

Happiness, Solved

# Your Happiness Guide



# Solved

with Mark Manson

# Introduction

In 1869, John Stuart Mill sat at his desk, pen trembling in his hand. The greatest philosopher of his generation — the man who literally wrote the book on utilitarianism, the ethical system that declared the highest good was “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” — was writing about his own profound unhappiness.

“Ask yourself whether you are happy,” Mill wrote in his autobiography, “and you cease to be so.”<sup>1</sup>

This wasn't supposed to happen. Mill had dedicated his entire life to understanding happiness. He'd read every philosopher, mastered every language, studied every system of thought. His father had trained him from birth to be a happiness-maximizing machine — teaching him Greek at three, Latin at eight, calculus at twelve. Every moment of his childhood was optimized for future satisfaction, engineered for success, designed to produce the happiest possible human being.

And it had produced a nervous breakdown instead.

At twenty, Mill found himself in what he called “a dry heavy dejection.” Nothing brought him joy. Every pleasure felt hollow. The very activities he'd been told would make him happy — intellectual achievement, social reform, personal excellence — left him feeling empty. The harder he pursued happiness, the further it seemed to slip away.

Mill's crisis reveals the central paradox of human happiness: the more directly we chase it, the more elusive it becomes. Like trying to catch smoke with your bare hands, happiness seems to evaporate the moment we grasp for it.

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<sup>1</sup> Mill, J. S. (1873). [Autobiography](#) (Chap. V, p. 138). London: Longmans, Green, Reader, & Dyer.

This isn't just Mill's problem. It's ours.

We live in an age obsessed with happiness. We read happiness books, take happiness courses, download happiness apps. We track our moods, optimize our mornings, hack our habits. We've turned the pursuit of happiness from a philosophical ideal into a technical problem to be solved. And somehow, we're more miserable than ever.

But happiness doesn't work like that. And the more we treat it like it does, the more we set ourselves up for frustration, disappointment, and, ironically, unhappiness.

Why is happiness misunderstood? For one, we often define it wrong — confusing it with constant pleasure or a life free of problems. We compare ourselves to others and assume they have it easier (thanks, Instagram). We tell ourselves “I'll be happy when X happens,” not realizing that when X happens, we'll just move the goalposts again. We berate ourselves for not being happy, as if it's a personal failure or a switch we ought to control. All these misconceptions set us up for disappointment.

The truth is, happiness is not a place you reach or a prize you win. It's more like a byproduct — the unintended side-effect of how you live and what you value. This guide breaks down exactly what that means and how you can actually get there by not always trying to. We're going to cut through the noise and get real about happiness: what it is (and isn't), where it comes from, and how to cultivate it in a practical way.

The reality about happiness is both simpler and more complex than we've been led to believe. It's not a feeling you can force, but a signal that emerges when your life is aligned with deeper principles. It's not a problem to be solved, but a mystery you can untangle as you live it.

## Introduction

We'll explore ancient wisdom and modern science, Eastern philosophy and Western psychology. We'll debunk the myths that keep us trapped in cycles of striving and disappointment. And we'll discover practical approaches that actually work — not because they make us happy directly, but because they create the conditions from which happiness naturally arises.

Most importantly, we'll learn the lesson that took Mill years to discover: that happiness is like sleep. The harder you try to force it, the more it eludes you. But when you stop chasing it and focus instead on living according to your values, engaging with meaningful work, and connecting with others — it has a curious way of showing up on its own.

This guide won't promise to make you happy — that would be missing the point entirely. Instead, it will help you understand happiness in a way that will make it more likely to appear in your life. Not as something you manufacture or deserve, but as something that emerges when you're too busy living a meaningful life.

So let's begin where all good philosophy begins: by admitting what we don't know. Let's unlearn our assumptions about happiness. Let's stop trying to hack our way to joy. And let's explore what the wisest humans have always known — that happiness isn't the goal of a life well-lived.

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# The Origins of Human Happiness

*Happiness: “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.”*

— Sonja Lyubomirsky, happiness researcher

In ancient Greece, happiness was often referred to by the term “eudaimonia,” which literally means “having a good spirit.” Rather than a fleeting emotion, eudaimonia for philosophers like Aristotle meant a life well-lived — a state of human flourishing achieved through virtue and rational living.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle argued that happiness is the highest good and ultimate purpose of human life, attained by living in accordance with virtue over a complete lifespan.<sup>3</sup> This did not equate happiness with constant pleasure; instead, it was about fulfilling one’s potential and living morally. He acknowledged that external factors (like misfortune) can affect one’s happiness, but he and his contemporaries increasingly emphasized human agency in securing a happy life.<sup>4</sup>

Roman thinkers, influenced by the Greeks, also grappled with happiness. The stoics, such as Cicero and Epictetus, took Aristotle’s ideas even further. They taught that a wise person’s happiness depends only on virtue and inner character, not on external circumstances. The stoics took an even more extreme stance and claimed that a truly virtuous person could maintain happiness even under torture.<sup>5</sup> While Aristotle allowed that severe misfortunes can undermine happiness,

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<sup>2</sup> McMahan, D. M. (2006). [The pursuit of happiness: A history from the Greeks to the present](#). Allen Lane.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle. (2009). [The Nicomachean ethics](#) (D. Ross, Trans.; L. Brown, Ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published ca. 350 BCE)

<sup>4</sup> Haybron, D. M. (2020). [Happiness](#). In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Stanford University.

<sup>5</sup> Sherman, N. (2005). [Stoic warriors: The ancient philosophy behind the military mind](#). Oxford University Press.

they believed happiness is a function of the will, entirely under one's control through the proper attitude. This classical view suggested that happiness is not simply feeling good, **but being good**. Notably, enduring hardship or practicing self-denial was often seen as necessary for virtue; therefore, happiness was compatible with — or even sometimes born from — suffering and sacrifice.<sup>6</sup>

A story illustrating this is the story that the philosopher Socrates, known for his virtue, remained calm and “content” while awaiting his own execution from a prison cell, as his conscience was clear. Such accounts reinforced the idea that inner moral state, not external comfort, determined true happiness.<sup>7</sup>

When the ancient Greeks carved “Know Thyself” above the entrance to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, they weren't offering feel-good advice. They were issuing a challenge; perhaps the most difficult challenge a human being can face. Because to know yourself, truly know yourself, is to understand not just what makes you happy, but what happiness itself actually is.

The Greeks had two distinct words for what we clumsily translate as “happiness.” The first was *hedonia* — pleasure, enjoyment, the feeling of satisfaction. This is what most modern people mean when they say they want to be happy. They want to feel good. They want positive emotions. But the Greeks had another word: *eudaimonia*. This is harder to translate. It means something like “the good life” or “human flourishing” or “the actualization of human potential.”

### Hedonia: Happiness as Pleasure

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<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum, M. C. (2018). [The therapy of desire: Theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics](#). Princeton University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Plato. (1997). [Complete works](#) (J. M. Cooper & D. S. Hutchinson, Eds.). Hackett Publishing Company.

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The most straightforward understanding of happiness is the experience of pleasure and the absence of pain. This is the core of **hedonia**. One of its earliest proponents was Aristippus of Cyrene (c. 435–356 BCE), a student of Socrates, who argued that pleasure, particularly immediate, bodily pleasure, was the highest good and the ultimate goal of life.<sup>8</sup>

A more nuanced and influential version of hedonism was developed by **Epicurus** (341–270 BCE).<sup>9</sup> For Epicurus, the good life was indeed one of pleasure, but he defined pleasure primarily as the absence of disturbance. He sought *ataraxia*, a state of serene tranquility and freedom from mental anxiety, and *aponia*, the absence of bodily pain. Epicurus astutely distinguished between different types of desires and pleasures. He categorized desires as:

1. **Natural and Necessary:** These are desires essential for life, health, and happiness itself, such as the need for food, shelter, and freedom from bodily pain. Fulfilling these leads to a stable state of contentment.
2. **Natural but Not Necessary:** These desires are for variations of natural needs, such as luxurious foods or elaborate comforts. While natural, they are not essential for happiness and can lead to anxiety if unfulfilled.
3. **Vain and Empty (or Unnatural and Unnecessary):** These are desires for things like fame, power, or excessive wealth. Epicurus believed these desires are limitless, difficult to satisfy, and often lead to turmoil and unhappiness.<sup>10</sup>

Epicurus believed that true happiness comes from enjoying life's simple pleasures rather than chasing after intense thrills or expensive luxuries. For him, the best life was built around close friendships, taking time to

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<sup>8</sup> Lampe, K. (2015). [The birth of hedonism: The Cyrenaic philosophers and pleasure as a way of life](#). Princeton University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Konstan, D. (2022). [Epicurus](#). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University.

<sup>10</sup> DeWitt, N. W. (2018) [Epicurus and his philosophy](#). University of Minnesota Press.

think and reflect, and living moderately — not going overboard with anything.

This might sound boring compared to our modern idea of “living it up,” but Epicurus had a different take. He thought real happiness wasn't about wild parties or constantly seeking the next big high. Instead, it was about finding peace and contentment by avoiding unnecessary pain and stress while making sure your basic needs were met.

Think of it this way: instead of always wanting more — more money, more excitement, more stuff — Epicurus suggested focusing on what actually makes you feel calm and satisfied. A good meal with friends, a walk in nature, or time to read and think could bring more lasting happiness than constantly chasing the next big thing.

This ancient wisdom feels especially relevant today when we're constantly bombarded with messages telling us we need to optimize everything and pursue intense experiences. Sometimes the path to happiness is actually simpler and quieter than we think.

### **Eudaimonia: Happiness as Flourishing and Virtue**

A more complex and arguably more profound conception of happiness was articulated by Aristotle (384–322 BCE) in his seminal work, the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>11</sup> Aristotle used the term **eudaimonia** to describe the highest human good, often translated as “flourishing,” “living well,” or “a life well-lived.”

Central to Aristotle's concept was the idea of *ergon*, or function. He argued that everything has a characteristic function, and the good for that thing lies in performing its function well. The unique function of human beings, distinguishing them from plants and animals, is their capacity for reason (*logos*). Therefore, human flourishing, or eudaimonia,

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<sup>11</sup> Aristotle. [Nicomachean Ethics](#).

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consists in living a life guided by reason and expressed through virtuous activity.<sup>12</sup>

“One swallow does not make a summer,” wrote Aristotle, “nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.”

For Aristotle, eudaimonia wasn't a feeling at all. It was the activity of living in accordance with virtue. And you couldn't judge whether someone had achieved eudaimonia by asking how they felt at any given moment; you had to look at their entire life. You had to ask: Did this person develop their potential? Did they cultivate virtue? Did they contribute to their community? Did they live with honor, courage, justice, and wisdom?

Only at the end of a life, Aristotle argued, could you step back and say: “Yes, this was a happy life.” Not because it was filled with pleasure (*though it might have been*), but because it was filled with meaning. Because the person became who they were capable of becoming.

Virtues, for Aristotle, were not innate but cultivated through habit and practice. They represented a mean between two extremes of vice (e.g., courage is the mean between cowardice and recklessness).<sup>13</sup> Living virtuously meant consistently choosing and acting in accordance with these rational principles. While Aristotle acknowledged that external factors like good fortune, health, and friends could contribute to eudaimonia, he maintained that human agency (our choices and actions) played the most significant role in achieving a flourishing life.<sup>14</sup> Eudaimonia, then, is an active, ongoing process of self-cultivation and virtuous engagement with the world, a far cry from the passive reception of pleasure. This idea of happiness as an active expression of

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<sup>12</sup> Russell, D. (2012). [Happiness for humans](#). Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Lake, T. (2022). [Aristotle's philosophy: Eudaimonia and virtue ethics](#). *The Collector*.

<sup>14</sup> Kraut, R. (2018). [Aristotle's ethics](#). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University.

one's best self, achieved through disciplined effort, has had a lasting impact on Western ethical thought.

### **Eudaimonia vs Hedonia: The Contemporary Revival**

This classical tension between hedonia (pleasure) and eudaimonia (virtue/meaning) persists in contemporary discussions: we distinguish between mere pleasure and deeper fulfillment. Many modern psychologists draw on Aristotle's concept, differentiating “hedonic well-being” (short-term pleasure) from “eudaimonic well-being” (long-term fulfillment through meaning and personal growth).<sup>15</sup>

Research suggests that pursuing eudaimonic happiness often yields more lasting benefits than chasing hedonic happiness.<sup>16</sup> Studies show that people oriented towards meaning, personal growth, and contribution tend to have higher life satisfaction and mental health than those who primarily seek pleasure and material gains.

While hedonic activities provide short-term boosts in happiness, eudaimonic activities correlate with sustained well-being and even better physical health, with some studies finding differences in gene expression related to stress and immunity between those leading meaningful lives versus primarily pleasure-seeking ones.<sup>17</sup>

This doesn't mean pleasure should be avoided — moments of joy and indulgence remain important. But pleasure tends to be fleeting and subject to diminishing returns, whereas eudaimonic pursuits — like

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<sup>15</sup> Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). [On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being](#). *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 141-166.

<sup>16</sup> Sun, W., Liu, L., Jiang, Y., Fang, P., Ding, X., & Wang, G. (2023). [Why are hedonists less happy than eudaimonists? The chain mediating role of goal conflict and mixed emotions](#). *Frontiers in psychology*, 14, 1074026.

<sup>17</sup> Fredrickson, B. L., Grewen, K. M., Coffey, K. A., Algoe, S. B., Firestine, A. M., Arevalo, J. M., Ma, J., & Cole, S. W. (2013). [A functional genomic perspective on human well-being](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 110(33), 13684-13689.

nurturing relationships, volunteering, or following a calling — provide a sense of worth and connection that accumulates over time.<sup>18</sup> To sum up, *while hedonia makes life sweet, eudaimonia makes life worthwhile, with the happiest lives likely blending both approaches.*<sup>19</sup>

### Eastern Perspectives: Beyond the Self

Travel across the mountains and deserts, east from ancient Athens, and you'll find a different worldview on happiness. One that challenges modern Western assumptions at their core.

In Sanskrit, *sukha* (happiness) literally means “good space” — like a chariot wheel that turns without friction. Its opposite, *dukkha* (suffering), is a wheel with its axle off-center, grinding with every turn. This etymology reveals the Buddhist philosophy: happiness isn't about chasing pleasure or even achieving virtue. It's about removing the friction that comes from being at odds with reality.<sup>20</sup>

The Buddha's first noble truth was that life contains suffering. His second was that this suffering comes from craving, and from constantly wanting things to be different than they are. We suffer because we cling to pleasure and push away pain, imagining that if we could just arrange our circumstances correctly, we could achieve permanent satisfaction.<sup>21</sup>

But this is like trying to stop a river from flowing. Reality equals change. Everything is impermanent. The moment you achieve what you think will make you happy, happiness begins to slip away. The pleasure fades. The achievement becomes old news. The person you love changes, ages,

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<sup>18</sup> Steger, M. F., Kashdan, T. B., & Oishi, S. (2007). [Being good by doing good: Daily eudaimonic activity and well-being](#). *Journal of Research in Personality*, 42(1), 22–42.

<sup>19</sup> Henderson, L. W., Knight, T., & Richardson, B. (2013). [An exploration of the well-being benefits of hedonic and eudaimonic behaviour](#). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8(4), 322–336.

<sup>20</sup> Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (2015). [In the Buddha's words: An anthology of discourses from the Pāli Canon](#).

<sup>21</sup> Eltschinger, V. (2014). [The four nobles' truths and their 16 aspects: On the dogmatic and soteriological presuppositions of the Buddhist epistemologists' views on niścaya](#). *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 42, 249–273.

and eventually dies. Fighting this fundamental truth creates friction — the bad space of *dukkha*.

The Buddhist path to *sukha* isn't about achieving or obtaining anything. It's about letting go, embracing impermanence, releasing attachment, and finding peace with what *is* rather than constantly striving for what might be. Through the Middle Way — a balanced life of ethical conduct, mental discipline (meditation), and wisdom — one discovers that happiness isn't something you create. It's what remains when you stop creating unhappiness through this resistance to reality.<sup>22</sup>

We want permanence in a world of change, control in a world of uncertainty. We want to be special in a world where everyone is ultimately subject to the same forces of nature. The Buddhist concept of *anatta* (non-self) takes this even further.<sup>23</sup> Suggesting that not only is everything impermanent, but the very self that seeks happiness is actually an illusion — a construction of thoughts, sensations, and memories with no fixed essence. How can an illusion achieve lasting satisfaction? It would be like a wave trying to possess the ocean.

### The Confucian Way

While Buddhism sought happiness through detachment, Confucianism took a different approach — one that emphasized engagement, relationship, and social harmony.

For Confucius and his followers, the highest good wasn't individual enlightenment or personal pleasure. It was harmony. Real happiness doesn't come from chasing pleasure or trying to escape the world — it comes from showing up, doing the right thing, being kind, and giving

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<sup>22</sup> Ricard, M. (2007). [Happiness: A guide to developing life's most important skill](#).

<sup>23</sup> Giles, J. (1993). [The no-self theory: Hume, Buddhism, and personal identity](#). *Philosophy East and West*, 43(2), 175–200.

back. It's about living with integrity and making life a little better for the people around you.<sup>24</sup>

This might sound constraining to modern individualists, but the Confucian insight was profound: humans are fundamentally social beings. We exist in webs of relationships — as children to parents, parents to children, citizens to society, friends to friends. Our happiness is inseparable from these relationships. A person who achieves great individual success but destroys their family relationships or corrupts their community hasn't achieved happiness, but instead, isolation and ostracism.

The Confucian concept of *li* (ritual propriety) suggests that happiness comes from knowing how to act appropriately in each situation and relationship.<sup>25</sup> Not because following rules makes you happy directly, but because appropriate action creates balance, which in turn creates the conditions for flourishing.

The Confucians understood that happiness is ecological — it emerges from the right relationships between parts, not from any individual part. A single note, no matter how pure, doesn't make music. Music is created from the harmonious relationship between notes. Similarly, human happiness emerges from the harmonious coexistence between people.

## The Universal Pattern

As we look across these different traditions — Greek, Buddhist, Confucian — and despite their vast differences, a pattern emerges. None of them treat happiness as a direct goal. None of them say “pursue

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<sup>24</sup> Ames, R. T., & Rosemont, H. (1998). [\*The analects of Confucius: A philosophical translation\*](#). Ballantine Books.

<sup>25</sup> Li, C. (2008). [The Philosophy of harmony in classical Confucianism](#). *Philosophy Compass*, 3(3), 423–435.

happiness and you will find it.” Instead, they all share a fundamental understanding:

### **Happiness is not a cause but an effect.**

For Aristotle, happiness is the effect of living virtuously. For the Buddha, it's the effect of releasing attachment. For Confucius, it's the effect of creating social harmony. But in each case, happiness isn't something you pursue directly. It's something that emerges when you align your life with deeper principles.

This wisdom appears in other traditions too. In Christianity, happiness (or blessedness) is the fruit of living according to God's will.<sup>26</sup> In Islam, *sa'adah* (happiness) comes from submission to Allah and living righteously.<sup>27</sup> In Hinduism, *ananda* (bliss) is achieved through union with the divine.<sup>28</sup> In each case, happiness is presented *not as a goal but as a reward*.

It's no coincidence that many religions frame ultimate happiness as something that comes from goodness, often after resisting temptations or enduring trials. Consider the concept of heaven and hell in Western religions: they can be seen as metaphors that if you live a virtuous, loving life (heavenly behavior), you'll eventually experience bliss in the afterlife or even internally, whereas a life of vice and selfishness leads to inner torment (hellish states of mind). Christianity, for instance, doesn't tell followers to feel happy all the time, but encourages them to live by principles of love, charity, and faith, promising joy and salvation as a result. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God... and all these things shall be added unto you,” the Bible says — implying that by seeking the good (not directly seeking “happiness”), you get happiness thrown in as

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<sup>26</sup> BibleProject Scholarship Team. (2025). [The fruit of the Spirit \(and its meaning\) in the Bible](#). BibleProject.

<sup>27</sup> Berghout, A., & Wan Ismail, H. (2024). [Rethinking the concept of Al-Saādah \(happiness\) in light of the Quranic Istikhlaḥ framework](#). *Journal of Islam in Asia*, 21(1), 277–305.

<sup>28</sup> van Buitenen, J. A. B. (1979). ["Ānanda". or all desires fulfilled](#). *History of Religions*, 19(1), 1–32.

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a bonus. Likewise, the Bhagavad Gita in Hinduism teaches acting according to dharma (duty/righteousness) without attachment to personal reward; peace and bliss come as an eventual reward of correct living, not from grasping at pleasure.

The idea that happiness ensues when you pursue something more profound than happiness itself — is a common thread from ancient ethics to spiritual teachings. It's basically a warning against the paradox of hedonism: chase happiness directly and you'll likely miss it. Live with integrity, purpose, compassion — and happiness is more likely to find you.

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## The WEIRD Problem: When Happiness Research Goes West

Before we continue, we need to confront an uncomfortable truth about the research of happiness itself. The vast majority of what we “know” about human happiness comes from studying a remarkably narrow slice of humanity: people from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies. Researchers call them WEIRD populations, and the acronym is more apt than they perhaps intended.

WEIRD people make up less than 15% of the world's population, yet they represent over 90% of research participants in existing psychological studies.<sup>29</sup> This might not matter if human psychology was universal, but it's not. On measure after measure — from visual perception to moral reasoning to basic concepts of the self — WEIRD populations are outliers. They're not the human norm, but the exception.

And nowhere is this more problematic than in happiness research.

### The Cultural Influence on Happiness

Consider how a typical American thinks about happiness. More likely than not, it's an individual achievement, a personal emotional state to be maximized. The happy person is someone who feels good about themselves, who has high self-esteem, who stands out from the crowd. Americans typically gravitate toward high-energy positive emotions — excitement, enthusiasm, and pride dominate their emotional landscape. The cultural ideal is feeling “peppy” and energized, with

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<sup>29</sup> Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). [The weirdest people in the world?](#) *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33(2-3), 61-83.

happiness that's bold and expressive.<sup>30</sup> This is so obvious to most Westerners that it seems like human nature itself.

