

Happiness belongs to the self-aware.

There are people who always seem happy, with a positive outlook on life. So, what makes them tick? Are they genetically hard wired in a different way to the rest of us? Have they had an easy life, with good fortune abounding around them? Or is it that they know what to do to ensure their own happiness? The important question is – what will make you happy?

Naturally, genetics does play a part in our temperament. If you accept the nature versus nurture concept, with nature in greater control, you are handing over the charge of your happiness to your ancestors. If nurture is your belief, then you are completely at the mercy of your current circumstances. But is it ever really one or the other in isolation or is it a balance of both? And how much is actually within your control?

In terms of genetics, it is thought that we are born with what is considered a set range of happiness. Greater happiness can be reached through living at the top of your set range of happiness. That being said, neuroscience now shows that it is also possible to increase our set range of happiness. We can do this through producing new neural connections in our brains. How does a person do that? If we want to live in the upper range, or increase our set range of happiness, we need to expect to be happier and make more opportunities to be happy. That's right, we have control over this process. You are able to choose how genuinely happy you can be.

So, where to start? You need to discover what makes you happy. So, what makes you truly happy? It's not an easy question to answer. Let's work though it.

Logic may dictate that if we are born into 'luckier circumstances', we surely must be happier than those suffering more hardship. Yet, research demonstrates this is not necessarily the case. If our basic needs for food, warmth and shelter are catered for, those living in countries with more wealth per capita and more opportunities do not necessarily measure higher on the happiness scale than people from countries with less.

Do you believe that if you have more material possessions, or live in 'luckier circumstances' that you will be happier?

Most of us have bought into the dream of having a bigger house, a better car and being able to afford life's luxuries. This isn't a problem within itself, and financial freedom certainly removes one aspect of stress from life. However, this is a problem if we think money and possessions create the sole path to happiness.

If we are waiting for the magic circumstance to occur, such as the new house, the new career or the lotto win, in order to be happy, we will find it often falls short of our expectations. You will still be the same person with the same disposition, sitting in your new house or at your new desk. It won't actually improve how you feel on the inside. The new circumstance may bring short term pleasure, but it does not bring long term happiness. In fact, research has shown that no matter how great the gain or purchase, your happiness usually returns to its previous level within about three months. For some reason, when the pleasure wears off, we usually readjust our thinking. So, instead of questioning why the new circumstances or possessions didn't make us happy in the long term, we aim higher in the material stakes. This is why, for instance, it doesn't matter how much money you have. It's never enough, because we will simply live to our means. We've missed the key point. The revelation we need to make about happiness is that it comes from within, not the external. It sounds cliché but that doesn't make it less true.

The key to happiness is to increase your awareness of what will make you truly happy. You need to identify your values. Although money and financial security are valid values, most people will have others as well. It could be intellectual stimulation, family, friendship, trust, good health, freedom, recognition or self-esteem. There are literally thousands of values. The way to identify yours is to

identify what you are truly thankful for, and what you could not live without. Take the time to list your values, and rank them in order of importance. Then ask yourself why you value those things, in that order. Use your idealism to shed light on your values. This may help you identify what drives you deep down. Then, when you have identified what you value, you need to ensure that your goals are aligned with your values. You need to set achievable goals that reflect who you are at your core, rather than who you are trying to be, or who you believe you should be. This will ensure that your goals are aligned with your core beliefs and what is most important to you. Think about whether the goal has a short term benefit or a long term gain. The goals with long term benefits generate even more meaning to your life.

In order to live in the top of your set range of happiness, or to extend it, you need to look within yourself. In this way, both the journey and the goal are fulfilling and increase happiness. It is important to acknowledge that happiness is not external. Nor is it out of your control. It is based on aligning your goals and actions to your internal core beliefs and values. This is far more within your power than you may think. With heightened self awareness, thought and planning, you can choose whether you are happy today. 💡

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