people – and more happiness – into your life.

Alicia Fortinberry, psychologist and author



different ways. Some think of it as pleasure, even though the pursuit of pleasure can lead to becoming a slave to the passions, and hence unhappiness; others think it has to do with honour and status; others still equate happiness with the pursuit of knowledge and “making one's soul as good as possible”.

“Because we all have different experiences, and seek different versions of happiness in different ways, these different experiences wire our brains up differently so that varied coalitions of neurons arise,” says Doidge. “The result? Each brain is unique.”

Doidge says scientists know what an unhappy brain looks like – there are nine areas in the brain, for example, that are typically active in chronic pain.

Similarly, scientists also know that certain areas light up when a person feels pleasure. And people chasing different forms of happiness – hedonists, status seekers or people looking to attain the highest good, for example – all show different areas of brain activity.

SO CAN a person alter their behaviour to change the structure of their brain so that it becomes a “happier” brain? The short answer appears to be yes.

“I've certainly seen brains altered over time,” adds Doidge. He says research has shown that individuals each tend to have a “set point” for happiness, and that this set point can definitely be altered.

Lyubomirsky concurs. “Each of us is born with a set ‘happiness level’. Some people are genetically programmed more happy than others, but notwithstanding, a large portion of our day-to-day

“You can tackle becoming happier in the same way as you tackle a weight loss goal. Go to the ‘happiness gym’ and you can learn to transform your outlook on life”

happiness is in our control,” she says. “It simply requires a personal commitment to nurturing one's emotional life.”

Lyubomirsky says having a goal to become happier can be tackled in much the same way as we tackle a weight-loss goal. “Some people are born skinny and hardly put on weight even if they overeat, and some people get fat just by looking at food. So too with happiness,” she says.

“Each of us is born with a different genetic predisposition, and we all have different environmental circumstances, but still... if we go to the ‘happiness gym’ we can definitely change our outlook. But as with anything, it takes motivation, commitment and a lot of practice.” (See box, left, in which Lyubomirsky suggests 12 exercises she believes will lead to greater contentment.)

Lyubomirsky points out that some people are clinically depressed and need professional help. Others don't want to be happy, and that's OK. But for the vast majority of us, happiness is something worth striving for. She cites research that suggests certain values are critical to maximise one's happiness quotient. These values include religious faith, being charitable, >>

work satisfaction, optimism, and a sense of individual freedom. On the other hand, secularism, excessive reliance on the state to solve problems, and an addiction to security are said to promote unhappiness.

Psychologist Fortinberry believes that, given the right environment, everyone can be happy. "There is a gene that predisposes some of us to depression or pessimism. But this is a 'soft' gene, which can be turned on and off according to our circumstances – particularly our relationships.

"The real secret of happiness," he adds, "is that, contrary to what most self-help books tell us, happiness comes not from the inside out, but the outside in."

Happy or not, Doidge notes, it seems we don't stay content for long before we get restless and seek new goals. "We all may long for perpetual happiness as the best of ends, but it is not our primary goal in a day-to-day way."

Got that, folks? You, haven't failed life's "happy test" just because you're not chirpy every minute of every day. +



In the flow

The route to happiness is often in creative concentration, as Maya Zahran reports

AS THE MOMENT of his solo approaches, the seconds seem to slow until they freeze. Musician Mark Barnsley lifts the trombone to his lips and launches into a solo. The brass instrument resounds richly and Barnsley's off on a jazz riff that lasts for three minutes.

It's a precious stretch of time that artists sometimes refer to as "being in the zone". Researchers have officially labelled it "flow" and describe it as a state of being where a person focuses all their energy on one activity to the point that they become oblivious to the passing of time.

Being "in the zone" is something Barnsley lives for. With a working knowledge of most big-band instruments, the charismatic 33-year-old's preferred ones are the trombone, bass trombone, euphonium and bass guitar.

"Playing with a big band gives me enormous pleasure," he says. "When I'm in the zone, it feels completely natural, beautiful and relaxing." Performer and Sydney Conservatorium of

Music singing teacher Maree Ryan nods in agreement. She says that "flow" is a powerful opportunity for artists. "The concentration level is so intense, it enables you to block out everything else."

Researchers of flow say that engaging in a creative pursuit boosts overall happiness. Sure, we can be content with our jobs, our lives and our relationships, but the satisfaction we get from activities of our own choosing enhances our personal growth and allows us to attain something that is ultimately sublime.

Ryan says singing and teaching both unleash an extraordinary sense of fulfilment in her: "Singing is such a personal expression of self and involves the whole body."

And she loves that teaching involves sharing that knowledge with others.

Every one of us has a passion within us, be it writing, playing tennis, painting, swimming or something else. Pursue that activity – and experience the joy it brings.

Share Your Happiest Moments AND WIN!

"Happiness leads none of us by the same route"
Charles Colton



HEALTHSMART PHOTO COMPETITION

FIRST PRIZE
\$600
OLYMPUS DIGITAL CAMERA

Happiness is...

- Lunch with my family;
- A wonderful holiday;
- Watching the kids grow up;
- Learning to ski;
- My best friend's wedding;
- Winning the match;
- Curling up with the dog;
- Finishing the reno project;
- The big adventure;
- Messing about on the water.

or you show us...

HERE'S YOUR BIG CHANCE to share one of your happiest moments with *HealthSmart* readers everywhere – and be in the running to win fabulous prizes! Send us a favourite photo that captures a moment of pure happiness for you, your friends or your family, and tell us why it means so much. We'll publish a selection of entries in our next issue and announce our *HealthSmart* Happiest Moments winners.

FIRST PRIZE wins an Olympus 8000 Tough, a top-of-the-range digital camera, valued at \$600, that takes beautiful, high-quality photographs. **THREE RUNNERS-UP** will each receive a digital photo frame valued at \$150. **TO ENTER**, go to healthsmart.com.au/photocomp or mail your entry to GPO Box 4353, Sydney 2001 before June 1, 2009.

Each image must be accompanied by a description of no more than 75 words to explain who or what is in the picture and why it means so much to you. Please note we cannot return or acknowledge entries, so do not send original prints or negatives.