But step outside the WEIRD bubble, and this view of happiness starts to look bizarre. In East Asian cultures, the self isn't separate from relationships — you are your relationships. Success doesn't mean standing out; it means fitting in harmoniously. Rather than maximizing positive emotions, happiness centers on emotional balance and social harmony. Excessive individual happiness can appear immature, selfish, or threatening to group cohesion.

Where Americans chase excitement, East Asian cultures prize serenity. In Japan and China, happiness often means achieving peace, balance, and tranquility. Research confirms this divide: Hong Kong Chinese participants consistently preferred calm contentment over excitement when compared to European Americans. This isn't merely academic — these preferences shape everything from entertainment to advertising to parenting styles.<sup>31</sup>

The Japanese have a saying: “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” This isn't oppression. It's just a different philosophy of what makes life worth living. Similarly, the Japanese concept of *ikigai* (life purpose) emphasizes quiet satisfaction from fulfilling your role, not ecstatic individual achievement.<sup>32</sup> When researchers ask Japanese people about their “ideal” level of happiness, they consistently choose lower levels than Americans. Not because they're depressed, but because they value emotional moderation.<sup>33</sup> Extreme happiness seems

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<sup>30</sup> Tsai, J. L., Knutson, B., & Fung, H. H. (2006). [Cultural variation in affect valuation](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(2), 288-307.

<sup>31</sup> Tsai, J. L., Miao, F. F., Seppala, E., Fung, H. H., & Yeung, D. Y. (2007). [Influence and adjustment goals: Sources of cultural differences in ideal affect](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1102-1117.

<sup>32</sup> Wilkes, J., Garip, G., Kotera, Y., & Fido, D. (2022). [Can ikigai predict anxiety, depression, and well-being?](#) *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 21(5), 2941-2953.

<sup>33</sup> Uchida, Y., & Trommsdorff, G. (2022). [SOEP-IS 2014 – Cross-cultural study of happiness and personality](#). (SOEP Survey Papers No. 1092: Series H). DIW/SOEP.

naive, even dangerous. In one massive cross-cultural study on happiness across the world, one Japanese subject, when asked how often they thought about their own happiness, replied, “I never thought about such a thing in my whole life.”<sup>34</sup>

Or consider the Russian perspective. There's a cultural wariness toward expressing excessive happiness, captured in sayings like “Laughter without reason is a sign of stupidity” and “If you laugh a lot, you'll cry a lot.” They are not pessimists, rather, their worldview shaped by generations of hardship, one that values depth, authenticity, and being ready for life's inevitable struggles more than surface-level positivity.<sup>35</sup>

In many Middle Eastern cultures, expressing too much happiness can invite the evil eye — a curse brought on by arousing envy. Better to be modest about your well-being, to emphasize life's difficulties even when things are going well. This isn't necessarily dishonesty; you can view it as social wisdom that protects both you and others from the corrosive effects of comparison and the envy that arises within.<sup>36</sup>

Among Buddhist populations, the very pursuit of happiness is seen as a form of suffering. Chasing after positive mental states creates attachment, and in turn, attachment creates suffering.<sup>37</sup> The goal isn't to be happy but to be liberated from the cycle of wanting happiness and fearing unhappiness. Peace comes from stepping off the hedonic treadmill entirely.

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<sup>34</sup> Kryś, K., Kostoula, O., van Tilburg, W. A. P., Mosca, O., Lee, J. H., Maricchiolo, F., Kosiarczyk, A., Kocimska-Bortnowska, A., Torres, C., Hitokoto, H., Liew, K., Bond, M. H., Lun, V. M., Vignoles, V. L., Zelenski, J. M., Haas, B. W., Park, J., Vauclair, C. M., Kwiatkowska, A., Roczniowska, M., ... Uchida, Y. (2024). [Happiness maximization is a WEIRD way of living](#). *Perspectives on psychological science: a journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, 17456916231208367.

<sup>35</sup> Sheldon, K. M., Titova, L., Gordeeva, T. O., Osin, E. N., Lyubomirsky, S., & Bogomaz, S. (2017). [Russians inhibit the expression of happiness to strangers: Testing a display rule model](#). *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 48(5), 718-733.

<sup>36</sup> Abu-Rabia, A. (2005). [The evil eye and cultural beliefs among the Bedouin tribes of the Negev, Middle East](#). *Folklore*, 116(3), 241-254.

<sup>37</sup> Sahdra, B. K., Shaver, P. R., & Brown, K. W. (2010). [A scale to measure nonattachment: a Buddhist complement to Western research on attachment and adaptive functioning](#). *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 92(2), 116-127.

These aren't pathological worldviews or cultural neuroses. They're coherent philosophies about what makes a life worth living — philosophies that prioritize different values than the WEIRD obsession with individual satisfaction. Wisdom over pleasure. Social harmony over personal achievement. Spiritual development over emotional highs. Resilience over comfort.

## The Measurement Problem

Now imagine trying to compare happiness across these radically different worldviews using a single question. This is exactly what the World Happiness Report attempts to do. Chances are you've seen headlines and news articles about the “World's Happiest Country.” Since 2012, this influential ranking has shaped policy discussions worldwide, with countries celebrating rises in the rankings and soul-searching over declines. But it doesn't take long to quickly imagine ways in which this report is deeply flawed.

The report's main measure is the Cantril Ladder, which asks people to imagine a ladder from 0 to 10, where 10 represents “the best possible life for you.” This sounds neutral and universal, except it's not. Recent evidence shows that the ladder framing leads respondents to focus on material power and wealth rather than broader relational forms of wellbeing.<sup>38</sup> The question assumes that people think about life in terms of individual achievement, that they can imagine an ideal life, that they're comfortable rating themselves on a scale, and that “the best possible life” is even a meaningful concept.

When researchers tested whether people across cultures understood this question the same way, the results were damning. A field study in northern Tanzania found that more than one-third of respondents

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<sup>38</sup> Richardson, M., Carragher, L., & Bujacz, A. (2024). [The Cantril Ladder elicits thoughts about power and wealth](#). *Scientific Reports*, 14, 2795.

(especially those with limited formal education) did not grasp the ladder metaphor; many oscillated between 0 and 10 or altered answers when they believed aid was at stake.<sup>39</sup> One woman even raised her score from 6 to 8 because she thought it was some kind of aid assessment that might bring her financial help.

Even when people understand the question intellectually, they answer it through profoundly different cultural lenses. In societies that prize modesty or gratitude, respondents systematically avoid extreme scores even when life is good or report high satisfaction despite hardship.<sup>40</sup> In Scandinavia, the “Jante Law” discourages self-aggrandizement and emphasizes humility, equality, and collective well-being; surveys show that endorsement of Jante norms predicts muted self-ratings but higher social trust, complicating further the comparison.<sup>41</sup>

Finland, the seven-time reigning “Happiness Report” champion, is a perfect example. In Finland, there's a deep cultural value of something known as “Jante Laki” which basically means, “keep life simple; don't try to be too much.” Now, if you imagine a happiness metric that asks people to compare their current life to the best life they can imagine — and you're looking at a culture that deeply values modesty and discourages self-aggrandizement — you can see why people might give surprisingly high ratings. Ironically, the Finns themselves are perplexed by their own status as “the world's happiest country.” Recently, when one Finnish government official was introduced at an international conference as representing the world's happiest country, he replied, “If that's true, then I'd hate to see the other nations.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Kaufman, M. (2022). [What the World Happiness Report doesn't see: The sociocultural contours of wellbeing in northern Tanzania](#). *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 12(4), 123–146.

<sup>40</sup> Jang, Y., Kwag, K. H., & Chiriboga, D. A. (2010). [Not saying I am happy does not mean I am not: Cultural influences on responses to positive affect items in the CES-D](#). *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 65(6), 684–690.

<sup>41</sup> Cappelen, C., & Dahlberg, S. (2017). [The Law of Jante and generalized trust](#). *Acta Sociologica*, 61(1), 5–25.

<sup>42</sup> Savolainen, J. (2021). [The grim reason why Finland is the “Happiest” place on Earth](#). *Slate Magazine*.

### What Gets Lost in Translation

The standard happiness measures don't just mismeasure non-WEIRD happiness — they miss it entirely. The Interdependent Happiness Scale shows that well-being grounded in harmonious relationships, being content with an ordinary day, and doing good for others, is different from individual life satisfaction. When this scale is used, East Asian nations score far higher than on the Cantril Ladder.<sup>43</sup> African countries with strong communal bonds similarly reveal feelings of collective joy which are invisible to individualistic metrics. Research on Ubuntu values shows how the belief that “I am because we are” builds mental strength, brings communities together, and creates everyday happiness.<sup>44</sup>

There is a Latin American paradox that reveals another blind spot. By standard economic and individual satisfaction measures, Latin American countries should be less happy than their wealth predicts. Instead, they consistently report higher happiness. Recent work documents this “paradox,” attributing it to cultural emphases on *presente*, *simpatía*, and *fiesta* (being present, friendly, and celebratory).<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, in some Middle Eastern cultures, life satisfaction often comes from upholding and protecting the dignity of oneself and one's family.<sup>46</sup> Indigenous concepts worldwide — from the Lakota's *mitakuye oyasin* (all my relations) to the Māori's *whakapapa*

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<sup>43</sup> Hitokoto, H., & Uchida, Y. (2015). [Interdependent happiness: Theoretical importance and measurement validity](#). *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 16(1), 211–239.

<sup>44</sup> Kagola, F., & Abur, W. (2023). [Leveraging Ubuntu values and principles as cultural strengths to overcome mental health and emotional well-being issues](#). *African Journal of Social Work*, 13(6), 312–324.

<sup>45</sup> Bericat, E., & Acosta, M. J. (2021). [The Latin American paradox of happiness: Theoretical and methodological considerations](#). *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 83(3), 709–743.

<sup>46</sup> Uskul, A. K., Cross, S. E., Günsoy, Ç., & Gül, F. (2017). [Cultures of honor](#). In S. Kitayama & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural psychology*. Guilford Press.

(genealogical connections) — root happiness in their ties to ancestors, land, and future generations.<sup>47</sup>

These aren't just different routes to the same happiness. They're different destinations entirely. Does this mean cross-cultural comparison is impossible? That we can't say anything meaningful about human flourishing across cultures? Not at all.

Some conditions really do seem universally harmful to well-being: extreme poverty, violence, oppression, disease, isolation. And some seem universally supportive: basic material security, peaceful social relations, some degree of autonomy, meaningful social roles.

But beyond these basics, human flourishing takes radically different forms. What looks like happiness to a WEIRD researcher might be suffering to a Buddhist monk. What seems like oppression to an individualist might be a supportive structure to a collectivist. What appears as poverty to a materialist might be voluntary simplicity to a spiritualist.

A more honest approach begins by recognizing that happiness isn't a single, universal experience — it takes many forms. Different cultures have likely evolved their own versions of flourishing, shaped by their unique histories, geographies, philosophies, and social structures. Wisdom, then, isn't about deciding which culture got happiness 'right,' but about understanding which kind of flourishing aligns with your life, your story, and the values and relationships that matter most to you.

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<sup>47</sup> Galbraith, E., Reyes-García, V., & ICTA-UAB colleagues. (2024). [High life satisfaction reported among small-scale societies with low monetary incomes](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121(6), e2311703121.

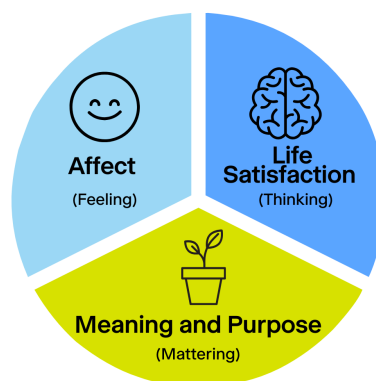
## The Three Components of Happiness

How do you measure happiness? It's like asking how to measure love, or beauty, or the taste of your grandmother's cooking. These are subjective experiences that are unique to each person and seemingly impossible to quantify. And yet, if we want to understand happiness scientifically, we need some way to assess it.

Early happiness researchers faced this challenge head-on. They couldn't peer inside people's minds or souls. They couldn't objectively determine who was “really” happy. All they could do was ask, and so they did.

What emerged were three distinct but related components of what we call happiness: **affect (how you feel)**, **life satisfaction (how you think about your life)**, and **meaning (whether you feel you matter)**. Each captures something important, but none captures everything. Together, they form a more complete picture — though still not a perfect one — of human well-being.

The 3 Components of the Happiness Wheel



### Component 1: Affect (The Feeling Part)

The most obvious component of happiness is how you feel moment to moment. Psychologists call this “emotional well-being” or more simply, affect — the ongoing emotional tone of your experience. Are you feeling pleasant or unpleasant? Activated or calm? Enthusiastic or serene?

Measuring affect seems straightforward, and researchers may ask you to:

- Rate your emotions several times throughout the day
- Keep a mood diary to track your emotional states and experiences
- In more sophisticated studies, they might ping your phone at random intervals and ask “How are you feeling right now?”

This approach has revealed some surprising findings. While humans typically pay more attention to negative experiences (due to our natural negativity bias), extensive research shows that, from moment-to-moment, most people actually experience more positive emotions than negative ones. Even in difficult circumstances, on a typical day, individuals tend to experience roughly three mild positive feelings for every negative feeling — a phenomenon researchers call the “positivity offset.”<sup>48</sup>

Second, positive and negative affect aren't simply opposite ends of one continuum; they're distinct emotional systems. You can experience gratitude and anxiety simultaneously or feel joy and sadness at the same time. This explains why deeply meaningful moments — like watching your child graduate or saying goodbye to a dying parent — often involve emotionally complex mixtures.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Fredrickson, B. L., & Losada, M. F. (2005). [Positive affect and the complex dynamics of human flourishing](#). *American Psychologist*, 60(7), 678–686.

<sup>49</sup> Larsen, J. T., McGraw, A. P., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2001). [Can people feel happy and sad at the same time?](#) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(4), 684–696.

Third, emotional states are extremely responsive to external circumstances. Getting a promotion or receiving good news can make you feel elated, while a bad breakup or receiving criticism can send your mood plummeting. This reactive nature of affect leads many people to equate happiness directly with feeling good, but this is an oversimplified and problematic definition.

### **Component 2: Life Satisfaction (The Thinking Part)**

In 1978, three researchers at the University of Illinois were puzzled over their research. They were studying people who had experienced major life changes – some positive (like winning the lottery), some negative (like becoming paralyzed in an accident). They expected to find dramatic, lasting differences in happiness. Lottery winners should be ecstatic. Accident victims should be miserable.

What they found changed our understanding of happiness forever.

Yes, lottery winners experienced a spike in positive emotions. And yes, accident victims plunged into negative ones. But within a surprisingly short time (usually just a few months), both groups returned to what was roughly their baseline level of happiness. The lottery winners were no happier than control subjects. The accident victims were not as unhappy as anyone would predict.<sup>50</sup>

This phenomenon came to be known as “hedonic adaptation” or the “hedonic treadmill.” We adapt to almost everything – good or bad.<sup>51</sup> The new car that thrilled you last month is just transportation now. The job that stressed you terribly at first has become routine. Even major life

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<sup>50</sup> Brickman, P., Coates, D., & Janoff-Bulman, R. (1978). [Lottery winners and accident victims: Is happiness relative?](#) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36(8), 917–927.

<sup>51</sup> Frederick, S., & Loewenstein, G. (1999). [Hedonic adaptation](#). In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology* (pp. 302–329). Russell Sage Foundation.

changes that seem like they should permanently alter our happiness often don't.

This is where the second component of happiness comes in: life satisfaction. This isn't about how you feel moment to moment. It's about how you evaluate your life when you step back and think about it. Researchers typically ask questions like:

- “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life?”
- “If you could live your life over, would you change anything?”
- “How close is your life to your ideal?”

Life satisfaction is more stable than affect. It's less responsive to daily ups and downs. It's more about your evaluation of your life as a whole. And surprisingly, it often diverges from affect. You might have a life filled with stress and challenge (negative affect) but still evaluate it as deeply satisfying. Or you might have a pleasant, comfortable life (positive affect) but feel like something essential is missing.

This cognitive component captures something important that pure emotion misses: It allows for the possibility that a difficult life might still be a good life. That satisfaction might come not from feeling good all the time, but from living according to your values, achieving your goals, or contributing to something meaningful.

But even life satisfaction doesn't capture everything...

### **Component 3: Meaning and Purpose (The Mattering Part)**

Viktor Frankl survived the Nazi concentration camps. In his memoir “Man's Search for Meaning,”<sup>52</sup> he described observing which prisoners survived and which gave up. It wasn't always the physically strongest

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<sup>52</sup> Frankl, V. E. (1946). [Man's search for meaning](#).

## The Three Components of Happiness

who made it. Often, it was those who maintained some sense of meaning or purpose. Those who had something to live for beyond their own survival.

This observation led to the recognition of a third component: meaning or purpose. This isn't about feeling good (affect) or evaluating your life positively (satisfaction). It's about feeling that your life matters, that you're contributing to something beyond yourself.

Measuring meaning involves questions like:

- “Do you feel your life has purpose?”
- “Do you feel you're making a difference in the world?”
- “When you look back on your life, will you feel you've lived meaningfully?”

What's fascinating is that meaning can be completely disconnected from both affect and satisfaction. Parents caring for severely disabled children report high meaning but low affect.<sup>53</sup> Social activists fighting losing battles report high meaning despite frustration. Artists creating unappreciated work may also report higher meaning despite poverty and struggle.

Conversely, people living comfortable, pleasant lives sometimes report a crisis of meaning. They have positive affect and high life satisfaction, but something is missing. Their lives might feel empty, even pointless.

While meaning is not the same thing as happiness, a lack of meaning can have dramatic consequences, leading to greater anxiety and depression.<sup>54</sup> We will return to this point later and hammer home its significance.

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<sup>53</sup> Beighton, C., & Wills, J. (2019). [How parents describe the positive aspects of parenting their child who has intellectual disabilities: A systematic review and narrative synthesis](#). *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 32(6), 1255–1279.

<sup>54</sup> Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., Aaker, J. L., & Garbinsky, E. N. (2013). [Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life](#). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8(6), 505–516.

## The Hedonic Adaptation Problem

Here's where things get complicated. Remember hedonic adaptation? Our tendency to return to baseline happiness despite positive or negative events? It turns out different components of happiness adapt at different rates.<sup>55</sup>

The effect adapts quickly. The joy of a new purchase fades in days or weeks. The pain of a breakup softens over months. Even major trauma often shows significant affective adaptation within a year or two. We're emotional adaptation machines, constantly adjusting to what is our new normal.<sup>56</sup>

Life satisfaction adapts more slowly and incompletely. Major life changes can create lasting shifts in how we evaluate our lives. Unemployment, divorce, or the death of a child can permanently lower life satisfaction. Stable marriage, meaningful work, or achieving important goals can permanently raise it. We try to adapt to these circumstances, but not completely.<sup>57</sup>

Meaning hardly adapts at all. Once you find something meaningful — raising children, pursuing a calling, fighting for a cause — that sense of meaning tends to persist. Even when the daily experience becomes difficult or routine, the sense that it matters remains. This is why people in objectively difficult circumstances (like

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<sup>55</sup> Diener, E., Lucas, R. E., & Scollon, C. N. (2006). [Beyond the hedonic treadmill: Revising the adaptation theory of well-being](#). *American Psychologist*, 61(4), 305–314.

<sup>56</sup> Lucas, R. E., Clark, A. E., Georgellis, Y., & Diener, E. (2003). [Reexamining adaptation and the set point model of happiness: Reactions to changes in marital status](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(3), 527–539.

<sup>57</sup> Lucas, R. E., Clark, A. E., Georgellis, Y., & Diener, E. (2004). [Unemployment alters the set point for life satisfaction](#). *Psychological Science*, 15(1), 8–13.

caregivers or activists) can maintain high well-being through meaning even when other components of happiness are low.<sup>58</sup>

This differential adaptation creates a puzzle. If we adapt to pleasure but not to meaning, should we stop pursuing pleasurable experiences and focus only on meaningful ones? If affect is fleeting but purpose is lasting, should we ignore how we feel and focus only on why we exist?

The truth is, we need all three. We need a pleasant life. We need to feel satisfied with ourselves. And we need to feel as though our lives have meaning.<sup>59</sup>

The ancient philosophers we discussed earlier would say these are the wrong questions to be asking. Remember, they saw happiness not as a goal, but as a by-product. The question isn't "How do I maximize all components of happiness?" but "How do I live in a way that allows happiness to emerge naturally?"

Modern research suggests they were right. People who pursue pleasure directly often end up anxious and disappointed. People who pursue life satisfaction through achievement often end up on the hedonic treadmill. But people who pursue meaningful goals, build strong relationships, and contribute to something beyond themselves tend to experience all three components of happiness as natural consequences.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Park C. L. (2010). [Making sense of the meaning literature: an integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events](#). *Psychological bulletin*, 136(2), 257–301.

<sup>59</sup> Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). [Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being](#). Free Press.

<sup>60</sup> Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., Aaker, J. L., & Garbinsky, E. N. (2013). [Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life](#). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8(6), 505–516.



The components of happiness, it turns out, are like the instruments in an orchestra. Each contributes something essential. Affect provides the melody — the moment-to-moment experience that makes life vivid. Satisfaction provides harmony — the sense that things are fitting together properly. And meaning provides the bass line — the deep, often unnoticed foundation that gives the whole composition weight and significance.

The goal isn't to play one instrument as loudly as possible. It's to create harmonious music.

# What Does — and Doesn't — Make Us Happy

From steamy weekends to fat paychecks, plenty of pursuits masquerade as *the* recipe for happiness. But poke at the data and the story is... well, complicated. Some crowd-pleasers bring a genuine lift while others barely nudge the needle, and a few can even boomerang into outright misery. In the pages that follow, we'll dissect the science behind each popular promise — separating seductive myths from evidence-backed mood boosters one assumption at a time.

## Drugs and Alcohol

“I feel unhappy — maybe I just need a drink, a joint, or some other quick fix to loosen up.”

We've all seen (or lived) this pattern. Psychoactive chemicals can certainly deliver a burst of pleasure; a glass of wine or a hit of cannabis can feel great in the moment. Yet those moments are fleeting, and the brain often rebounds in the opposite direction — anxiety, irritability, or low mood — as the substance wears off.

Modern brain research shows that repeated highs from alcohol or drugs trigger stress systems in the brain, which over time pull your mood down and make you feel worse overall.<sup>61</sup> In other words, the more you rely on chemical shortcuts, the steeper the emotional bill that comes due.

The research bears this out. People with opioid-use disorder report markedly lower life satisfaction — even while receiving gold-standard

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<sup>61</sup> Ferrer-Pérez, C., Montagud-Romero, S., & Blanco-Gandía, M. C. (2023). [Neurobiological theories of addiction: A comprehensive review](#). *Psychoactives*, 3(1), 35–47.

treatment — than non-users.<sup>62</sup> Hazardous drinking follows a similar pattern: heavy-use university students score lower on life satisfaction and show higher rates of depression and loneliness than their low-risk or abstinent peers.<sup>63</sup> Frequent cannabis users likewise exhibit poorer well-being and more mental-health burdens than non-users or occasional users.<sup>64</sup>

Does that mean every sip or puff is doomed to make you miserable? Not necessarily. Light-to-moderate social drinking can be neutral (or even slightly positive) when embedded in healthy relationships. Long-term studies of older American couples show that marriages are stronger and last longer when both partners drink moderately — or not at all — compared to couples with mismatched or heavy drinking habits.<sup>65</sup> The point is not that ethanol itself builds happiness, but that convivial rituals can strengthen social bonds that do.

Used to fill an inner void, however, substances resemble seawater for thirst: they offer momentary relief but ultimately deepen the deficit. A Friday cocktail can offer a pleasant buzz, yet real, durable contentment is far more likely to grow from mastering life without leaning on chemical crutches. In the long run, confidence, autonomy, and healthy relationships — not ever-larger doses of mood-altering chemicals — provide the surest path to well-being.

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<sup>62</sup> Gaulen, Z., Šaltytė Benth, J., Fadnes, L. T., Brenna, I. H., & Tanum, L. (2022). [Life satisfaction among individuals with opioid use disorder receiving extended-release naltrexone: A 12-week randomized controlled trial and 36-week follow-up](#). *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 135, 108656.

<sup>63</sup> Blomseth, V. G., Myrtveit Madsen, T., Knudsen, A. K., et al. (2021). [Satisfaction with life, mental health problems and potential alcohol use among Norwegian students](#). *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, 578180.

<sup>64</sup> Hasin, D. S., Sarvet, A. L., & Weissman, J. (2024). [Current cannabis use in the United States: Implications for public health](#). *American Journal of Public Health*, 114(1), 17–25.

<sup>65</sup> Birditt, K. S., Turkelson, A., Polenick, C. A., Cranford, J. A., Smith, J. A., Ware, E. B., & Blow, F. C. (2023). [Alcohol use and mortality among older couples in the United States: Evidence of individual and partner effects](#). *The Gerontologist*, 64(2).

### Sex

Intimacy and physical pleasure are natural mood boosters, and indeed studies confirm that people who have a healthy sex life tend to report *slightly higher happiness*.

A well-known analysis of tens of thousands of people found that frequency of sexual activity correlated positively with happiness. But interestingly, *more is not always better beyond a point*. More specifically, well-being rises with sexual frequency *up to about once a week*, but increasing beyond that doesn't add much additional happiness. It's a diminishing return — quality matters more than sheer quantity after a certain baseline.<sup>66</sup> Couples having sex weekly were, on average, just as happy as those with more frequent encounters — challenging the “more is better” assumption and suggesting that quality and connection matter more than quantity.

What truly matters is emotional connection and satisfaction with one's sex life rather than meeting a specific frequency. For single individuals, the relationship between sex and happiness can be more complex, depending on context and personal comfort. Studies have found that casual sex boosts well-being only when people engage in it for genuine reasons that align with their values.<sup>67</sup> When driven by external reasons like peer pressure or a fear of missing out, the positive effects of sex on wellbeing typically decrease, highlighting the importance of intimacy and connection.

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<sup>66</sup> Muise, A., Schimmack, U., & Impett, E. A. (2016). [Sexual frequency predicts greater well-being, but more is not always better](#). *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 7(4), 295-302.

<sup>67</sup> Vrangalova, Z., & Ong, A. D. (2014). [Who benefits from casual sex? The moderating role of sociosexuality](#). *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 5(8), 883-891.

Society sometimes overemphasizes sex as essential to happiness, or stigmatizes its pursuit. The truth lies in balance — a fulfilling sex life can be a significant source of joy and closeness, but it also represents just one aspect of life. **Sex should be considered within one's personal values and comfort; there is no universal standard.**

So rather than focusing on frequency benchmarks, consider

1. Communicating openly with partners about desires and boundaries
2. Prioritizing connection over performance
3. Seeking professional help for sexual concerns, as addressing these issues can significantly improve quality of life.

For those who are *not* sexually active currently, either by choice or circumstance, research suggests focusing on other forms of physical touch and intimacy, which can also release oxytocin and promote wellbeing.<sup>68</sup>

Lastly, here's a fun finding: the happiness boost from having sex more often is actually greater than the boost from a big jump in income. One study found that the difference in joy between having sex once a month versus once a week was bigger than the difference between earning \$15,000 and \$50,000 a year.<sup>69</sup> While such comparisons are of course playful, they emphasize that intimate connection can sometimes contribute more to happiness than financial gains.

## Money

Does money buy happiness? The answer from research: **Yes, up to a point** — and then it gets a little more complicated.

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<sup>68</sup> Field, T. (2010). [Touch for socioemotional and physical well-being: A review](#). *Developmental Review*, 30(4), 367-383.

<sup>69</sup> Blanchflower, D. G., & Oswald, A. J. (2004). [Money, sex and happiness: An empirical study](#). *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 106(3), 393-415.

## What Does and Doesn't Make Us Happy

At lower income levels, increases in money do lead to big boosts in happiness because basic, crucial needs can be met (food, shelter, healthcare, security). The difference in life satisfaction between someone earning \$1,000 a year and \$10,000 is huge. However, once comfortable (middle-class) living standards are achieved, the returns tend to diminish. A famous study found that day-to-day emotional well-being in the United States rose with income up to around \$75,000 (in 2010 dollars), after which it plateaued — more income didn't bring more daily happiness.<sup>70</sup>

However, a more recent study provided greater granularity around the question of money and happiness. For people who are the least happy, emotional well-being tends to improve as income rises — but only up to around \$100,000. Beyond that point, making more money doesn't make much of a difference..

In contrast, for the majority of people who are already moderately happy, money continues to increase happiness even beyond \$100,000, but the increases gradually become smaller.

As for the happiest individuals, additional income can sometimes accelerate happiness even further. Thus, the impact of money varies significantly depending on one's baseline emotional state.<sup>71</sup>

These findings help explain why money has diminishing returns when it comes to happiness. Once people reach a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle — somewhere around \$60,000 to \$100,000 a year — each extra dollar tends to add less and less to their overall happiness.

The exact number can vary depending on where you live, but the main takeaway is this: after your basic needs and financial stability are

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<sup>70</sup> Kahneman, D., & Deaton, A. (2010). [High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107(38), 16489-16493.

<sup>71</sup> Killingsworth, M. A., Kahneman, D., & Mellers, B. (2023). [Income and emotional well-being: A conflict resolved](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 120(10),

## What Does and Doesn't Make Us Happy

covered, chasing more money usually isn't the best way to get happier. Other things start to matter more.<sup>72</sup>

Interestingly, relative income affects happiness too: of course people care about their income in comparison to others. Research has found that one's income rank in their peer group predicted life satisfaction more strongly than absolute income.<sup>73</sup> This means a raise that puts you above your peers might make you feel happier than a larger raise that still leaves you at the bottom — this is a quirk of human psychology that helps explain why inequality can be so damaging to societal wellbeing.

To sum up, the perceived importance of money is often inflated; many people believe far more money will dramatically change their happiness, only to find that adaptation eventually kicks in. However, the adaptation and diminishing returns phenomenon is nuanced: it's important to remember that your emotional baseline greatly affects how additional income influences your happiness.

In reality, after ensuring financial stability and an absence of hardship, money's role is more about what you do with it. Using money for experiences, helping others and buying time (e.g., outsourcing dreaded tasks) rather than accumulating more possessions is a particularly effective happiness strategy.<sup>74</sup>

Rather than pursuing ever-increasing income, consider:

1. Calculating your personal “enough” number that provides security without causing excessive stress.

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<sup>72</sup> Jebb, A. T., Tay, L., Diener, E., & Oishi, S. (2018). [Happiness, income satiation and turning points around the world](#). *Nature human behaviour*, 2(1), 33–38.

<sup>73</sup> Boyce, C. J., Brown, G. D., & Moore, S. C. (2010). [Money and happiness: Rank of income, not income, affects life satisfaction](#). *Psychological science*, 21(4), 471–475.

<sup>74</sup> Whillans, A. V., Dunn, E. W., Smeets, P., Bekkers, R., & Norton, M. I. (2017). [Buying time promotes happiness](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 114(32), 8523–8527.

2. Redirecting some spending from material goods to experiences, charitable giving, and making daily life easier.

### Fame and Status

Many people secretly (or not so secretly) think, *“If I were famous or widely admired, I'd be happy.”* We see the rich and famous on red carpets with smiles and assume their lives are perfect. But as a wise rapper (Biggie) once said, *“Mo' money, mo' problems,”* similarly, *mo' fame, mo' problems.*

In truth, fame and high status are actually very weakly related to happiness, and pursuing them can even decrease your well-being. It has shown that people who chase extrinsic goals like fame, money, or image tend to feel less fulfilled and happy (and therefore, more anxious and unwell) compared to those who focus on things like personal growth, relationships, and community, which are intrinsic goals.<sup>75,76</sup>

Why? Psychologically, if one's self-worth becomes tied to external validation from fame, it can be a precarious foundation for happiness, as it becomes subject to others' opinions and can lead to constant social comparison or fear of failure. That's likely because chasing fame often diverts from authentic relationships or personal growth, and the satisfaction from fame can often be short-lived or surface-level.

As one analysis put it, *“The pursuit of fame... exacts a toll on mental well-being. Intense scrutiny and loss of privacy leave many celebrities stressed and lonely.”*<sup>77</sup> We've all seen the headlines: celebrities battling addictions, divorcing frequently, even tragically taking their own lives. Clearly, fame isn't a happy pill.

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<sup>75</sup> Kasser, T., & Ahuvia, A. (2002). [Materialistic values and well-being in business students](#). *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 32(1), 137–146.

<sup>76</sup> Niemiec, C. P., Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2009). [The path taken: Consequences of attaining intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations in post-college life](#). *Journal of Research in Personality*, 43(3), 291-306.

<sup>77</sup> Adeima, S. (2024). [The cost of being a celebrity on mental health](#). *Qeios*.

On the other hand, social status (being respected, having a certain standing in community or career) does have some impact on happiness in a broader sense. Since humans like to feel competent and valued, achieving a respected status through hard work can increase self-esteem and opportunities. Like with money, what really matters to many people is their relative status. In fact, how someone feels about their social standing often affects their well-being more than their actual status does.<sup>78</sup>

Rather than chasing admiration from others, try this:

1. Clarify which aspects of recognition truly matter to you — like respect, influence, or a sense of security?
2. Explore ways to gain those benefits without the drawbacks that often come with fame.
3. Focus on developing skills and mastery in areas you genuinely enjoy.

Having status in a community — like respect or prestige — can definitely feel good. We're wired to care about how others see us. But what really matters isn't being recognized by strangers — it's feeling valued by the people you care about.

### Physical Attractiveness

Ah, the million dollar question of beauty — does being good-looking make you happier? You might expect a resounding yes, given how much time and money we pour into appearance (Americans spend billions annually on cosmetics, fashion, and increasingly, cosmetic procedures). But like most happiness factors, it's more than complicated.

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<sup>78</sup> Anderson, C., Kraus, M. W., Galinsky, A. D., & Keltner, D. (2012). [The local-ladder effect: Social status and subjective well-being](#). *Psychological Science*, 23(7), 764-771.

The research shows that yes, attractive people do report being somewhat happier. Large long-term studies have found a strong link between physical attractiveness (like being more facially attractive in high school, having a lower BMI, or being taller in middle age) and higher psychological well-being.<sup>79</sup> Why would looks affect happiness? Well, it's not just vanity. Attractive people experience what researchers call the “beauty premium” — they're more likely to be employed, work more productively and profitably, receive more substantial pay, obtain loan approvals,...you get the gist.

This is called the “halo effect” in psychology — we unconsciously assume attractive people are smarter, more competent, and more trustworthy.<sup>80</sup> This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: from a young age, attractive people receive more attention that helps them develop these characteristics.<sup>81</sup>

But when you factor out the indirect benefits — like having a better job, higher income, or a more successful partner — the impact of beauty on happiness drops by more than half for men, and a bit less for women. This suggests that most of the happiness boost from being attractive comes from the advantages it brings, not just from liking how you look in the mirror.<sup>82</sup>

It's not all good, though. The pressure to be beautiful can be its own source of misery. One study on fashion models — people who literally make a living from being beautiful, found they actually had lower

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<sup>79</sup> Gupta, N. D., Etcoff, N. L., & Jaeger, M. M. (2016). [Beauty in mind: The effects of physical attractiveness on psychological well-being and distress](#). *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 17(3), 1313–1325.

<sup>80</sup> Batres, C., Shiramizu, V. (2023). [Examining the "attractiveness halo effect" across cultures](#). *Current Psychology* 42, 25515–25519.

<sup>81</sup> Gupta, N. D., Etcoff, N. L., & Jaeger, M. M. (2016). [Beauty in mind: The effects of physical attractiveness on psychological well-being and distress](#). *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 17(3), 1313–1325.

<sup>82</sup> Hamermesh, D. S., & Abrevaya, J. (2013). [Beauty is the promise of happiness?](#). *European Economic Review*, 64, 351–368.

well-being and greater personality maladjustment than non-models.<sup>83</sup> Research also shows that attractive people have difficulty making meaningful friendships with others, especially with those of the same gender, due to feelings of envy or jealousy.<sup>84</sup> In social settings, subconscious competition for attention may exist, leading people to distance themselves and harbor negative feelings toward them.

When your worth is tied to something as superficial and fleeting as looks, it can be a recipe for anxiety. Studies show that when attractive people are evaluated by members of the same sex, they may often face negative biases rather than positive ones — being judged as less talented than average-looking people, with their success attributed to their looks rather than ability.<sup>85</sup>

Rather than treating beauty as the main route to happiness, try this:

1. Pinpoint which aspects of attractiveness actually matter to you — like confidence, connection, or career opportunities.
2. Look for ways to gain those benefits by developing real skills and meaningful qualities.
3. Build your self-worth on what you do and who you are, not just how you look or how others respond to it.

That said, taking care of your physical appearance and health isn't vanity — it's also a form of self-respect. Exercise, good nutrition, and basic grooming can make you feel better, not just look better. The key is to approach self-care with kindness, not harsh self-criticism. Lasting happiness comes more from feeling valued by the people who truly matter — not from getting compliments from strangers about how you

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<sup>83</sup> Meyer, B., Enström, M. K., Harstveit, M., Bowles, D. P., & Beevers, C. G. (2007). [Happiness and despair on the catwalk: Need satisfaction, well-being, and personality adjustment among fashion models](#). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2(1), 2-17.

<sup>84</sup> Ahad, A. (2023). [Why attractive people are actually more lonely, according to science](#). The List.

<sup>85</sup> Agthe, M., Spörrle, M., & Maner, J. K. (2011). [Does being attractive always help? Positive and negative effects of attractiveness on social decision making](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(8), 1042-1054.

look. A lot of the happiness linked to beauty actually comes from the social and career perks it brings — many of which you can also get by building real skills, forming strong relationships, and growing as a person.

### Geography and Environment

Does your happiness depend on whether you live in a city or countryside, a rich country or poor, a cold climate or warm? To an extent, yes: national and regional differences do exist when it comes to happiness.

According to recent research, there are six key factors that explain about 75% of the variation in national happiness scores: GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and absence of corruption.<sup>86</sup> This suggests that what matters most is not geography itself, but the social and institutional context a place provides.

So, let's look at the big picture: living in a society with good governance, safety, and community trust fosters happiness. However, research in urban design has also identified some geographic factors that *do* impact wellbeing.

Neighborhoods with greater walkability, access to green spaces, and opportunities for social interaction tend to result in higher wellbeing.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, it was found that people who spend at least two hours per week in nature report significantly higher wellbeing than those who

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<sup>86</sup> Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J. D., De Neve, J.-E., Aknin, L. B., & Wang, S. (2023). [World happiness report 2023](#). Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

<sup>87</sup> Montgomery, C. (2013). [Happy city: Transforming our lives through urban design](#). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

don't, regardless of whether this happens in one long visit or multiple shorter ones.<sup>88</sup>

People often believe that moving to a quiet rural area — or, on the flip side, an exciting city — will make them happier. And while it's true that some people thrive in calm settings and others in hustle bustle, the reality is that we're highly adaptable. Most of us tend to settle back into our usual level of happiness no matter where we live. Interestingly, if you live in a culture that matches your values (e.g., a communal society for someone who values community, or a vibrant arts city for someone who loves artistic expression), you may find more outlets that bring you happiness. But purely external features like “sunny skies” or “by the ocean” don't guarantee happiness if, say, you don't have friends there or are working a stressful job.

When thinking about moving, try this:

1. Prioritize things like being close to supportive people and having opportunities for meaningful activities over perks like nice weather.
2. If you can, spend extended time in a new place before committing to a permanent move.
3. Focus on building a sense of community wherever you go — because feeling connected to your neighborhood has a bigger impact on well-being than the location's physical features.<sup>89</sup>

## Your Job/Career

Your relationship with work significantly shapes your overall happiness, but not in the way most people think. While many assume that simply having a high-paying job guarantees life satisfaction, research reveals a

<sup>88</sup> White, M. P., Alcock, I., Grellier, J., Wheeler, B. W., Hartig, T., Warber, S. L., Bone, A., Depledge, M. H., & Fleming, L. E. (2019). [Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing](#). *Scientific Reports*, 9(1), 7730.

<sup>89</sup> Oishi, S. (2010). [The psychology of residential mobility: Implications for the self, social relationships, and well-being](#). *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5(1), 5-21.

more complex picture where the quality of your work experience matters far more than the paycheck.

It may sound counterintuitive, but the connection between work and life satisfaction actually flows both ways. When you're generally happy with life, you're more likely to find satisfaction in your job over time, and vice versa, creating either a positive or negative spiral.<sup>90</sup> But the good news is, this bidirectional relationship means that investing in either area can boost the performance in the other.

Employment status itself has a major impact on our wellbeing. Being unemployed substantially reduces happiness, with effects that can persist even after finding new work. However, not all jobs are created equal when it comes to happiness. Research shows that jobs in physically demanding fields like construction and manufacturing are linked to lower well-being, suggesting that what kind of work you do matters just as much as simply having a job.<sup>91</sup>

What really drives job satisfaction isn't just the job itself — it's what the workplace feels like. Having control over your tasks and schedule is a big one. Supportive coworkers and a safe environment also make a huge difference.<sup>92</sup> And when your job offers chances to grow, take on a variety of tasks, and move forward in your career, you're much more likely to enjoy showing up every day.<sup>93</sup>

Your emotional skills also play an important role in how work affects your happiness. Workers who are skilled at managing their emotions

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<sup>90</sup> Wiese, C. W., Dormann, C., Vaziri, H., Tay, L., Wille, B., Chen, J., Moran, L. H., & Li, Y. (2025). [Happy work, happy life? A replication and comparison of the longitudinal effects between job and life satisfaction using continuous time meta-analysis](#). *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

<sup>91</sup> De Neve, J.-E., & Ward, G. (2017). [Happiness at work](#). Centre for Economic Performance.

<sup>92</sup> Novliadi, F., & Anggraini, R. (2018). [Happiness at work viewed from job satisfaction and perceived organizational support](#). *Proceedings of the International Conference of Science, Technology, Engineering, Environmental and Ramification Researches*.

<sup>93</sup> Ochavo, J., Lopez, C., Peret, J. M. D., Vigonte, F., & Abante, M. V. (2023a). [From demographics to policy: Unraveling the relationship of job satisfaction and happiness](#). *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

report higher job satisfaction, especially in environments with low social support – suggesting that emotional regulation and resilience can serve as a buffer against difficult workplace conditions.<sup>94</sup>

Perhaps most surprisingly, while income does correlate with happiness, the relationship is weaker than you might expect. Non-monetary factors like relationships with coworkers and finding meaning in your work have stronger effects on wellbeing than salary alone.

### Love and Relationships

Fulfilling relationships are central to happiness. This includes romantic love, friendships, and family bonds. Being in a loving, supportive relationship contributes to feelings of security, belonging, and meaning.

Married people, on average, report slightly higher happiness and health than singles, though the quality of the marriage is crucial (a happy marriage boosts well-being, an unhappy or a toxic one can severely detract from it).

Some of the clearest proof that love matters most comes from long-term studies showing that the happiest, healthiest people in their 80s were the ones who kept close relationships – whether with a spouse, good friends, or family.<sup>95</sup> Love not only provides joy; it acts as a buffer during stress and adversity – knowing someone genuinely cares for you helps you cope with life's challenges.

Young adults in romantic relationships often report being happier, more satisfied with life, and healthier – both mentally and physically – than those who are single. But it's not just being in a relationship that

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<sup>94</sup> Mérida-López, S., Extremera, N., Quintana-Orts, C., & Rey, L. (2018). [In pursuit of job satisfaction and happiness: Testing the interactive contribution of emotion-regulation ability and workplace social support](#). *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 60(1), 59–66.

<sup>95</sup> Waldinger, R. J., & Schulz, M. S. (2023). [The good life: Lessons from the world's longest scientific study of happiness](#).

matters — it's the quality of that relationship. Things like intimacy, commitment, feeling supported, and having a secure bond play a huge role in overall well-being. When a relationship is strong, it's also tied to higher self-esteem, more positive emotions, and greater progress toward personal and shared goals.<sup>96</sup>

One study found something pretty eye-opening: out of all the factors researchers looked at in romantic relationships, only how *satisfied* people felt really predicted their happiness. How long they'd been together or whether they were married or just living together didn't make a difference — it was the quality of the connection that truly mattered.<sup>97</sup>

However, it's worth noting that one can be single and still feel very happy if they have been able to cultivate strong friendships and community ties as a foundation in their lives. It's the presence of connection that matters more than the form. In fact, the downsides of being single mostly disappear if you've got strong friendships and a solid support network.<sup>98</sup>

What really stands out across cultures? Strong social connections are one of the best predictors of happiness — hands down. And when it comes to feeling good, **who** you're close to matters way more than **how many** people you know.<sup>99</sup>

Most people intuitively sense that love is vital, though sometimes society focuses so much on romantic love that other forms of love

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<sup>96</sup> Gómez-López, M., Viejo, C., & Ortega-Ruiz, R. (2019). [Well-being and romantic relationships: A systematic review in adolescence and emerging adulthood](#). *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(13), 2415.

<sup>97</sup> Novliadi, F., & Anggraini, R. (2018). Happiness at Work Viewed from Job Satisfaction and Perceived Organizational Support. [Proceedings of the international conference of science, technology, engineering, Environmental and ramification researches](#).

<sup>98</sup> Saphire-Bernstein, S., & Taylor, S. E. (2013). [Close relationships and happiness](#). In I. Boniwell, S. A. David, & A. C. Ayers (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of happiness* (pp. 821-833). Oxford University Press.

<sup>99</sup> Sun, J., Harris, K., & Vazire, S. (2020). [Is well-being associated with the quantity and quality of social interactions?](#) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 119(6), 1478–1496.

(friendship, familial love) are undervalued. In truth, all forms of genuine affection count. So, investing in all types of relationships is generally a very sound happiness strategy.

If your social life feels a little thin, don't worry — there are some simple ways to build more connections.

Try:

1. Setting up regular catch-ups with friends, like a monthly coffee or game night.
2. Joining a group or class that matches your interests — think a hiking club, book group, or pottery workshop.
3. Going beyond small talk by asking deeper questions that spark real conversation.
4. If needed, talking to a therapist to work through any patterns that might be holding you back.

These kinds of steps can go a long way toward creating the meaningful relationships that give the biggest boost to your happiness.

## Friendships

While romantic relationships often capture the spotlight in discussions of love and well-being (not to mention in movies and hit songs), friendships represent a uniquely powerful force in human happiness that operates through distinctly different mechanisms. Unlike family bonds, which we inherit, or romantic partnerships, which carry intense emotional stakes, friendships are chosen relationships built on mutual affinity and kept going because both people genuinely want to be there..

Here, research also highlights friendship's remarkable power for well-being. High-quality friendships don't just correlate with current

happiness; they are even able to forecast life satisfaction decades into the future. A person's friendship quality at age 30 can predict their well-being at age 50, suggesting that social investments made in early adulthood continue to pay off throughout our lives.<sup>100</sup> This long-term effect shows that friendship isn't just about having fun in the moment — it's a key pillar of a meaningful, well-built life.

What makes friendships so terrifically beneficial? Quality friendships simultaneously provide emotional support during crises, stimulating companionship for growth, and reliable alliance when you tackle life's challenges.<sup>101</sup> This combination addresses multiple psychological needs in ways that other relationships often cannot, creating an “emotional richness” that single-purpose relationships struggle to match.

Let's be real — friends aren't just for brunch plans and group chats. Having close buddies or someone you can truly open up to slashes your risk of depression, boosts life satisfaction, and helps you bounce back from loneliness like a champ. In a world where isolation's on the rise, friendship isn't a luxury — it's emotional survival gear, right up there with sleep and salads.<sup>102</sup>

Plus, friends hit different. They make us feel like we matter, give us space to be ourselves, and cheer us on without it feeling like a duty. It's not top-down advice or forced support — it's real, mutual care. And that kind of love? It sticks. It heals. It gets you.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Pezirkianidis, C., Galanaki, E., Raftopoulou, G., Moraitou, D., & Stalikas, A. (2023). [Adult friendship and wellbeing: A systematic review with practical implications](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14.

<sup>101</sup> Šutić, L., van Roekel, E., & Novak, M. (2025). [Quality of friendships and well-being in adolescence: daily life study](#). *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 30(1).

<sup>102</sup> Teo, A. R., Choi, H., & Valenstein, M. (2013). [Social relationships and depression: Ten-year follow-up from a nationally representative study](#). *Plos One*, 8(4), e62396.

<sup>103</sup> Demir, M., Özen, A., Doğan, A., Bilyk, N. A., & Tyrell, F. A. (2011). [I matter to my friend, therefore I am happy: Friendship, mattering, and happiness](#). *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*, 12(6), 983–1005.

Unsurprisingly, friendship is a two-way street: the benefits flow in both directions. Both giving and receiving support from friends can enhance happiness,<sup>104</sup> creating “reciprocal benefit cycles.”

Friendship isn't just about having someone to lean on during tough times — it's also about making the good times even better. Joy has a way of multiplying in friendships; when your friend is happy, it rubs off on you too. It's true — happiness can be contagious! And when friends celebrate each other's wins (big or small), it creates a kind of shared joy that's even better than experiencing it alone.<sup>105</sup>

Interestingly, how much people value friendship varies around the world. But one thing's clear: it tends to matter most for certain groups — like older adults, women, people without fancy degrees, and those living in more unequal or individualistic societies. Basically, when life feels a bit more uncertain or support is harder to come by, strong friendships become a secret weapon for staying happy and grounded.<sup>106</sup>

### Having Children

In a recent podcast, pop artist Chappell Roan didn't mince words: all her friends with kids, she said, “are in hell.” She added, “I have literally not met anyone who is happy, anyone who has light in their eyes, anyone who has slept.”

It's a harsh take — but not an uncommon one. Still, science tells a more complicated story.

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<sup>104</sup> Crocker, J., Canevello, A., & Brown, A. A. (2017). [Social motivation: Costs and benefits of selfishness and otherishness](#). *Annual review of psychology*, 68, 299–325.

<sup>105</sup> Gable, S. L., Reis, H. T., Impett, E. A., & Asher, E. R. (2004). [What do you do when things go right? The intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of sharing positive events](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87(2), 228–245.

<sup>106</sup> Lu, P., Oh, J., Leahy, K. E., & Chopik, W. J. (2021). [Friendship importance around the world: Links to cultural factors, health, and well-being](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11.

First, there's the question of who chooses to have kids. Happier people are more likely to become parents in the first place, which suggests a self-selection effect: it's not that kids cause happiness, but that happier people tend to become parents.<sup>107</sup>

The findings beyond that are a mixed bag. Some studies show that fathers report slightly higher life satisfaction than childless men.<sup>108</sup> For mothers, the difference is less clear. But across the board, parents consistently report a stronger sense of meaning and purpose in life.<sup>109</sup>

Location also matters. In countries with strong social support — like Norway or Hungary — parents tend to be happier than nonparents. But in places like the U.S., U.K., or Australia, where child care is expensive and support is limited, the opposite is often true. The stress and cost of parenting, especially without adequate resources, can drag down well-being. Similarly, married parents tend to be happier than single parents, likely due to increased social and financial support.<sup>110</sup>

Ask ten people if kids make you happier and you'll get ten different answers. The truth? It depends. Parenthood doesn't guarantee joy — or misery. It amplifies whatever's already there. If you're broke, exhausted, and in a dead marriage, adding diapers won't help. But if you've got support, purpose, and your shit mostly together, raising kids can feel deeply meaningful. It's not about the kids — it's about the context.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Cetre, S., Clark, A. E., & Senik, C. (2016). [Happy people have children: Choice and self-selection into parenthood](#). *European journal of population = Revue europeenne de demographie*, 32(3), 445–473.

<sup>108</sup> Nelson-Coffey, S. K., Killingsworth, M., Layous, K., Cole, S. W., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2019). [Parenthood is associated with greater well-being for fathers than mothers](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 45(9), 1378-1390.

<sup>109</sup> Nelson, S. K., Kushlev, K., English, T., Dunn, E. W., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). [In defense of parenthood](#). *Psychological Science*.

<sup>110</sup> Negraia, D. V., & Augustine, J. M. (2020). [Unpacking the parenting well-being gap: The role of dynamic features of daily life across broader societal contexts](#). *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 83(3), 207-228.

<sup>111</sup> Nelson, S. K., Kushlev, K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2014). [The pains and pleasures of parenting: when, why, and how is parenthood associated with more or less well-being?](#) *Psychological bulletin*, 140(3), 846–895.

It's also important to distinguish between “happiness” and “satisfaction.” You can be grateful for your decision to have kids and still feel less happy in your day-to-day life. Parenthood tends to lower moment-to-moment quality of life, but it also brings deeper emotional rewards that aren't easily captured by surveys.

So no, the experience isn't universal. And Chappell Roan's comment — while raw — reflects only one side of parenting. But like most things in psychology, the answer isn't black and white. It's deeply personal, often depends on your circumstances, and full of trade-offs.

If you're considering parenthood:

1. Honestly assess your support system and financial resources, as these factors significantly impact parental wellbeing.
2. Recognize that having children may decrease day-to-day happiness while increasing life's meaning, so consider what matters more to you.
3. Don't rely solely on others' experiences — both the glowing reports and the horror stories — as your circumstances and temperament will shape your own parenting experience.

## The Experiencing vs. Remembering Self

Throughout this exploration of happiness, we've seen repeatedly that our intuitions about what brings lasting joy are often nuanced and occasionally paradoxical. Daniel Kahneman's concept of the experiencing self versus the remembering self provides a powerful framework to understand these complexities and their interactions.<sup>112</sup>

The **experiencing self** refers to our moment-to-moment awareness — how happy or unhappy we feel right now. On the other hand, the **remembering self** shapes our narratives about past events, recalling mainly peak moments (the most intense emotional points) and endings, a phenomenon Kahneman calls the “peak-end rule.”<sup>113</sup> This is why the way we remember an experience often has nothing to do with how we actually felt while living it.<sup>114</sup>

Parenting is a masterclass in life's emotional whiplash. Day to day, it's sleep deprivation, stress, and tiny humans screaming about toast. Not exactly a spa weekend. But look back years later, and parents often call it the most meaningful thing they've ever done. Why? Because the 'remembering self' doesn't care about your 3 a.m. diaper disaster — it cares about purpose, identity, legacy. It turns chaos into meaning. And that's where real happiness tends to hide — not in comfort, but in the stories we tell ourselves afterward.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Kahneman, D. (2011). [Thinking, fast and slow](#). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

<sup>113</sup> Kahneman, D., & Riis, J. (2005). [Living, and thinking about it: Two perspectives on life](#). In F. A. Huppert, N. Baylis, & B. Keverne (Eds.), *The science of well-being* (pp. 285–304). Oxford University Press.

<sup>114</sup> Kahneman, D., Krueger, A. B., Schkade, D. A., Schwarz, N., & Stone, A. A. (2004). [A survey method for characterizing daily life experience: the day reconstruction method](#). *Science (New York, N.Y.)*, 306(5702), 1776–1780.

<sup>115</sup> Zajchowski, C. A. B., Schwab, K. A., & Dustin, D. L. (2017). [The experiencing self and the remembering self: Implications for leisure science](#). *Leisure Sciences*, 39(6), 561–568.

You see this everywhere. Relationships? They're messy, frustrating, and half the time you're arguing about who left dishes in the sink. But long-term, they're what make life feel worth living. They give your story weight. Fame and hotness? Great for your Instagram. Useless for your soul. They light you up for five minutes, then vanish. Because real happiness doesn't come from looking good — it comes from mattering.

Money and status? They're classic double-edged swords. Sure, more cash makes life easier at first — bills get paid, fridge stays full, you sleep better. That's your experiencing self nodding in approval. But after a certain point, more money doesn't buy more meaning. The remembering self doesn't care about your new watch or job title — it cares whether your life actually felt worthwhile. And no paycheck can fill that gap.

As studies show, investing resources in meaningful experiences, altruism, and relationships rather than the endless chasing of more aligns better with long-term remembered happiness.<sup>116</sup>

Even the relationship between pleasure and substances can be explained using this framework. Drugs and booze feel great for a while. They spike your mood, numb your pain, and trick your brain into thinking everything's fine. That's the experiencing self talking. But the remembering self? It sees the hangovers, the broken promises, the years lost. Eventually, the highs stop working and the regrets start piling up. People who get sober often feel a cocktail of shame and grief — not just for what they did, but for how long they lied to themselves. It's a brutal reminder: shortcuts to happiness usually come with the longest bills.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Kahneman, D., Krueger, A. B., Schkade, D. A., Schwarz, N., & Stone, A. A. (2004). [A survey method for characterizing daily life experience: the day reconstruction method](#). *Science (New York, N.Y.)*, 306(5702), 1776–1780.

<sup>117</sup> McGaffin, B. J., Lyons, G. C., & Deane, F. P. (2013). [Self-forgiveness, shame, and guilt in recovery from drug and alcohol problems](#). *Substance abuse*, 34(4), 396–404.

However, the remembering self isn't static — our retrospective evaluations shift dramatically over time. A challenging career transition initially viewed as meaningful growth might later seem like a wasteful detour, while a seemingly pointless period could be reframed as essential preparation. The death of a parent or career setback might first be remembered for pain, but often become integrated into narratives of resilience and growth. Happiness isn't fixed — it shifts as you do. What matters most at 25 might feel pointless at 45. That's why the key isn't clinging to meaning, it's learning to remake it. The happiest people aren't the ones who nailed life early, they're the ones who keep rewriting the story as they grow.

Real happiness isn't just about feeling good — it's about feeling good and being proud of it later. The sweet spot is when your day-to-day doesn't suck and your future self nods in approval. That means doing more of what feels good and builds a story worth telling. So check in with yourself. Journal. Reflect. Make tiny course corrections. Test what works. Because when you ignore one self for the other, you end up either burnt out or bored. But when they're aligned? That's when life actually starts to feel right.

Happiness isn't just how good life feels — it's how good it *makes sense* later. It's not one thing, it's the tug-of-war between your present moments and the story you spin about them afterward. The goal? Build a life that feels good now and still holds up when you look back. That's where real satisfaction lives — in the overlap between pleasure and meaning.

# Baseline vs. Circumstantial vs. Intentional Happiness

## Baseline Happiness: The 50% You Inherit

Lisa and her twin sister Lauren were separated at birth, adopted by different families. Lisa grew up in suburban comfort, with attentive parents. Lauren was raised by a single mother struggling with poverty. When researchers found them at age 35, they expected to see dramatically different happiness levels.

Instead, they found something remarkable: despite their different life paths, the twins reported nearly identical levels of well-being. They even shared the same emotional patterns — both experienced mild winter blues, both bounced back quickly from setbacks, both found deep satisfaction in creative work.

This is the power of baseline happiness. Twin studies consistently show that identical twins raised apart are far more similar in happiness than fraternal twins raised together. Genetics doesn't just influence happiness — it accounts for about half of it.<sup>118</sup>

Your baseline happiness is like your emotional thermostat. Just as your body returns to a set temperature after exercise or illness, your mood tends to return to a set point after positive or negative events. Win the lottery? After the initial excitement, you'll likely return close to baseline. Suffer a major loss? After the acute grief, you'll probably recover more than you expect.

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<sup>118</sup> Lykken, D., & Tellegen, A. (1996). [Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon](#). *Psychological Science*, 7(3), 186-189.

This set point isn't just about mood. It influences:

- How you interpret events (optimistically or pessimistically)
- How quickly you recover from setbacks
- How much you savor positive experiences
- How sensitive you are to stress
- How easily you form social connections

Some people win the genetic lottery — they're born with a high set point, naturally resilient and optimistic. Others inherit a tendency toward anxiety, depression, or emotional instability. It's not fair, but it's real.

Does this mean that if you have a low set point, you're doomed? Absolutely not. Your baseline is your starting point, not your destiny. Think of it like height in basketball. Being tall is an advantage, but plenty of shorter players excel through skill, strategy, and determination. Similarly, people with lower happiness set points can achieve high well-being through intentional effort.

Understanding your baseline helps in several ways:

- It explains why happiness feels easier for some people
- It reduces self-blame for struggling with well-being
- It helps you set realistic expectations
- It shows why copying others' strategies might not work for you

Your baseline is the hand you're dealt. You can't exchange it, but you can play it skillfully.

## Circumstantial Happiness: The 10% That Surprises Everyone

Here's a finding that shocks almost everyone: life circumstances account for only about 10% of happiness differences between people.<sup>119</sup> The job, the house, the relationship status, the bank account — all the things we kill ourselves trying to improve — matter far less than we think.

How can this be? Don't rich people seem happier than poor people? Aren't married people more satisfied than singles? Doesn't health affect well-being?

Yes, but... less than you'd expect, and not in the way you'd think.

The key is, once again, hedonic adaptation. We adapt to almost everything, remember? However, some circumstances do have lasting effects:

- **Extreme poverty** genuinely reduces happiness (though even here, adaptation occurs)
- **Chronic pain or severe disability** can permanently lower well-being (though less than healthy people predict)
- **Social isolation** reliably decreases happiness
- **Long commutes** create daily stress that doesn't adapt away
- **Living in nature** versus congested cities has sustained effects

But most of the circumstances we obsess over — income above subsistence level, job prestige, possessions, appearance — have surprisingly small long-term effects on happiness.

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<sup>119</sup> Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). [Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change](#). *Review of General Psychology*, 9(2), 111-131.

This doesn't mean circumstances don't matter at all. They create the context for happiness. It's easier to be happy when you're financially secure, and physically healthy. But circumstances are the stage, not the play. Here, what matters more is what you do on that stage.

The myth of circumstantial happiness drives much of modern misery. People sacrifice health for wealth, relationships for career advancement, present joy for future security — all chasing circumstances that won't deliver the happiness they promise. It's like spending your life savings on a car that only drives 10% faster than your current one.

Understanding the limited role of circumstances is liberating. It means:

- You can stop postponing happiness until circumstances improve
- You can question whether that life change is worth the cost
- You can focus on what actually moves the needle
- You can find happiness even in imperfect circumstances

### **Intentional Happiness: The 40% You Control**

Let's say you wake up each morning and write down three things you're grateful for. You take a walk in nature during lunch. You volunteer at a literacy center on weekends. You're not naturally optimistic — your genetic set point tilts toward anxiety. What's more, your circumstances are average — decent job, small apartment, single. Yet you would likely report higher life satisfaction than your wealthy, naturally cheerful neighbor who spends his days scrolling social media and complaining.

This is where intentional activities become transformative. Most life circumstances fade into the background — get the promotion, move to

the beach, and six months later it all feels normal. But the stuff you *choose* to do — the habits you build, the rituals you stick with — those keep paying off. Why? Because they don't just happen to you. They demand effort. And that effort keeps you engaged. Real well-being isn't something you reach — it's something you keep doing.

Why don't we adapt to intentional activities the way we adapt to circumstances? Several reasons:

- **Variety:** Activities can be varied to prevent adaptation
- **Timing:** You control when to engage, allowing for optimal impact
- **Effort:** The effort itself creates value and meaning
- **Growth:** Many activities build skills that compound over time

Research has identified several categories of intentional activities that reliably boost happiness.

### A Healthy Body — The Physical Foundation of Happiness

It's hard to have a cheerful mind if your body feels like crap. Our physical state hugely impacts mood and vice versa. Taking care of your body isn't shallow or separate from emotional well-being — it's intimately connected. Here's what we can do:

- **Exercise: The All-Natural Antidepressant** If only there were a pill that improved mood, reduced anxiety,<sup>120</sup> alleviated depression, boosted self-esteem,<sup>121</sup> and enhanced brain health, it would be a blockbuster drug. Exercise does all that, and it's free (or at least,

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<sup>120</sup> Goodarzi, S., Teymouri Athar, M. M., Beiky, M., Fathi, H., Nakhaee, Z., Parvizi Omran, S., & Shafiee, A. (2024). [Effect of physical activity for reducing anxiety symptoms in older adults: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials](#). *BMC Sports Science, Medicine and Rehabilitation*, 16, 153.

<sup>121</sup> Tikac, G., Unal, A., & Altug, F. (2022). [Regular exercise improves the levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem and body awareness of young adults](#). *The Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness*, 62(1).

cheap). Studies show regular physical activity can be as effective as antidepressant medication for mild to moderate depression — it releases endorphins, reduces inflammation, and literally rewires the brain for resilience.<sup>122</sup>

The secret is consistency: choose activities you genuinely enjoy — whether cycling, yoga, team sports, or music-fuelled walks — because sticking with it makes the benefits grow over time.

The key is consistency. Make movement a regular part of your life. Don't think of it as a chore; find something you enjoy, it can even just be walking while listening to music or a podcast.

*Hint:* Doing it outdoors adds an extra mood lift,<sup>123</sup> and moving with others doubles the payoff by layering social connection onto the workout itself.<sup>124</sup> Think of exercise as daily mental hygiene — like brushing your teeth, but for your mood (plus you'll look sexy).

- **Sleep:** We live in a society that often treats sleep as wasted time or a luxury. Big mistake. Sleep is essentially the reset button for your brain's emotional circuitry. Lack of sleep not only makes you tired; it impairs emotion regulation, increases irritability, and saps your positivity.<sup>125</sup> Chronic insomnia is linked to higher risk of depression. Conversely, improving sleep tends to improve mood and overall

<sup>122</sup> Guimarães, M. E. A., Derhon, V., Signori, L. U., Seiffer, B. A., Wolf, S., & Schuch, F. B. (2024). [Acute and chronic effects of physical exercise in inflammatory biomarkers in people with depression: A systematic review with meta-analysis](#). *Journal of psychiatric research*, 179, 26–32.

<sup>123</sup> Coventry, P. A., Brown, J. E., Pervin, J., Brabyn, S., Pateman, R., Breedvelt, J., Gilbody, S., Stancliffe, R., McEachan, R., & White, P. L. (2021). [Nature-based outdoor activities for mental and physical health: Systematic review and meta-analysis](#). *SSM - population health*, 16, 100934.

<sup>124</sup> Golaszewski, N. M., LaCroix, A. Z., Hooker, S. P., & Bartholomew, J. B. (2021). [Group exercise membership is associated with forms of social support, exercise identity, and amount of physical activity](#). *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 20(2), 630–643.

<sup>125</sup> Jansson-Fröjmark, M., & Hossain, S. (2024). [Emotion dysregulation in insomnia disorder: The possible role of psychiatric comorbidity](#). *Frontiers in Sleep*, 3, Article 1383552.

well-being<sup>126</sup>

Aim for the classic 7-9 hours per night.<sup>127</sup> But both quantity and quality matter. Keep a consistent sleep schedule, have a calming bedtime routine (yes, like a toddler), make your sleep environment comfortable (dark, cool, quiet).<sup>128</sup> Avoid both screens right before bed if you can (yes, even with the blue light filter!)<sup>129</sup> and info overload which can mess with sleep.

If your mind races, try journaling or reading something light to settle. It might sound unexciting, but happiness can hinge on something as unglamorous as getting enough Z's. As the NSF poll found, 87% of people said good sleep positively affects their happiness — that's a landslide majority.<sup>130</sup> So, guard your sleep like the precious treasure it is. Productivity is great, but you can't be a happy, productive person on a constantly exhausted brain.

- **Diet and Substance Use:** “You are what you eat” has some truth emotionally too. Food affects neurotransmitters and energy levels. There's emerging research stating that diets rich in whole foods — vegetables, fruits, lean proteins, nuts, whole grains — are associated with lower depression and higher well-being, whereas

<sup>126</sup> Scott, A. J., Webb, T. L., Martyn-St James, M., Rowse, G., & Weich, S. (2021). [Improving sleep quality leads to better mental health: A meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials](#). *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, 60, 101556.

<sup>127</sup> Watson, N. F., Badr, M. S., Belenky, G., ... Quan, S. F. (2015). [Recommended amount of sleep for a healthy adult: A joint consensus statement of the American academy of sleep medicine and sleep research society](#). *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, 11(6), 591–592.

<sup>128</sup> Shimura, A., Sugiura, K., Inoue, M., Misaki, S., Tanimoto, Y., Oshima, A., Tanaka, T., Yokoi, K., & Inoue, T. (2020). [Which sleep hygiene factors are important? Comprehensive assessment of lifestyle habits and job environment on sleep among office workers](#). *Sleep Health*, 6(3), 288–298.

<sup>129</sup> Duraccio, K. M., Zaugg, K. K., Blackburn, R. C., & Jensen, C. D. (2021). [Does iPhone night shift mitigate negative effects of smartphone use on sleep outcomes in emerging adults?](#) *Sleep Health*, 7(4), 478–484.

<sup>130</sup> National Sleep Foundation. (2025). 2025 [Sleep in America® Poll: People with better sleep health are most likely to flourish](#).

diets high in processed foods and sugar can lead to more mood swings.<sup>131</sup> For instance, deficiencies in certain nutrients (like B-vitamins, Omega-3 fatty acids, magnesium) have been linked to low mood.<sup>132,133,134</sup>

It's not as simple as “eat spinach, cure sadness,” but fueling your body with nutritious foods gives it the building blocks for the brain chemicals that regulate mood (like serotonin). Also, stabilize your blood sugar — extreme hunger or sugar crashes can make you *hangry* or anxious.<sup>135</sup> So don't skip meals; aim for balanced snacks to keep you on an even keel.

And we must mention **substances**: As covered earlier, alcohol and drugs provide short bursts of pleasure at the risk of long-term unhappiness if misused.<sup>136</sup> If you find you're relying on that nightly half-bottle of wine or frequent hits of something to cope, it might be undermining your baseline mood even if it feels good at the moment. Alcohol is a depressant; it can disrupt sleep and next-day

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<sup>131</sup> Knüppel, A., Shipley, M. J., Llewellyn, C. H., & Brunner, E. J. (2017). [Sugar intake from sweet food and beverages. common mental disorder and depression: Prospective findings from the Whitehall II study](#). *Scientific Reports*, 7, 6287.

<sup>132</sup> Young, L. M., Pipingas, A., White, D. J., Gauci, S., & Scholey, A. (2019). [A systematic review and meta-analysis of B vitamin supplementation on depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress](#). *Nutrients*, 11(9), 2232.

<sup>133</sup> Grosso, G., Pajak, A., Marventano, S., Castellano, S., Bucolo, C., Drago, F., & Caraci, F. (2014). [Role of omega-3 fatty acids in the treatment of depressive disorders: A meta-analysis of randomized clinical trials](#). *Plos One*, 9(5), e96905.

<sup>134</sup> Tarleton, E. K., Littenberg, B., MacLean, C. D., Kennedy, A. G., & Daley, C. (2017). [Role of magnesium supplementation in the treatment of depression: A randomized clinical trial](#). *Plos One*, 12(6), e0180067.

<sup>135</sup> de Rivaz, R., Swendsen, J., Berthoz, S., Husky, M., Merikangas, K., & Marques-Vidal, P. (2022). [Associations between hunger and psychological outcomes: A large-scale ecological momentary assessment study](#). *Nutrients*, 14(23), 5167.

<sup>136</sup> Boden, J. M., & Fergusson, D. M. (2011). [Alcohol and depression](#). *Addiction*, 106(5), 906–914.

mood.<sup>137</sup> Additionally, caffeine in moderation can boost alertness and mood, but too much can make you jittery or disrupt sleep (vicious cycle).<sup>138</sup>

So, be mindful of what you put in your body. A generally healthy diet and moderate approach to substances sets a foundation where your brain can function optimally to support happiness. (And drink water! Dehydration can make you feel tired and cranky, and chronic dehydration may contribute to cognitive decline with age.)<sup>139</sup>

To summarize: treat your body kindly if you want your mind to feel good. Exercise regularly (anything that gets your heart rate up and limbs moving), sleep enough, eat to nourish, and be cautious with mood-altering substances. These might sound basic, but many people overlook them and then wonder why they feel blah. When in doubt, start by fixing these fundamentals — often you'll see a noticeable improvement in mood and energy, which then gives you more oomph to tackle other happiness strategies.

### **Better Relationships — Connection is Key**

We've hammered on this already because it's so important: **human connection is arguably the greatest source of happiness.** So intentionally working on your relationships is one of the smartest happiness investments you can make. This applies to romantic partners,

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<sup>137</sup> Murillo-Rodríguez, E., Carreón, C., Acosta-Hernández, M. E., & García-García, F. (2022). [Stimulants and depressor drugs in the sleep-wake cycle modulation: the case of alcohol and cannabinoids](#). *Current Topics in Medicinal Chemistry*, 22(15), 1270–1279.

<sup>138</sup> O'Callaghan, F., Muurlink, O., & Reid, N. (2018). [Effects of caffeine on sleep quality and daytime functioning](#). *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy*, 11, 263–271.

<sup>139</sup> Mantantzis, K., Drewelies, J., Duezel, S., Steinhagen-Thiessen, E., Demuth, I., Wagner, G. G., Lindenberger, U., & Gerstorf, D. (2020). [Dehydration predicts longitudinal decline in cognitive functioning and well-being among older adults](#). *Psychology and Aging*, 35(4), 517–528.

yes, but equally to friends, family, and community ties. Here are strategies to boost happiness via relationships:

- **Prioritize Time with People:** In our busy lives, social time often gets cut first when we're stressed or chasing goals. Reverse that by making time for friends and loved ones *non-negotiable*. Schedule a weekly call or coffee with a close friend. Have regular date nights with your partner (where you *really* connect, not just stare at a screen together silently). Plan outings with family. Even if you're introverted, quality one-on-one time or small group hangs can be hugely fulfilling.

When researchers map how people feel during different activities, **socializing is consistently near the top of the happiness scale**, while being alone (especially with nothing to do) is often lower — except for those who really need some alone time to recharge, of course.<sup>140</sup> If you find that you "don't have time" for friends, consider that time spent bonding often increases your productivity and energy later because it lifts your mood. It's like an emotional recharge. So treat it as essential, not optional.

Pro tip: combine social time with other happiness habits — e.g., go for a walk or workout with a friend (exercise + social in one), or join a club/volunteer group (purpose + social).

- **Improve Relationship Quality:** It's not just the time, but how you interact. Work on your communication and empathy skills. Happy relationships have a high ratio of positive to negative interactions (Marriage researcher John Gottman found a 5:1 ratio in stable,

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<sup>140</sup> Quoidbach, J., Taquet, M., Desseilles, M., de Montjoye, Y. A., & Gross, J. J. (2019). [Happiness and social behavior](#). *Psychological science*, 30(8), 1111-1122.

happy couples).<sup>141</sup> That means for every snarky comment or argument, they have five instances of affection, appreciation, or fun.

Consider consciously increasing positive interactions: express appreciation, give compliments, show affection, tell that silly joke or reminisce about a funny memory. Little gestures go a long way: a surprise coffee for your coworker, a text to your sibling to say you're thinking of them.

Also, *listen* actively when others talk; make them feel heard and valued. Practice forgiveness and letting go of grudges — holding onto resentment hurts you in the long run. And avoid toxic communication patterns like constant criticism or defensiveness; they erode happiness in relationships. If conflict arises (as it will), approach it with curiosity and willingness to compromise rather than a win-lose mindset. Essentially, treat your loved ones at least as kindly as you treat strangers (we often save our worst behavior for those close ones, try to flip that).

- **Make New Connections (if needed):** Maybe you're reading this and thinking "great, but I don't have many friends" or "I just moved and feel isolated." It can be tough to build connections as an adult, but it's definitely possible with intentional effort. Say yes to social invitations even if you feel a bit shy. Join activities where you'll meet people with common interests (anything from a cooking class, sports league, to online forums that have local meetups). Volunteer — it's a double win, you help others and often bond with fellow volunteers (plus kindness boosts happiness, as we'll

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<sup>141</sup> Gottman, J. M., & Levenson, R. W. (1992). [Marital processes predictive of later dissolution: Behavior, physiology, and health](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63(2), 221-233.

discuss).

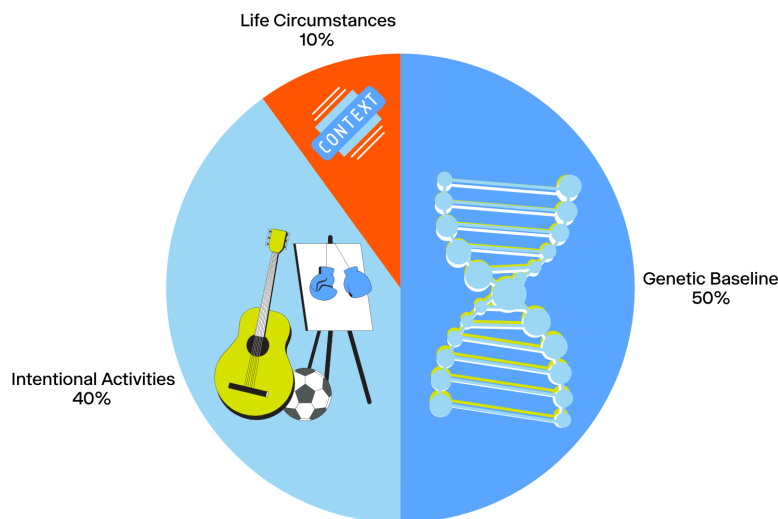
Don't be afraid to initiate; ask a colleague to grab lunch, or a neighbor if they want to go for a walk. Not everyone will become a close friend, but some will. It might feel awkward at times, and that's normal. You might need to kiss a few frogs (socially speaking) before you find your tribe. The risk of a little awkwardness is worth the reward of human connection. And remember, *quality over quantity*: one or two solid friends beat a dozen superficial acquaintances for happiness.

- **Intimacy and Vulnerability:** Real happiness in relationships comes from being truly known and accepted. That means allowing yourself to be a bit vulnerable. Open up to people you trust about your feelings, dreams, even your struggles. It can deepen the bond, and reciprocally, encourage others to share with you, be the friend who can be confided in without judgment.

Shared vulnerability often creates the most meaningful connections and a sense if we're *in this together*, which is a powerful happiness driver. If you're lonely because you keep conversations superficial, try gradually steering them deeper, by asking more open-ended questions, and sharing a little more of yourself. Many people are relieved to go beyond small talk.

At the end of their lives, people often say their biggest sources of happiness were their relationships. So if you take one thing from this guide, let it be: *nurture your connections*. All these small acts accumulate into a support network that not only buffers stress but amplifies joy. It really is love (in all its forms) that makes the world go round.

## The Happiness Pie Chart



### Gratitude — Counting Blessings (Not Burdens)

Gratitude is like a secret happiness weapon — it's simple, free, and backed by solid science. In a culture that often emphasizes what we lack or what's wrong, **gratitude flips the script to focus on what we have and what's going right.** And it turns out that shifting attention in this way significantly increases happiness.

What does being grateful do? It amplifies positive emotions, helps us savor good experiences, fosters optimism, and even strengthens relationships (people like being appreciated!).

One famous study had participants jot down a few things they were grateful for each week; after 10 weeks, those who did this were happier and even had fewer health complaints than those who wrote about hassles or neutral events.<sup>142</sup> In another study, people who wrote gratitude letters to someone showed immediate boosts in happiness and reduced depressive symptoms, with effects lasting weeks (even if they never sent them).<sup>143</sup> Gratitude is sometimes called “social glue,” since it reminds us of our interdependence and the kindness around us, combating feelings of isolation or victimhood.

How can you practice gratitude intentionally?

- **Gratitude Journal:** Probably the most popular method. Each day (or a few times a week), write down 3-5 things you're grateful for. Big or small – doesn't matter. “My mom called to check on me,” “The sunset was gorgeous pink tonight,” “Got through a tough meeting at work,” “My cat curled up on my lap.” The key is genuinely pausing to feel thankful as you list them, not just rattling them off mechanically. Try to vary it; keep noticing new positives so it doesn't become stale. Some days you'll have obvious great things; other days you might struggle – that's when it's most important. Even if it's “I had a hot cup of coffee and it tasted good,” put it down. You're training your brain to scan for positives rather than negatives. Over time, this can literally rewire cognitive biases – making you more inclined to notice the good things automatically, which fosters a more constant background of contentment.

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<sup>142</sup> Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). [Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 377-389.

<sup>143</sup> Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). [Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions](#). *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410-421.

- **Gratitude Meditation or Prayer:** If you're into meditation, you can spend a few minutes visualizing things you're grateful for and silently saying “thank you” for them. Some people pray in a thankful way (thanking their conception of a higher power for blessings) which can bring similar effects of joy and peace. It's the attitude, not the theology, that does the heavy lifting here, so secular or religious, doesn't matter — just immerse in appreciative thoughts.
- **Express Appreciation to Others:** This one not only boosts your happiness but someone else's, too. Next time you feel grateful to or for someone, *tell them*. Shoot a text: “Hey, I really appreciate that you \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you, it means a lot.” Or better yet, tell them in person or by phone call. It might feel a little vulnerable if you're not used to it, but most likely you'll make their day, and it strengthens your bond. These acts create an environment more conducive to happiness for everyone.
- **Visual Reminders:** Sometimes it helps to place visual cues for gratitude around you. Maybe a photo of loved ones on your desk so you remember to be grateful for them instead of stressed at work, a sticky note on your mirror, or a gratitude jar. The beauty of gratitude is it works even when life is tough. It's not about denying your problems; it's about noticing *what doesn't suck* in spite of them. If you're going through a breakup, you might feel awful, but gratitude can remind you “At least I'm healthy and have friends who care about me.” It won't erase pain, but it can balance perspective. People who practice gratitude regularly show increased resilience — they bounce back more readily because they can find

silver linings and not succumb to a purely negative view of events.<sup>144</sup>

One caution: gratitude is not the same as forcing Pollyanna positivity. You can acknowledge crap while still being thankful for other things. It's both-and, not either-or. Also, don't use it to *comparatively* shame yourself (“I shouldn't feel bad because others have it worse”) that's not true gratitude, that's guilt. Genuine gratitude is simply *appreciating the gift of what is good* without comparison.

If you incorporate a gratitude habit, you'll likely notice a subtle but visible shift in a few weeks: what used to be mundane might spark little moments of joy because you start seeing it differently. You realize, as the saying goes, that “the little things were the big things.”

This doesn't mean you settle or don't strive for change; it means you simultaneously appreciate what you have while you work for what you want.

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<sup>144</sup> Elfers, J., Hlava, P., Sharpe, F., Arreguin, S., & McGregor, D. C. (2023). [Resilience and loss: the correlation of grief and gratitude](#). *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 9(1), 327–345.

# Your Happiness Portfolio

## Flow — Losing Yourself (in a Good Way)

Ever been so absorbed in an activity that you lost track of time and everything else? That state is what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi famously dubbed “**flow**.”<sup>145</sup> Flow is characterized by *complete engagement, focus, and enjoyment* in the process of an activity. In flow, you're not mulling over worries or distracted by external stuff, you're “*in the zone*.” People describe it as some of their most satisfying moments. Think of an athlete in the middle of a game, an artist painting, a coder deep in programming, or even a casual hobbyist gardening or playing music blissfully. In flow, you may not feel “happy” in the smiley sense (instead, you might be intensely focused) but afterwards, you often feel a deep sense of fulfillment or even exhilaration.

Finding flow matters because it leads to what Csikszentmihalyi called “optimal experience” — those times when we stretch ourselves and feel fully alive and competent.<sup>146</sup> **The happiest people tend to regularly experience states of flow.** It contributes to a feeling of purpose and competence, which are key psychological nutrients for well-being.

So, how do you increase flow in your life?

- **Pick the Right Challenges:** Flow occurs when your skill level *matches the challenge* of the task — not too easy (that's boring), not too hard (that's stressful). It's that sweet spot in the middle. If you're, say, an intermediate rock climber, you get into flow on a route that's hard for you but doable with effort, you can't zone out,

<sup>145</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). [Flow: The psychology of optimal experience](#). New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>146</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M., & LeFevre, J. (1989). [Optimal experience in work and leisure](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56(5), 815–822.

you must focus, but you're not constantly failing either. Identify activities in your life that have this balance. If your work is too easy and rote, flow is rare; maybe you can add responsibilities that challenge you a bit more. If it's too hard and anxiety-provoking, perhaps break tasks into smaller manageable bits that allow small “wins” and focused effort when tackled step by step.

- **Cultivate Hobbies or Skills:** Many people find flow in creative or active hobbies (playing an instrument, writing, crafting, sports, hiking, etc.). These often require present-moment focus and have clear goals/feedback (like making progress on a song or reaching a mountain summit). If you don't have a hobby that absorbs you, consider experimenting with one. Think about times you've felt “lost” in something, what were you doing? Can you do more of that or find something similar? It could even be social flow, like a lively conversation or team project where ideas bounce back and forth and you're all in sync.
- **Minimize Distractions:** To experience flow, you need to set the stage for deep focus. In today's ping-notification-multitasking world, that means *designating time to single-task*. Turn off notifications, close unrelated tabs, let others know you need an hour undisturbed. Flow often takes some time to get into (you might toil for 15-20 minutes before it “clicks”), so set aside chunks of time for immersion. You'll come out more satisfied than if you spent the same hour context — switching between emails, social media, and tasks (which tends to feel fragmented and unfulfilling). It's worth it.
- **Set Clear Goals (within the activity):** Knowing what you're aiming to do helps keep you engaged. If you're painting, have a vision of

what you want to create. If you're working, define what outcome you're working toward in that session, and seek feedback. In flow activities, you usually get immediate feedback from the activity itself (like in a game you see how you're doing). If not, create little feedback loops yourself, like checking a test run of code you wrote, or reading back a paragraph you just wrote to see if it sounds right.

Flow can happen even in everyday chores, if you approach them with the right mindset (some people get into it while cooking or cleaning, by turning it into a focused task rather than a mindless one). But it's easiest to achieve in activities you intrinsically enjoy or care about. Notably, *passive leisure* (like watching TV) seldom produces flow because it doesn't require active involvement. It might relax you, but it often doesn't give the afterglow of satisfaction that flow does. If you find a lot of your downtime is passive and you're still feeling unfulfilled, try swapping in a more active hobby occasionally.

The benefit of flow isn't just the happiness during the activity; it builds your skills and confidence, too. You come out thinking “I did something cool/engaging,” which adds to your sense of accomplishment and identity. Over time, having regular flow experiences can significantly up your overall life satisfaction because you feel you're living fully, not just drifting.

## **Experiences vs. Stuff — Where Your Money Buys More Joy**

In a culture that bombards us with ads for the latest gadgets, fashion, and home upgrades, it's natural to think that material purchases will make us happy. After all, that new phone is sleek, that designer jacket looks sharp, and that upgraded car has all the bells and whistles. But here's what decades of research reveals: if you want to buy happiness,

you're better off spending on experiences than stuff.<sup>147</sup> But, why does this “experiential advantage” exist? It comes down to how our brains process and remember different types of purchases. Does that sound familiar?

**Material goods suffer from hedonic adaptation, as we covered earlier.**

Basically, we get used to stuff quickly. That thrilling new gadget becomes just another thing on your desk within weeks. Worse, material purchases invite comparison. Your fancy watch loses its luster when you spot your colleague's even fancier one. That cutting-edge phone feels outdated the moment the new model drops. We're wired to notice what others have, and with material goods, there's always something newer, shinier, or more expensive to covet.

Experiences, on the other hand, tend to improve with time through the magic of memory. That camping trip where it rained the whole time? Give it a few months and you'll be laughing about the “adventure” of it all. Our brains actively reconstruct memories in a positive light, especially for experiences.<sup>148</sup> We remember the highlights and minimize the hassles, what the psychologist Daniel Kahneman called the “peak-end rule.”<sup>149</sup> Your memory of a vacation focuses on that perfect sunset and amazing meal, not the delayed flight or mediocre hotel breakfast. This rosy retrospection means experiences actually become more valuable over time, while material goods depreciate both financially and emotionally.

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<sup>147</sup> Nicolao, L., Irwin, J. R., & Goodman, J. K. (2009). [Happiness for sale: Do experiential purchases make consumers happier than material purchases?](#) *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36(2), 188–198.

<sup>148</sup> Kumar, A., Killingsworth, M. A., & Gilovich, T. (2020). [Spending on doing promotes more moment-to-moment happiness than spending on having.](#) *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 88, 103971.

<sup>149</sup> Kahneman, D., Fredrickson, B. L., Schreiber, C. A., & Redelmeier, D. A. (1993). [When more pain is preferred to less: Adding a better end.](#) *Psychological Science*, 4(6), 401–405.

Beyond memory tricks, experiences tap into deeper psychological needs that things simply can't fulfill:

- **Identity and Self-Concept:** We are what we do, not what we have. When people tell their life stories, they talk about places they've been and things they've done, not items they've purchased. That backpacking trip through Europe becomes part of who you are in a way that an expensive handbag never will. Experiences get woven into your identity, while material possessions remain external, separate from your core self. As one researcher put it, "Your life is the sum of your experiences."<sup>150</sup> Nobody on their deathbed wishes they'd bought more stuff.
- **Social Connection:** Experiences are inherently more social than possessions. Even solo experiences like traveling alone create opportunities to meet people and develop into stories to share later. But a great many experiences involve others directly – concerts with friends, dinners with family, classes with fellow learners. These shared experiences bond us together, creating what researchers call "social capital."<sup>151</sup> People enjoy talking about experiences more than possessions, and listeners prefer hearing about them too.
- **Uniqueness and Comparison Resistance:** Every experience is one-of-a-kind. Your trip to Paris is yours alone – nobody else saw it through your eyes, with your companions, at that exact moment in time. This makes experiences largely comparison-proof. Sure, your friend might have stayed at a fancier hotel in Paris, but they didn't

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<sup>150</sup> Lyubomirsky, S. (2016, January 3). "You're the sum of your experiences." [Quoted in E. Fitzpatrick, [5 ways to maintain your vacation happiness](#)]. *U.S. News & World Report*.

<sup>151</sup> Putnam, R. D. (1995). [Bowling alone: America's declining social capital](#). *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 65–78.

have YOUR Paris experience. With material goods, comparison is straightforward and usually unfavorable — their car is newer, their house is bigger, their TV has more pixels. But experiences are apples and oranges, wonderfully incomparable.

The research on this is remarkably robust. In one study tracking people in real-time, participants were randomly texted throughout the day and asked about their happiness and recent purchases. Turns out, spending your money on stuff you *do* makes you way happier than blowing it on stuff you *own*. And this isn't just some feel-good theory — it holds up across the board: cheap or pricey, big or small. Whether you're about to do the thing, in the middle of doing the thing, or just thinking back on doing the thing — it consistently feels better than buying more crap.<sup>152</sup>

Here's how to apply this insight to your own spending:

- **Budget for joy:** Look at your discretionary spending and consciously shift some from material to experiential. Maybe skip the wardrobe update and take a weekend trip instead. Pass on the latest tech toy and sign up for those pottery classes you've been considering. Create a specific “experience fund” to make this concrete.
- **Prioritize social experiences:** Given that experiences plus relationships equal maximum happiness, prioritize purchases that combine both. When you must buy material goods, consider doing it socially — go furniture shopping with a friend who has good taste, so you get to make it an experience rather than just an acquisition.

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<sup>152</sup> Kumar, A., Killingsworth, M. A., & Gilovich, T. (2020). [Spending on doing promotes more moment-to-moment happiness than spending on having](#). *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 88, 103915.

- **Document and Savor:** Take photos (but don't obsess over them), keep ticket stubs, write brief journal entries about your experiences. This gives you raw material for positive reminiscence later. Research shows that anticipating experiences brings more joy than anticipating material purchases,<sup>153</sup> so book experiences in advance when possible. The happiness starts the moment you buy those concert tickets, peaks during the show, and continues every time you remember it.
- **Start Small:** You don't need expensive vacations to tap into the experiential advantage. A picnic in the park, a new hiking trail, a matinee movie, trying a new cuisine, these modest experiences often bring more joy than much pricier material goods. In fact, experiences don't have to cost anything: they come in the form of free museum days, library events, community festivals, or nature walks. The experiential advantage isn't about spending more; it's about spending differently.

One important caveat: The experiential advantage is strongest for people whose basic material needs are already met. If you're struggling to afford decent clothes or reliable transportation, material purchases that meet genuine needs can absolutely increase happiness. A warm coat when you've been cold, a working laptop when yours has died, a comfortable mattress when you've been sleeping poorly, can be genuinely transformative. The experiential advantage kicks in most strongly when we're talking about discretionary spending beyond necessities.

Also, be mindful that not all experiences are positive. A terrible vacation can leave you less happy than a reliable material purchase. The key is

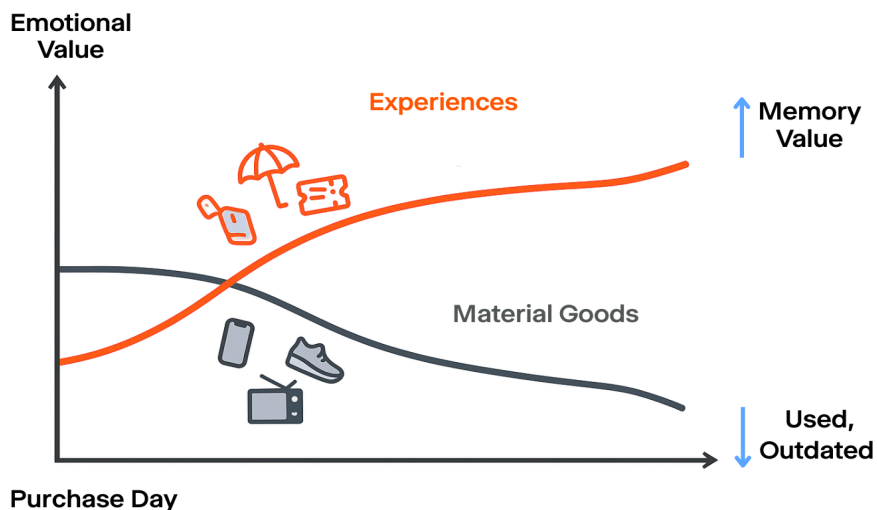
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<sup>153</sup> Kumar, A., Killingsworth, M. A., & Gilovich, T. (2014). [Waiting for Merlot: Anticipatory consumption of experiential and material purchases](#). *Psychological Science*, 25(10), 1924-1931.

## The Happiness Portfolio

that positive experiences tend to be appreciated in memory while positive material purchases depreciate in satisfaction. Choose experiences thoughtfully, but don't let perfect be the enemy of good. Even imperfect experiences can often become good stories.

The bottom line is this: In a consumer culture that's constantly pushing you to buy more stuff, science offers a subversive message: Happiness isn't found in having more, but in *doing* more.



**Buy experiences, not stuff.**

## Acts of Kindness — The Helper's High

Earlier we noted how **prosocial behavior** (kindness, generosity, volunteering) boosts happiness. This is often called the “helper's high.”<sup>154</sup> Doing good makes us feel good — it's deeply wired in humans because we're social animals. When you perform a kind act, it can flood your brain with feel-good chemicals (sometimes even more than doing something for yourself). Over time, being a giving person bolsters your self-image (you feel useful, connected) and can imbue life with meaning (knowing you make a difference). It also tends to win you friends and appreciation, creating a positive feedback loop socially.

How to incorporate kindness intentionally:

- **Everyday Kindness:** Look for small ways to be helpful or considerate in daily life. Hold the door for the person behind you, let someone in your lane in traffic, help a colleague who's swamped by taking a task off their plate, compliment a stranger or coworker on something you genuinely admire. These minor acts take little time but can create micro-bursts of joy — for them and for you. One study had people do 5 acts of kindness in a single day each week for 6 weeks; those folks became happier than a control group.<sup>155</sup> Notably, the acts were as simple as giving someone a ride or writing a thank-you note.
- **Volunteer or Give Back:** Dedicating time to a cause you care about is a powerful happiness booster. It provides a sense of purpose and often social connection with fellow volunteers. Whether it's mentoring youth, cleaning up parks, helping at a food bank, or

<sup>154</sup> Barraza, J. A., & Zak, P. J. (2009). [Empathy toward strangers triggers oxytocin release and subsequent generosity](#). *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1167, 182-189.

<sup>155</sup> Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). [Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change](#). *Review of General Psychology*, 9(2), 111-131.

campaigning for a community project, find something that resonates with your values. If time is an issue, even occasional volunteering (say, one Saturday a month) is beneficial. Giving feels good — especially when you care about the cause and can see the impact. In fact, once your basics are covered, spending on others often makes you happier than spending on yourself. It's not just the money — it's the connection and knowing you made a difference.

- **Kindness in Relationships:** Look for chances to do something thoughtful for your partner, family, or friends. Maybe you surprise your partner with breakfast, or you pick up a friend's favorite snack when you meet. Maybe you offer to babysit your sister's kids so she can have a break, or you run an errand for an elderly neighbor. When you treat those around you with kindness and generosity, it strengthens the relationship (they feel cared for) and you feel more loving and connected.

This is important: do it genuinely and not with expectation of something in return (true kindness is a gift, not a trade). Ironically, when both people in a relationship adopt that attitude, *everyone* ends up getting a lot in return, creating a very positive dynamic.

- **Random Acts and Beyond:** Some people like the concept of “**random acts of kindness**” — doing nice things for strangers anonymously or unexpectedly. It could be feeding someone's parking meter, leaving an inspiring note in a library book, or paying for the coffee of the person behind you in line. These fun little practices can give you a secret thrill. You know you did something good, even if unknown, that can actually feel quite pure. However, kindness doesn't have to be random, planned kindness is just as good or better.

Studies have even shown that the participants who were asked to perform more acts of kindness ended up with higher well-being and greater peer acceptance (people liked them more).<sup>156</sup> It's a virtuous cycle: being kind makes you happy, and being happier tends to make you more kind, and others respond positively which makes you happier... and so on.

One caution: ensure you also practice *self-kindness*. Being kind doesn't mean becoming a martyr or burning yourself out to please others. Balance is important. Replenish yourself so you can keep giving. Often, doing something kind for yourself (like taking a relaxing bath or giving yourself a break) can boost your mood, which then enables you to spread kindness outward. So don't exclude yourself from the circle of compassion.

By weaving intentional kindness into your life, you create meaning and positive emotion out of thin air. Even on days you feel down, doing something nice for someone can lift you (and them) up a bit. It reminds you that you have agency to create goodness in the world. And in a very real sense, **happiness is a byproduct of value-driven action**: when you act according to kindness, love, generosity, you feel aligned and fulfilled.

We've now assembled a toolkit of intentional strategies: caring for your body, nurturing relationships, practicing gratitude, engaging in flow, shifting your mindset, and helping others. If this seems like a lot, remember, you don't have to do everything at once.

You can think of it as a menu, by starting with a couple that resonate most and incorporating them into your routine. Over time, you can add

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<sup>156</sup> Layous, K., Nelson, S. K., Oberle, E., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). [Kindness counts: prompting prosocial behavior in preadolescents boosts peer acceptance and well-being](#). *PLoS one*, 7(12), e51380.

more. The beauty is that many of these reinforce each other (exercise with a friend = healthy + relationship; volunteering = kindness + social + meaning; gratitude helps reframe and savor; etc.). They create a supportive ecosystem for happiness.

### **The Paradox of Intentional Happiness**

Here's the twist: the most effective intentional activities often aren't directly about happiness. They're about connection, contribution, growth, and meaning. Happiness emerges as a byproduct.

This brings us full circle to ancient wisdom. The stoics practiced virtue not to be happy but because it was right — and found tranquility. Buddhists meditate not to feel good but to understand reality — and discover peace. Those who serve others don't aim for happiness but for impact — and find fulfillment.

The intentional activities that most reliably boost happiness are those pursued for their own sake. Exercise for health and energy. Connect for love and belonging. Practice gratitude for perspective. Contribute for meaning. Happiness follows.

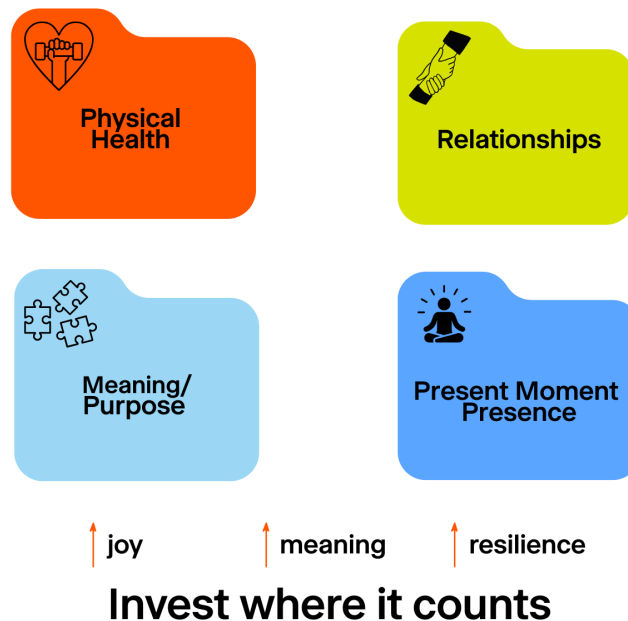
### **Your Happiness Portfolio**

Think of your well-being as an investment portfolio:

- Your baseline (50%) is like bonds — stable, unchanging, the foundation
- Your circumstances (10%) are like real estate — they matter, but less than you think and change slowly

- Your intentional activities (40%) are like stocks — where you have the most control and potential for growth <sup>157</sup>

# Happiness Portfolio



A wise investor doesn't ignore bonds because they can't change them. They don't pour everything into real estate hoping it will transform their wealth. They focus on stocks — making regular, diverse investments that compound over time.

Similarly, accept your baseline while working skillfully with it. Improve circumstances that truly matter while not expecting miracles. And

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<sup>157</sup> Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). [Is it possible to become happier? \(And if so, how?\)](#). *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 1(1), 129-145.

invest most of your effort in intentional activities — the daily practices that, compounded over time, can transform your experience of life.

You can also think of it this way: the building of happiness has three floors, but you live mostly on the top one. Make it beautiful.

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# Don't Pursue Happiness; Remove Unhappiness

## The Backwards Law

On my first meditation retreat, I arrived hopeful, optimistic and naive. I had recently become obsessed with Buddhism and meditation and was committed to sitting for days staring at a wall, ready to discover incredible truths about myself.

Instead, I spent the better part of a week battling constant knee and back pain, boredom, and an overwhelming urge to go home. The harder I tried to find peace, the more agitated I became. The more I pursued enlightenment, the further it receded and the more disappointed and annoyed I became.

On day three, exhausted from the effort, I finally gave up. I stopped trying to meditate "correctly." I stopped chasing transcendent experiences. I just sat there, accepting my failure, silently waiting until I could go home.

And in that moment of surrender, something shifted. Not enlightenment exactly, but a profound relief. The peace I'd been desperately seeking appeared the moment I stopped seeking it.

This is what I call the "Backwards Law": Pursuing a positive experience is itself a negative experience. Accepting a negative experience is itself a positive experience.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Manson, M. (2016). [The subtle art of not giving a fck: A counterintuitive approach to living a good life\\*](#).

This isn't just philosophical wordplay, but a cornerstone of Buddhist thought and a fundamental truth about human psychology that modern happiness research is understating.

### The Subtraction Method

Think about what happens when you actively try to be happy:.

- You monitor your emotions constantly (“Am I happy yet?”)
- You compare your current state to an imagined ideal
- You find yourself lacking
- You feel bad about not feeling good
- You try harder

The cycle intensifies.

It's like trying to fall asleep by concentrating really hard on sleeping. The effort itself creates the opposite of what you want. Psychologists call this “ironic process theory” — the very act of monitoring whether you're achieving a mental state makes that state less likely to occur.<sup>159</sup>

This creates what I like to call “meta-emotions” — feelings about feelings. You don't just feel sad; you feel bad about feeling sad. You don't just experience anxiety; you get anxious about being anxious. These secondary emotions often cause more suffering than the original feelings.

The happiness industry exploits this trap. It promises that with the right technique, product, or mindset, you can achieve lasting happiness. When the technique fails (as it must), you blame yourself. You must not be doing it right. You need to try harder, buy more, do better. The pursuit intensifies, and the unhappiness deepens.

<sup>159</sup> Wegner, D. M., Erber, R., & Zanakos, S. (1993). [Ironic processes in the mental control of mood and mood-related thought](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65(6), 1093–1104.

## Removing Unhappiness

But what if the most effective path to happiness wasn't about happiness at all? What if, instead, it's about removing unhappiness?

The direct pursuit of happiness is self-defeating. But the removal of unnecessary unhappiness — that's where real progress lies. Perhaps the goal isn't to be happy all the time. It's simply to prevent being miserable.

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# Comparison is the Thief of Joy

## The Direction of Comparison Matters

Social comparison theory shows us there are two types of comparisons we make with other people: upward and downward.

**Upward comparison** is when you look at someone you feel is doing better or is more skilled than you. This can be motivating because it gives you something inspiring to aim for. However, it often leaves you feeling a little worse about yourself because it highlights what you don't have or haven't achieved yet.

Comparing yourself upward — looking at people who seem better off — can make you feel bad, triggering feelings of envy, dissatisfaction, or discouragement.<sup>160</sup> But there's an important exception: if you see the other person's success as achievable for you, then instead of feeling bad, you feel inspired. They become a role model rather than a source of envy.

On the flip side, if the gap feels too big, upward comparisons tend to make you feel worse. Instead of feeling inspired, you feel inadequate, which hurts your self-esteem and motivation.<sup>161</sup>

**Downward comparison** is when you look at someone who's worse off than you — and yeah, it can make you feel a bit better by contrast. For sure, at least once in your life you've heard the phrase “There are people who have it worse.” It's a way of boosting your mood or confidence, especially when things aren't going great. Psychologists think that when

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<sup>160</sup> Lockwood, P., & Kunda, Z. (1997). [Superstars and me: Predicting the impact of role models on the self](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(1), 91-103.

<sup>161</sup> Collins, R. L. (1996). [For better or worse: The impact of upward social comparison on self-evaluations](#). *Psychological Bulletin*, 119(1), 51-69.

we're feeling threatened or like we've failed, we naturally look for these comparisons to help us cope.<sup>162</sup>

Interestingly, studies have found that hearing about someone who's doing worse than you can actually feel good. It gives you a quick hit of relief, maybe even a little boost in mood. In the short term, it can lift your sense of well-being.

But there's a catch.

While downward comparisons can make you feel better (“Hey, at least I’m doing better than that guy”), they can also kill your motivation. When you feel like you’re already ahead, it’s easy to get complacent. Why push harder if you’re already looking good by comparison?

Research backs this up. In one study on video game performance, players who compared themselves to worse performers felt more competent and had more fun — but they didn't necessarily get better. On the flip side, comparing upward — to someone doing better — lowered confidence and motivation for a short period of time, but had them perform better.<sup>163</sup>

So, the kind of comparison you make really matters. Looking up can sting, but it can push you to grow. Looking down can feel good, but it might hold you back.

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<sup>162</sup> Wills, T. A. (1981). [Downward comparison principles in social psychology](#). *Psychological Bulletin*, 90(2), 245–271.

<sup>163</sup> Huguet, P., Dumas, F., Monteil, J.-M., & Genestoux, N. (2001). [Social comparison choices in the classroom: Further evidence for students' upward comparison tendency and its beneficial impact on performance](#). *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31(5), 557–578.



## Similarity Drives Comparison

We don't just compare ourselves to anyone at random — we're actually pretty selective. Most of the time, we compare ourselves to people who are similar to us in some meaningful way.

Back in 1954, psychologist Leon Festinger laid this out in a classic theory. He argued that when we're trying to evaluate our abilities or opinions, we naturally look to people who are kind of like us. Why? Because they give us a clearer, more useful benchmark. It's basically an “apples to apples” thing. If the person you're comparing yourself to is too different — way ahead of you, or in a totally different situation — it can throw things off. The comparison stops being helpful and can even backfire, making you feel worse or just confused about where you

stand.<sup>164</sup> Research backs up this idea, often called the similarity hypothesis — we tend to compare ourselves to people who are close to our own ability level. Not way above, not way below. Just enough to give us a bit of a challenge.

Take a casual tennis player, for example. She's probably sizing up her skills against another weekend player — not Serena Williams. Comparing herself to a pro wouldn't be helpful or motivating. But someone just a little better? That's where the sweet spot is. It's close enough to feel relevant, but just far enough to push her to improve.<sup>165</sup> When it comes to opinions and beliefs, we also tend to look toward people who share our background or values. If folks like us think the same way, it gives us a sense that we're probably on the right track.

We seek out similar comparison targets for a reason — they help us feel both accurate *and* okay about ourselves. When we compare with people who “mirror” us in some way, it gives us a solid, realistic standard. It helps cut through uncertainty without making us feel inferior.

You see this play out clearly in studies of stigmatized groups. People in disadvantaged groups often compare themselves to others within the same group — folks who are dealing with the same barriers — rather than to members of more privileged groups. It's not just about fairness; it's about making meaningful, manageable comparisons.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Festinger, L. (1954). [A theory of social comparison processes](#). *Human Relations*, 7, 117–140.

<sup>165</sup> Goethals, G. R., & Darley, J. M. (1987). [Social comparison theory: Self-evaluation and group life](#). In *Springer eBooks* (pp. 21–47).

<sup>166</sup> Crocker, J., & Major, B. (1989). [Social stigma and self-esteem: The self-protective properties of stigma](#). *Psychological Review*, 96(4), 608–630.

## The Local Dominance Effect

When it comes to judging ourselves, we care way more about how we stack up locally than globally. This is what researchers call the “local dominance effect.”<sup>167</sup>

We're more influenced by the few people right around us — friends, classmates, coworkers — than by big-picture stats or national averages. Your standardized test score might say one thing, but if your buddy scored higher, that's what hits. We measure ourselves in the mirror of who's closest.

This creates what psychologists call the “big fish in a small pond” effect. Students often feel more confident and happy when they're top performers in an average school than when they're average in a top school. If you're surrounded by low-performing peers, you might think you're crushing it — even if you're just okay by broader standards. On the flip side, if everyone around you is excelling, you might start doubting yourself despite doing well.<sup>168</sup>

## Why Local Comparisons Hit So Hard

It's all about what feels real. We see, talk to, and get feedback from the people around us constantly — those comparisons are up close, personal, and concrete. But distant stats? They're just numbers that don't carry the same emotional weight. There's a difference between seeing someone's score on a spreadsheet and watching your friend ace

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<sup>167</sup> Zell, E., & Alicke, M. D. (2010). [The local dominance effect in self-evaluation: Evidence and explanations](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14(4), 368–384.

<sup>168</sup> Marsh, H. W., & Parker, J. W. (2014). [Determinants of student self-concept: Is it better to be a relatively large fish in a small pond even if you don't learn to swim as well?](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47(1), 213-231.

the test you just struggled with. One hits you in the gut; the other doesn't.

There's also an evolutionary angle. Humans evolved in small groups where knowing your rank really mattered for survival. Our brains got wired to treat local status as top-priority intel — and that wiring hasn't changed, even in our globally connected world.

Local comparisons can mess with your sense of reality. You might feel tall because you're the tallest in your friend group, but zoom out and you're actually shorter than average. Local wins can inflate your self-view while local losses deflate it, even when the bigger picture says otherwise.

The key is managing these comparisons wisely. If being top of your class motivates you, you might be happier at a less competitive school where you can excel. But constantly seeking to be the big fish can limit growth. Instead, measure success against your own progress or meaningful benchmarks — not just how you stack up against whoever happens to be nearby.

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## The Paradox of Choice

*Learning to choose is hard. Learning to choose well is harder. And learning to choose well in a world of unlimited possibilities is harder still, perhaps too hard.*

– Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice*

Have you ever spent an hour scrolling through Netflix without selecting anything to watch? Or found yourself researching every possible phone plan only to feel exhausted and unsure by the end? You're not alone. Intuitively, we might think more choice = more happiness. Yet, as psychologist Barry Schwartz argues, an overabundance of choices can backfire.

Decision paralysis can lock us into a cycle of stress, second-guessing, and dissatisfaction.<sup>169</sup> The more we have to choose from, the higher our expectations climb — and the harder it becomes to feel content with any single decision. When everything is possible, it's easy to feel that nothing is good enough. Recognizing this paradox of choice is the first step toward breaking free from the anxiety of indecision and finding genuine fulfillment in a world bursting with possibilities.

### The Psychology of Too Many Options

Imagine standing in a grocery aisle faced with 24 flavors of jam. Logic suggests you're more likely to find a jam you adore, but research indicates otherwise. In a famous landmark experiment, shoppers presented with 24 jam options were far less likely to make a purchase

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<sup>169</sup> Schwartz, B., Ward, A., Monterosso, J., Lyubomirsky, S., White, K., & Lehman, D. R. (2002). [Maximizing versus satisficing: Happiness is a matter of choice](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(5), 1178-1197.

(3%) than those choosing from only 6 jams (30%) demonstrating how too many choices can overwhelm our cognitive resources, leading to decision avoidance or second-guessing.<sup>170</sup>

The phenomenon extends well beyond consumer products. In the digital age, choice overload hits hard — especially on dating apps.

With what feels like an endless scroll of potential matches, it's easy to get overwhelmed. Anthropologist Helen Fisher calls it “cognitive overload” — your brain basically short-circuits from too many options. Instead of feeling excited, you end up less satisfied with anyone you choose. Worse, all that swiping can lead to seeing people more as profiles than as actual humans. When there's always “someone else” just a swipe away, it gets harder to commit — and easier to objectify.<sup>171</sup>

Interestingly, research shows that our biggest regrets tend to show up in areas where we feel like we had the most choice. At the top of the list? Education, career, and romance — followed by parenting, personal growth, and even how we spend our free time. Basically, the more options we think we have, the more room there is for “what ifs.”<sup>172</sup>

### Why We Struggle with Too Many Choices

Research identifies four key problems that emerge when we face too many options:<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Iyengar, S. S., & Lepper, M. R. (2000). [When choice is demotivating: Can one desire too much of a good thing?](#) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(6), 995–1006.

<sup>171</sup> Fisher, H. E. (2016). [Anatomy of love: A natural history of mating, marriage, and why we stray](#). W. W. Norton & Company.

<sup>172</sup> Roese, N. J., & Summerville, A. (2005). [What we regret most... and why](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(9), 1273-1285.

<sup>173</sup> Schwartz, B. (2004). [The paradox of choice: Why more is less](#). Ecco.

1. **Information Overload:** When faced with dozens or hundreds of options, our brains simply can't process all the data needed to make a fully informed choice.
2. **Rising Expectations:** As options multiply, our standards for what constitutes a “good choice” also rise accordingly, making satisfaction harder to achieve.
3. **Opportunity cost:** Each choice we make also means saying no to countless alternatives.
4. **Self-Blame:** With so many alternatives available, we don't blame the situation — we blame *ourselves* when outcomes aren't perfect.

Understanding these psychological traps is crucial, but awareness alone isn't enough. The real question becomes: how do we actually make better decisions when faced with overwhelming choice? The answer lies in understanding two fundamentally different approaches to decision-making — and recognizing which one leads to greater happiness.

## Two Approaches to Decision Making

When faced with choices, people typically fall somewhere on a spectrum between two decision-making styles:<sup>174</sup>

### Maximizers: The Perfectionists

Maximizers approach decisions with one goal: finding the absolute best option there is. Some people go all-in, spending hours — days,

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<sup>174</sup> Khare, A., Chowdhury, T. G., & Morgan, J. (2021). [Maximizers and satisficers: Can't choose and can't reject](#). *Journal of Business Research*, 135, 731–748.

even — comparing every possible option, convinced that if they just search hard enough, they'll land the ideal outcome.

But here's the problem: the more options there are, the more exhausting it gets. They feel like they have to consider every single alternative before making a move. And even when they finally choose, they're often stuck with a nagging voice asking, “Could I have done better?”

It's the curse of chasing optimal — and it doesn't come cheap.

Despite often making objectively better choices, maximizers tend to experience:<sup>175</sup>

- Lower overall happiness and life satisfaction
- Lower optimism
- Higher depression and neuroticism
- Higher perfectionism and anxiety
- Greater susceptibility to upward social comparison
- Greater regret after making decisions

### Satisficers: The Pragmatists

Satisficers (combining “satisfy” and “suffice”) take a different approach. They establish a set of criteria that would make an option “good enough,” and choose the first alternative that meets those standards. Once they've made a choice, satisficers simply move on. When they later discover better options might have existed, they don't beat themselves up about it. Instead, they see these new possibilities as

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<sup>175</sup> Vargová, L., Zibrínová, L., & Baník, G. (2023). [The way of making choices: Maximizing and satisficing and their relationship to well-being, personality, and self-rumination](#). *Judgment and Decision Making*, 18(1), 88–97.

opportunities for next time, not reasons to regret what they've already chosen.

Satisficers, by contrast, generally report:<sup>176</sup>

- Higher levels of happiness and contentment
- Higher ability to enjoy their choices
- Less regret about their choices
- Lower stress during the decision-making process
- Greater resilience when facing an abundance of options

### From a Maximiser to a Satisficer

The good news is that you can train yourself to become a satisficer — someone who chooses “good enough” and ends up happier for it. Here's how to make the shift:

- **Prioritize your decisions:** Save your energy for choices that truly matter — like career changes, education, or where to live. For everyday decisions, “good enough” is actually better.
- **Set clear standards upfront:** Before you start looking, decide what would make you satisfied. Once you find something that meets those criteria, stop searching and choose it.
- **Limit your options and research time:** Look at only 3-5 choices maximum and set a time limit for deciding. More options and endless research usually make you less happy, not more.

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<sup>176</sup> Belli, A., Carrillat, F. A., Zlatevska, N., & Cowley, E. (2022). [The wellbeing implications of maximizing: A conceptual framework and meta-analysis](#). *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 32(4), 573–596.

- **Challenge perfectionist thinking:** When you catch yourself thinking in all-or-nothing terms (“this has to be perfect or it's worthless”), step back and ask if that's realistic. Most decisions don't need to be flawless to be good.
- **Focus on what works, not what others have:** When you start comparing your choice to someone else's or thinking “but what if there's something better?” bring the focus back to whether your decision works for you. That's what really counts.
- **Make the decision and move on:** Once you've chosen, resist the urge to keep second-guessing. Practice being grateful for the good parts of your decision instead of dwelling on what might have been different. Celebrate when things work out instead of focusing on how they could have been better.

The shift from maximizer to satisficer isn't about becoming lazy or careless — it's about recognizing that perfectionism often stands in the way of contentment. When you stop chasing the impossible ideal, you start living with what's actually good.

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# How Happiness Changes Across Your Lifetime

When researchers first began studying happiness across the human lifespan, they expected to find what most of us assume: happiness peaks in youth and declines with age. After all, getting older means losing things — energy, health, friends, opportunities.

What they discovered instead was shocking. The story of happiness across a lifetime isn't a tragedy of decline. It's something far more hopeful than anyone imagined.

## The Surprising Shape of Lifelong Happiness

Picture a graph of life satisfaction from age 20 to 80. The shape isn't what you'd expect. It's not a downward slope or even a flat line. Instead, it forms a clear U-shape — high in youth, dipping in middle age, then rising again in later life.<sup>177,178</sup>

This pattern shows up everywhere researchers look. Americans, Europeans, rich countries, developing nations — the U persists across cultures and economic conditions. Large-scale studies consistently find that life satisfaction typically bottoms out somewhere between 40 and 50, then climbs steadily through the 60s and 70s.<sup>179,180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Blanchflower, D. G., & Oswald, A. J. (2008). [Is well-being U-shaped over the life cycle?](#) *Social Science & Medicine*, 66(8), 1733–1749.

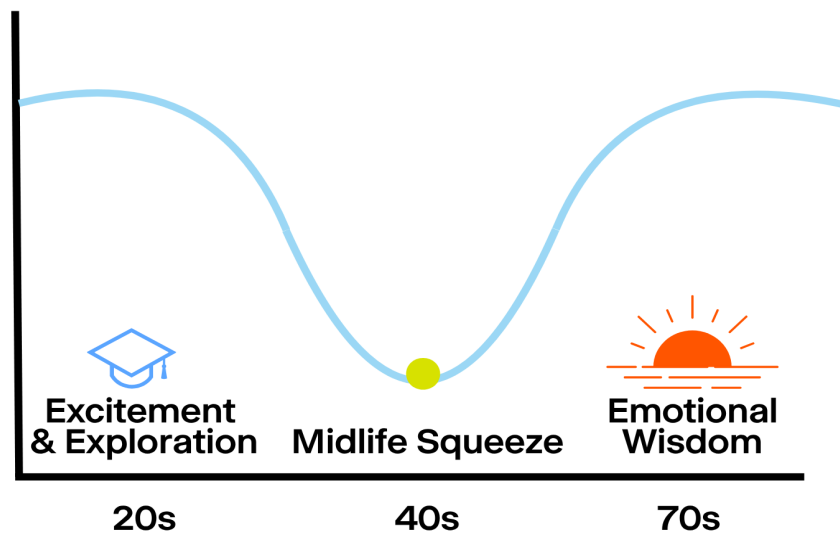
<sup>178</sup> Galambos, N. L., Krahn, H. J., Johnson, M. D., & Lachman, M. E. (2020). [The U shape of happiness across the life course: Expanding the discussion.](#) *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(4), 898–912.

<sup>179</sup> Blanchflower, D. G. (2021). [Is happiness U-shaped everywhere? Age and subjective well-being in 145 countries.](#) *Journal of Population Economics*, 34(2), 575–624.

<sup>180</sup> Cheng, T. C., Powdthavee, N., & Oswald, A. J. (2017). [Longitudinal evidence for a midlife nadir in human well-being: Results from four data sets.](#) *The Economic Journal*, 127(599), 126–142.

This finding was so counterintuitive that researchers spent years trying to debunk it. But study after study confirmed the same pattern: we don't just decline with age. We adapt, learn, and often end up happier than we started.

### U-Curve of Life Satisfaction



*Adapted from Graham, C., & Nikolova, M. (2014). Why aging and working makes us happy in 4 charts.*

### The Intensity Years: Your 20s and 30s

Young adulthood bursts with emotional intensity. Everything feels urgent and potentially life-changing. This is the age of first loves, career launches, and identity formation. Young adults literally feel more

intensely than older people — both the highs and the lows.<sup>181</sup>

This isn't emotional instability — it's emotional exploration. Young adults are discovering their range, testing boundaries, figuring out what moves them.

The happiness of youth focuses on excitement, pleasure, and peak experiences. Young people will endure significant discomfort (think music-festival camping or all-night study sessions) for moments of intense joy. They're optimizing for highlights, not consistency.

This intensity serves a purpose. Young adults need enormous energy and optimism to build a life — starting careers, forming relationships, establishing independence. The emotional volatility of youth provides that fuel, even when it sometimes burns too hot.

### **The Middle Age Squeeze: Your 40s and 50s**

Then comes the squeeze. By middle age, the gap between dreams and reality becomes visible. The career isn't what you imagined. The marriage has settled into routine. The kids demand everything while appreciating nothing. Your once-invincible parents now need care. Your body catalogs every indignity.

Multiple studies confirm that life satisfaction hits rock bottom in the mid-40s. Even controlling for income, health, employment, and relationships, being in your 40s predicts lower life satisfaction than any other age.<sup>182</sup>

Why this midlife dip? Several brutal realities converge:

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<sup>181</sup> Fareri, D. S., Martin, L. N., & Delgado, M. R. (2008). [Reward-related processing in the human brain: Developmental considerations](#). *Development and Psychopathology*, 20(4), 1191–1211.

<sup>182</sup> Blanchflower D. G. (2021). [Is happiness U-shaped everywhere? Age and subjective well-being in 145 countries](#). *Journal of population economics*, 34(2), 575–624.

- **The Burden Peak:** You're simultaneously raising children, supporting aging parents, and carrying maximum career responsibilities. You're the “sandwich generation” – pressed between demands from above and below with minimum freedom.<sup>183</sup>
- **The Comparison Trap:** Life trajectories have diverged enough to make comparisons painful. Your college roommate built a family while you're still grinding. Your sister's kids got into great colleges while yours struggled. The neighbor's marriage looks perfect while yours needs work. Youth's “anything is possible” has become middle age's “this is what I got.”
- **Time Reality Check:** In youth, time feels infinite. By middle age, mortality becomes real. You have more yesterdays than tomorrows. Dreams must be reconciled with remaining time. “It's now or never” carries new weight.

This midlife dip appears even among the objectively successful. CEOs, professors, and lottery winners all show the same pattern. It's not about failing to achieve – it's something deeper about how humans process life stages.<sup>184</sup>

But here's the plot twist the research also reveals: not everyone gets crushed by the midlife squeeze. Some people actually hit their happiness peak in their 40s and 50s, bucking the U-curve entirely.<sup>185</sup> What separates these outliers? They tend to be people who either never

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<sup>183</sup> Grundy, E., & Henretta, J. C. (2006). [Between elderly parents and adult children: A new look at the intergenerational care provided by the 'sandwich generation'](#). *Ageing & Society*, 26(5), 707–722.

<sup>184</sup> Stone, A. A., Schwartz, J. E., Broderick, J. E., & Deaton, A. (2010). [A snapshot of the age distribution of psychological well-being in the United States](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 107(22), 9985–9990.

<sup>185</sup> Galambos, N. L., Fang, S., Krahn, H. J., Johnson, M. D., & Lachman, M. E. (2015). [Up, not down: The age curve in happiness from early adulthood to midlife in two longitudinal studies](#). *Developmental Psychology*, 51(11), 1664–1671.

bought into society's standard timeline in the first place, or who made peace with their choices early. The 45-year-old who genuinely loves their “boring” job, has realistic expectations about marriage, and stopped comparing themselves to others years ago. The childless-by-choice couple who used their freedom to build exactly the life they wanted. The late bloomer who didn't start their real career until 35 and is now hitting their stride. These people avoided the midlife dip not because they're special, but because they sidestepped the three brutal realities that crush everyone else. They either structured their lives to avoid the burden peak, opted out of the comparison game, or made peace with time's limitations before mortality started breathing down their necks.

The lesson? The midlife squeeze isn't inevitable — it's largely the result of living according to other people's scripts instead of writing your own

### **The Happiness Comeback: Your 60s and Beyond**

Just when cultural narratives suggest happiness should plummet — retirement, health issues, loss of loved ones — something unexpected happens. Happiness rises. And keeps rising, often surpassing the joy of youth.

This isn't denial or delusion. Older adults aren't ignoring life's difficulties. Instead, they've developed what researchers call “emotional wisdom” — sophisticated strategies for maintaining well-being despite challenges.

As time horizons shrink, people get better at prioritizing what matters. They invest in close relationships rather than spreading themselves thin. They seek meaningful experiences rather than novel ones. They savor rather than constantly seek more.

Older adults also process emotions differently. When facing negative situations, they're more likely to consider context and meaning rather than just react. They've learned to manage their emotional responses in ways that protect their well-being.

Perhaps most importantly, older adults show a “positivity bias” in memory – they naturally focus on and remember positive events more vividly than negative ones. This isn't failing memory; it's selective wisdom about what deserves mental energy.<sup>186</sup>

### What Changes: The Components of Later-Life Happiness

Several key shifts contribute to the happiness upturn in later life:

- **Acceptance Over Achievement:** Young adults pursue happiness through getting more – better job, bigger house, more recognition. Older adults find happiness through accepting what is rather than striving for what might be. This isn't giving up; it's wisdom about what can and can't be changed.
- **Depth Over Breadth:** Social networks shrink with age, but relationship quality improves dramatically. Older adults invest in fewer, deeper relationships. They spend less time with acquaintances and more with close friends and family. These intimate connections provide more satisfaction than youth's broader but shallower networks.<sup>187</sup>
- **Present Over Future:** Young adults sacrifice present happiness for future gains – grueling education for career prospects, saving for

<sup>186</sup> Mather, M., & Carstensen, L. L. (2005). [Aging and motivated cognition: the positivity effect in attention and memory](#). *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 9(10), 496–502.

<sup>187</sup> Charles, S. T., & Carstensen, L. L. (2010). [Social and emotional aging](#). *Annual review of psychology*, 61, 383–409.

distant goals. Older adults prioritize present satisfaction. They're more likely to splurge on experiences, express feelings immediately, and resolve conflicts quickly.

- **Meaning Over Thrills:** The happiness of age focuses on purpose, connection, and contentment rather than intense pleasure. Older adults report less frequent peaks of joy but more consistent satisfaction. They've traded fireworks for a steady flame.
- **Smart Choices:** As abilities decline, older adults get better at selecting fewer goals, optimizing their remaining strengths, and finding workarounds for weaknesses. A pianist with arthritis might play fewer pieces but perfect the ones within reach.<sup>188</sup>

### What This Means for Your Life Right Now

Understanding this pattern offers practical guidance for whatever stage you're in:

- **If You're Young (20s-30s):**  
Your emotional intensity is normal and valuable — use it wisely. Document peak experiences; you'll treasure these memories later. But also start developing emotional regulation skills through meditation, exercise, or therapy. These tools will serve you through life. Don't panic about emotional ups and downs; they're temporary and part of building your foundation.
- **If You're Middle-Aged (40s-50s):**  
You're not failing — you're normal. The midlife dip affects

<sup>188</sup> Grossmann, I., Na, J., Varnum, M. E., Kitayama, S., & Nisbett, R. E. (2013). [A route to well-being: intelligence versus wise reasoning](#). *Journal of experimental psychology. General*, 142(3), 944–953.

successful people too. Instead of dramatic changes (the sports car, the affair, the career pivot), make smaller adjustments. Invest in relationships that sustain you. Find meaning beyond achievement. Start practicing the emotional skills that predict late-life happiness: gratitude, acceptance, present-focus. Remember: this is the valley, not the destination.

- ***If You're Older (60s+):***

Trust your instincts about what matters. Your narrowing focus isn't giving up — it's wisdom. Invest deeply in your closest relationships. Prioritize experiences over possessions. Share your emotional wisdom with younger generations who desperately need models of successful aging. Your rising happiness is real, valuable, and worth protecting.

So here's the deal: that U-shaped happiness curve isn't some academic curiosity — it's proof that you're not broken when life feels like shit in your forties, and you're not pathetic for being an emotional hurricane in your twenties. This pattern has held up across millions of people, different cultures, rich and poor countries. Which means your story isn't some tragic deviation from how life is “supposed” to go.

The middle-aged squeeze isn't punishment for your failures, and the late-life happiness boost isn't a consolation prize for surviving this long. It's just how humans work. So stop beating yourself up for being exactly where the data says you should be, and start trusting that this isn't the end of your story — it's just another chapter in a surprisingly hopeful book.

# The Myths of Happiness

We are the species that tells stories. From the moment we developed language, we created narratives to explain our world, our experiences, ourselves. And nowhere are our stories more influential — or more often wrong — than when it comes to happiness.

These myths aren't just harmless misconceptions. They're mental traps that create the very unhappiness they promise to solve. Like a map with north pointing south, they send us in exactly the wrong direction. The harder we follow them, the further we get from our destination.

Let's examine the five most pervasive and damaging myths about happiness, the ones that keep us stuck, striving for something out of reach, and perpetually dissatisfied.

## Myth #1: “Happiness Means Feeling Good All the Time”

*No one* — I repeat, no one — feels good all the time. Not the Dalai Lama, not Oprah, not that relentlessly cheery friend of yours. Human emotion isn't designed to stay on one note. In fact, experiencing a full range of emotions (including the so-called negative ones) is part of a healthy psyche. Pain, grief, frustration, dissatisfaction, are normal responses to life's challenges.

Research shows that believing you should be constantly happy actually backfires.<sup>189</sup> When you inevitably feel down, you'll feel down about feeling down (“What's wrong with me? I'm supposed to be happy!”), doubling the distress. One study demonstrated that, like Bentham, the

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<sup>189</sup> Ford, B. Q., Lam, P., John, O. P., & Mauss, I. B. (2018). [The psychological health benefits of accepting negative emotions and thoughts: Laboratory, diary, and longitudinal evidence](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 115(6), 1075-1092.

## Myths of Happiness

more people valued and pursued happiness, the more likely they were to feel disappointed and unhappy, especially in positive situations where they expected to feel great. In other words, setting an unrealistic bar for constant happiness makes your ordinary contentment seem like failure. Psychologists (and Buddhists) call this the “paradox of happiness”: wanting to be happy all the time makes you less happy.<sup>190</sup>

Constant happiness is, simply put, bullshit. It isn't how human psychology works. We're not designed for constant anything. Our emotional system evolved to provide information about our environment and our needs. Sadness signals loss and recruits the social support we need. Anxiety alerts us to potential threats. Anger mobilizes us to defend boundaries.<sup>191</sup> Even boredom serves a purpose, pushing us to seek new experiences and opportunities.

Research on emotional diversity shows that people who experience a wide range of emotions — both positive and negative — actually have better mental health than those who feel positive all the time. They're more resilient, more creative, better able to navigate complex social situations. A life of unvarying happiness isn't just impossible; it would be impoverished.<sup>192</sup>

Consider what we call “mixed emotions” — the bittersweet feeling of watching your child leave for college, the nervous excitement before a first date, the profound sadness mixed with gratitude at a funeral. These complex emotional experiences are often the most meaningful moments of our lives. Would we really want to flatten them into simple happiness?

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<sup>190</sup> Gruber, J., Mauss, I. B., & Tamir, M. (2011). [A dark side of happiness? How, when, and why happiness is not always good](#). *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6(3), 222-233.

<sup>191</sup> Keltner, D., & Gross, J. J. (1999). [Functional accounts of emotions](#). *Cognition and Emotion*, 13(5), 467-480.

<sup>192</sup> Hershfield, H. E., Scheibe, S., Sims, T. L., & Carstensen, L. L. (2013). [When feeling bad can be good: Mixed emotions benefit physical health across adulthood](#). *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 4(1), 54-61.

The happiest people aren't those who feel good all the time. They're those who feel appropriately — who experience the full range of human emotion in response to life's inevitable ups and downs. They don't resist negative emotions or cling to positive ones. They allow feelings to arise, acknowledge them, learn from them, and let them pass.

### **Myth #2: “You Should Be Able to Control What You Think and Feel All the Time”**

I discovered meditation when I was 16. Within weeks, I was convinced I'd found the secret to happiness. “Just observe your thoughts without attachment,” the books said. “Choose your emotional response.” But the more I tried to control my mind, the more chaotic it became. Attempting to suppress negative thoughts made them stronger. Trying to manufacture positive emotions left me feeling fake and exhausted.

A lot of people (especially those into personal development) believe that with enough willpower or the right techniques, they can *master* their inner life completely: banish negative thoughts, choose their feelings at will, and essentially think themselves into perpetual happiness. If they can't, they feel that they've failed.

This myth is fueled by well-meaning ideas: the law of attraction folks (“just focus on positive thoughts!”), some interpretations of Stoicism or cognitive-behavioral self-help (“change your thoughts, change your life”). It implies that if you feel anxious or sad, it's because you're *letting* yourself — you're not exerting enough mental control. Kind of a blamey stance, if you think about it.

The reality is that your mind is not a perfectly obedient robot; it's more like a wild monkey on caffeine. Thoughts and feelings will *come up* unbidden, no matter how enlightened you are.

## Myths of Happiness

Try a quick experiment: *For the next 60 seconds, do NOT think of a white bear.* Don't picture any white bear in your mind. Ready... go.

Did a white bear (or the idea of one) pop up? Of course it did. This classic demonstration by psychologist Daniel Wegner shows the phenomenon of ironic thought suppression — when you try to suppress a thought, it often rebounds even stronger.<sup>193</sup>

The same goes for emotions: telling yourself “I must not feel anxious” typically just makes you *more* anxious. Our brains have evolved to have a constant chatter of thoughts and a flow of feelings, many triggered automatically by our environment or bodily states.<sup>194</sup> You can't just decree them out of existence by force of will.

This myth is particularly seductive because it contains a grain of truth. We do have some influence over our thoughts and emotions. Cognitive-behavioral therapy works.<sup>195</sup> Meditation helps.<sup>196</sup> Reframing can shift our perspective.<sup>197</sup> But the myth takes this limited truth and inflates it into an impossible standard: that we must have total mental control.

The reality is that thoughts and emotions largely arise spontaneously, shaped by factors outside our conscious control: genetics, early experiences, current circumstances, physical health, sometimes even the weather. You can't simply decide not to feel anxious any more than you can decide not to feel hungry. You can't put yourself into happiness any more than you can put yourself to sleep.

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<sup>193</sup> Wegner, D. M., Erber, R., & Zanakos, S. (1993). [Ironic processes in the mental control of mood and mood-related thought](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65(6), 1093–1104.

<sup>194</sup> LeDoux J. E. (2000). [Emotion circuits in the brain](#). *Annual review of neuroscience*, 23, 155–184.

<sup>195</sup> Hofmann, S. G., Asnaani, A., Vonk, I. J., Sawyer, A. T., & Fang, A. (2012). [The efficacy of cognitive behavioral therapy: A review of meta-analyses](#). *Cognitive therapy and research*, 36(5), 427–440.

<sup>196</sup> Kabat-Zinn, J. (2018). [A study in happiness: Meditation, the brain, and the immune system](#). *Mindfulness*, 9(5), 1664–1667.

<sup>197</sup> Wu, W., Wu, H., Wu, X., Gu, J., & Qi, X. (2024). [A meta-analysis of life satisfaction's association with cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression: The influences of age, gender, and cultural values](#). *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 25(4), 1–24.

What actually works is something more like emotional aikido — working with emotions rather than against them. Instead of trying to control what you feel, you can notice it with curiosity. Instead of suppressing negative thoughts, you can acknowledge them without believing them.<sup>198</sup> Instead of manufacturing happiness, you can create conditions where it's more likely to arise naturally.

The paradox is that by giving up the illusion of complete control, we gain real influence. By accepting that thoughts and emotions will come and go like weather, we can learn to dress appropriately rather than trying to control the sky.

### **Myth #3: “Others Have It Easier”**

Scroll through social media for five minutes and the message is clear: everyone else seems to be living their best life. Your college roommate just posted about a promotion, your cousin's baby sleeps through the night, and your feed is wall-to-wall sunset-cocktail photos. Meanwhile, you're wrestling with a difficult boss, a cluttered house, and a relationship that's more Netflix than romance.

The problem? You're comparing your behind-the-scenes footage to everyone else's highlight. In public (online or face-to-face) people share their polished moments and mask the rest. Research calls this misperception *pluralistic ignorance*: one Stanford study found that students believed their peers were far happier and more social than was actually true, leaving the students lonelier and less satisfied.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Hayes, S. C., Luoma, J. B., Bond, F. W., Masuda, A., & Lillis, J. (2006). [Acceptance and commitment therapy: Model, processes and outcomes](#). *Behaviour research and therapy*, 44(1), 1–25.

<sup>199</sup> Jordan, A. H., Monin, B., Dweck, C. S., Lovett, B. J., John, O. P., & Gross, J. J. (2011). [Misery has more company than people think: Underestimating the prevalence of others' negative emotions](#). *Personality & social psychology bulletin*, 37(1), 120–135.

Behind closed doors, even that photogenic couple might be in therapy. The high-flying executive could be losing sleep over debt. Everyone carries struggles that rarely make it to the surface.

Worse, the comparison itself is corrosive. The more we measure ourselves against others, the more miserable we become — no matter how accurate our information. Life never distributes easy and hard in equal portions: the CEO with the perfect résumé may fight panic attacks; the friend who looks bulletproof might cry themselves to sleep.

Comparison also assumes happiness lies in external upgrades: the house, the job, the relationship. Yet hedonic adaptation means yesterday's promotion becomes today's inbox, and the dream car is just a means of transportation after a year.

The fix isn't to assume everyone is secretly miserable. It's to recognize that comparison warps reality and undermines well-being. Your happiness depends less on their circumstances and more on how you engage with your own unique, messy, complicated life.

### **Myth #4: “It's Too Late to Be Happy”**

This myth comes in many flavors. Too late to find love. Too late to change careers. Too late to repair relationships. Too late to become who you wanted to be. It's the myth that happiness has an expiration date, that windows of opportunity close forever, that some invisible point of no return has been passed.

These ageist stereotypes suggest that aging inevitably brings decline and misery, and the media isn't helping by portraying youth as the prime time for joy and fulfillment. Aging is inevitable, but it's our perception of it that shapes our experience. By reframing how we think about getting older, we can cultivate optimism about our future and enhance our

enjoyment of the present moment. Rather than viewing aging as a synonym to misery, see it as a continual evolution. Each stage of life brings unique opportunities, wisdom, and experiences.

Importantly, this myth confuses two different things: specific opportunities and the capacity for happiness itself. Yes, you might be too late to become an Olympic athlete, have children or repair certain relationships. But that doesn't mean happiness is off the table. It also assumes that happiness requires achieving specific goals or following a particular life script. Graduate school, start a career, get married, have kids, retire comfortably. But this is just one story among infinite possibilities. Some of the happiest people are those whose lives went completely off-script — who found unexpected paths to meaning and satisfaction.

Laura Ingalls Wilder didn't publish her first *Little House* book until she was 64. Harland Sanders was 62 when he franchised KFC. Grandma Moses didn't start painting until her 70s. These aren't just inspiring exceptions. They represent a fundamental example: human beings retain the capacity for growth, change, and new beginnings throughout life.

Consider the research on post-traumatic growth. People who experience major setbacks, failures, or losses often report, years later, that these experiences led to profound positive changes. Not that they're glad the bad thing happened, but that they discovered strengths, relationships, and possibilities they never would have found otherwise.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Jayawickreme, E., Infurna, F. J., Alajak, K., Blackie, L. E. R., Chopik, W. J., Chung, J. M., Dorfman, A., Fleeson, W., Forgeard, M. J. C., Frazier, P., Furr, R. M., Grossmann, I., Heller, A. S., Laceulle, O. M., Lucas, R. E., Luhmann, M., Luong, G., Meijer, L., McLean, K. C., . . . Zonneveld, R. (2020). [Post-traumatic growth as positive personality change: Challenges, opportunities, and recommendations](#). *Journal of Personality*, 89(1), 145–165.

Also remember that life satisfaction often follows a U-shaped curve, dipping in middle age but rising again later.<sup>201</sup> Many people report being happier in their 60s and 70s than they were in their 30s and 40s. Additionally, emotional regulation improves with age, so older adults may be better at maintaining positive emotions and recovering from negative ones.

The real tragedy isn't that it's too late. The real tragedy is *believing* it's too late and therefore not trying, which in turn becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As long as you're alive, you can still connect with others, find meaning, experience beauty, learn something new, contribute to the world. Growing older is a privilege denied to many. Each birthday represents another year of experiences and memories.

It's never too late to be happy. It's only too late when you're dead.

And even then, who knows?

### **Myth #5: “I’ll Be Happy When X Happens”**

“I’ll be happy when I graduate.” “I’ll be happy when I retire,” “when I lose weight,” or “when I move to a new city.” Psychologists call this the “arrival fallacy” — the mistaken belief that reaching a desired destination will bring lasting fulfillment.<sup>202</sup>

This myth is the siren song of modern life — the promise that happiness lies just around the corner, waiting for us to achieve that next milestone. It's the reason people sacrifice present joy for future success, endure miserable situations for distant rewards, and defer life until some imaginary moment when everything falls into place.

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<sup>201</sup> Blanchflower, D. G., & Oswald, A. J. (2008). [Is well-being U-shaped over the life cycle?](#) *Social Science & Medicine*, 66(8), 1733–1749.

<sup>202</sup> Ben-Shahar, T. (2007). [Happier: Learn the secrets to daily joy and lasting fulfillment](#). McGraw-Hill Education.

We also fall victim to something called “affective forecasting” errors — basically, we’re terrible at predicting how we’ll feel about future events. We consistently think things will hit us harder emotionally than they actually do, and we assume those feelings will last much longer than they really will.<sup>203</sup> The house you’re saving for? Soon it will just be where you live. The relationship you’re desperate to find? It will become routine, with its irritations and conflicts.

This mental trap happens because we don’t realize we have what’s called a “psychological immune system.” It’s basically our mind’s built-in way of protecting our emotional well-being. When bad things happen, this mental system automatically helps us make sense of disappointments, find silver linings, and bounce back to feeling normal again. But here’s the irony: while this system is great at helping us recover from setbacks, it also means that good things don’t make us as happy for as long as we expect them to.

Our minds are incredibly good at adapting to new situations, whether they’re positive or negative. This is why we keep falling into the arrival fallacy. We keep chasing the next goal or purchase, thinking “this will finally make me happy,” without realizing that our psychological immune system will eventually make even our biggest achievements feel normal and routine.<sup>204</sup> Understanding these psychological mechanisms allows us to break free from the “I’ll be happy when...” cycle by focusing instead on practices that work with our adaptive nature, such as mindfulness, gratitude, and savoring present experiences.

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<sup>203</sup> Gilbert, D. T., Pinel, E. C., Wilson, T. D., Blumberg, S. J., & Wheatley, T. P. (1998). [Immune neglect: A source of durability bias in affective forecasting](#). *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 75(3), 617–638.

<sup>204</sup> Rachman S. J. (2016). [Invited essay: Cognitive influences on the psychological immune system](#). *Journal of behavior therapy and experimental psychiatry*, 53, 2–8.

## Myths of Happiness

The myth seems logical. Surely happiness is about getting what we want? And if we don't have what we want yet, doesn't it make sense that we'll be happy when we get it?

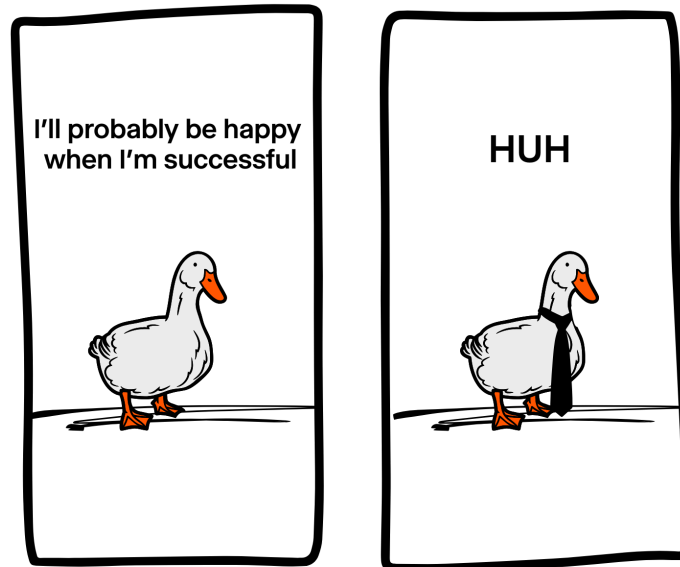
In reality, by tying happiness to future achievements, we declare our current life inadequate. We live in a state of postponement, always preparing for life rather than living it. We sacrifice relationships, health, and present joy for a future that, when it arrives, feels surprisingly similar to the present we fled.

This doesn't mean goals are pointless or achievement is empty. Goals provide direction, structure, and meaning. Achievement can create better life circumstances and opportunities. But they're not tickets to happiness. They're just new platforms from which we can experience the human condition.

The alternative isn't to abandon ambition, but to change our relationship with it. Instead of "I'll be happy when," we can think "I'm working toward this goal because it aligns with my values, and I'll find ways to appreciate the journey." Instead of deferring happiness, we can look for it in the process — in the growth, the effort, the small daily progress.

The present is the only moment in which happiness can actually be experienced. The future is just an idea. When it arrives, it will be a new present, subject to all the same challenges and adaptations as this one. There's no magical moment coming when happiness will finally be permanent and secure.

The time to be happy, if there is one, is now. Not because circumstances are perfect, but because they never will be. Not because you've achieved enough, but because "enough" is a moving target. Not because the future has arrived, but because it never does.



Adapted from Mamabolo (2024) "Money and the Myth of Happiness."<sup>205</sup>

## Beyond the Myths

These myths share a common flaw: they all treat happiness as a problem to be solved rather than a life to be lived. They promise control where only influence exists. They offer simple answers to complex questions. They create the very suffering they claim to cure.

The truth about happiness is messier but ultimately more hopeful. You're not broken if you feel negative emotions. You can't control your mind completely, and that's okay. Others aren't as happy as they appear, and comparing yourself to them only creates suffering. It's never too late to find meaning and connection. Your unhappiness isn't entirely your fault, but you do have some influence. Happiness isn't waiting somewhere in the future. Real happiness isn't about believing the right things or achieving the right goals. It's about engaging fully with life as

<sup>205</sup> Mamabolo, R. (2024). [Money and the myth of happiness.](#)

## Myths of Happiness

it is — messy, uncertain, bittersweet, and brief. It's about developing skills and practices that support well-being while accepting the limitations of human existence. It's about finding meaning in struggle, connection in imperfection, and joy in the ordinary moments that make up most of life.

The myths promise happiness through escape. Escape from negative emotions, from lack of control, from comparison, from time, from responsibility, from the present, from human nature itself. But happiness isn't found there. It's found in engagement. Not engagement with an idealized life, but with the life you're living.

That's harder than believing in myths. It's also more possible.

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## The 80/20 Guide to Happiness

Okay, we just went over a lot of information, and it's probably all swirling around in your head. As always, here's the 80/20 of happiness: if you focus on the right 20% of actions, you'll achieve 80% of your potential happiness.

- **Stop chasing happiness — it's a byproduct, not a goal.** The harder you pursue happiness, the more elusive it becomes. This is the fundamental paradox: pursuing positive experiences is itself a negative experience, while accepting negative experiences is itself a positive experience. Instead of trying to force happiness, focus on living according to your values, building meaningful relationships, and contributing to something beyond yourself. Happiness will emerge naturally as a consequence of a life well-lived, not as something you can manufacture through direct effort.
- **Remove impediments to happiness from your environment.** It's not about being rich or popular, it's about not being broke or alone. Approach your happiness in a satisficing way — look to make it “good enough.” Remove unnecessary stressors and toxic people from your life.
- **Fix your physical fundamentals before anything else.** Your body is the foundation of your mental state - if it feels terrible, your mind will follow. Prioritize 7-9 hours of quality sleep (it's your brain's emotional reset button), exercise for at least 30 minutes most days (it's as effective as antidepressants for mild-moderate depression), and eat nutritious whole foods that stabilize your blood sugar and mood. These aren't luxuries or “nice-to-haves.” They're

non-negotiable prerequisites for emotional well-being. When people say they're too busy for these basics, they're essentially saying they're too busy to not be miserable.

- **Invest in relationships above everything else.** They're the strongest predictor of happiness. Schedule regular time with friends and family as non-negotiable appointments. Express genuine appreciation to others regularly. Focus on quality over quantity — a few deep connections beat dozens of superficial ones. If you're isolated, join activities where you'll meet people with shared interests. Don't forget that people regret not spending more time with loved ones, while never regretting not working more or buying more stuff.
- **Find meaning through contribution.** While pleasure adapts quickly and life satisfaction adapts moderately, meaning hardly adapts at all. Once you find something meaningful, pursuing a calling, fighting for a cause, the sense of purpose persists even when daily experience becomes difficult. Practice intentional kindness to get the “helper's high.” Volunteer for causes you care about. Mentor someone. Create something that outlasts you. Meaning comes from contributing to something beyond yourself, and it provides resilience during hard times that pleasure-seeking never can.
- **Buy experiences, not things — they appreciate rather than depreciate in happiness value.** Experiential purchases (vacations, concerts, dinners with friends, classes) create more lasting happiness than material purchases (clothes, gadgets, furniture). Experiences improve in memory through “rosy retrospection,” become part of your identity, resist social comparison, create social connections, and demand present-moment engagement. Even small experiences like trying a new restaurant beat equivalently

priced material goods. Shift your discretionary spending from stuff to stories. Your future self will thank you.

- **Practice gratitude daily — it literally rewires your brain for positivity.** Write down 3-5 things you're grateful for each day, genuinely pausing to feel thankful rather than just listing mechanically. This simple practice increases positive emotions, improves relationships, enhances optimism, and even reduces physical ailments. You're training your brain to scan for positives rather than negatives, creating a more constant background of contentment. On difficult days when you struggle to find anything, that's when it's most important — even “I had a nice, hot coffee this morning” counts.
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## Further Reading

Below are some of the best books my team and I read while researching and preparing for this episode:

- [\*Stumbling on Happiness\*](#) by Dan Gilbert
- [\*Man's Search for Meaning\*](#) by Viktor Frankl
- [\*The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want\*](#) by Sonja Lyubomirsky
- [\*Thinking, Fast and Slow\*](#) by Daniel Kahneman
- [\*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience\*](#) by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- [\*The Happiness Hypothesis\*](#) by Jonathan Haidt
- [\*From Strength to Strength\*](#) by Arthur Brooks
- [\*Authentic Happiness\*](#) by Martin Seligman
- [\*The Paradox of Choice\*](#) by Barry Schwartz
- [\*Nicomachean Ethics\*](#) by Aristotle
- [\*Atomic Habits\*](#) by James Clear
- [\*The Gifts of Imperfection\*](#) by Brené Brown
- [\*Essentialism\*](#) by Greg McKeown
- [\*Meditations\*](#) by Marcus Aurelius
- [\*The Courage to Be Disliked\*](#) by Fumitake Koga and Ichiro Kishimi
- [\*Love Your Enemies\*](#) by Arthur Brooks
- [\*Daring Greatly\*](#) by Brené Brown
- [\*Utilitarianism\*](#) by John Stuart Mill
- [\*The Art of Happiness\*](#) by Dalai Lama