



The Truth About Happiness

Evidence-based practices for increasing
your wellbeing at home and work



Prepared for UKG by Dr. Gillian Mandich

There is no secret to happiness. But there is a science to it.

More than anything, we all want to be happy. The problem is that we are endlessly searching instead of thoughtfully practicing. Many people are waiting for happiness, and they believe that if they aren't happy now, they will be when their career finally takes off, when they find their dream home, or when they strike it rich. We often think that happiness is something that we will find one day, yet research teaches us that happiness is something we can create daily.

Prioritizing happiness isn't just essential on a personal level; recently, several countries, including Canada, started to include national happiness, along with health, as indicators of national progress.¹

Happiness not only feels good, but research has found that it is associated with superior mental and physical health.^{2, 3} Happiness and health are also linked to greater career success, improved relationships, enhanced creativity, and longevity.^{4, 5}

Some days are indeed more conducive to being happy than other days. Some days, it's easier to smile and exude joy than others. And in the case of prolonged stress and hardship, such as a global pandemic, keeping your personal and professional happiness level high may seem next to impossible. You're not alone.

One in five Canadians will personally experience a mental health problem or illness in any given year.⁶

Since the onset of the pandemic, 40% report their mental health has deteriorated.⁷

There is also some good news.

Research teaches us that regardless of genetics, age, gender, and life circumstances, it is possible to intentionally increase happiness.

Canadian researcher and happiness doctor Dr. Gillian Mandich is on a mission to help people live their happiest life. She brings academic research to life by combining the latest research, real-world wisdom, and an engaging style to provide practical, evidence-based solutions that empower people to live happier healthier lives.

In this guide, Dr. Mandich discusses why happiness is essential, debunks the myth about how to attain happiness, and provides five scientifically proven practices to make you happier each day.

How do you define happiness? Happiness is "the experience of joy, contentment, or positive wellbeing, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile."

Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky

Start here.

One of the simplest ways to boost your happiness and mental health is to shift what you focus on, because what you focus on is what you tend to notice in your life. If you always focus on the things that upset or frustrate you, then those things will influence your perception of reality. By noticing and focusing on things that make you feel happy, you train your brain to become more skilled at seeing and focusing on happy things.

Try making a habit of looking around and noticing the good or the things that make you feel happy that are already around you. This practice is incredibly potent if you can focus on the "small" things, such as the kind stranger who opened a door for you or the nice thing that someone said to you.



Research has found that

- approximately 50% of our happiness is genetically determined;
- 40% is controlled by our thoughts, actions, and behaviours;
- and 10% is affected by our life circumstances.⁸



The Facts

Why does it matter?

Focusing on our health and happiness is essential if we want to have energy every day; be the best friend, colleague, and partner; and live our best life possible.

The practice of happiness is important because it feels good and because it makes people healthier and improves their quality of life. In addition, research from Harvard University suggests that happiness spreads up to three degrees of separation from you;⁹ so if you are happy, your best friend's sister, hairdresser's spouse, and colleague's son may also become happier!

Happiness also makes a significant impact in the workplace:



If you're happy and you know it, smile!

Leaders, influencers, and authority figures should cultivate a work environment that encourages smiles. Smiling provides connections to pleasant experiences, improves interpersonal communications, and increases performance.¹⁰

A genuine smile leaves a memorable impression and can have a healing effect. It's a way of finding common ground and connecting with others without saying a word. In addition, a healthy smile can ease tension during times of anxiety and uncertainty, especially when tough decision-making is required. Leaders who understand this simple gesture often have team members who go the extra mile.



The Myth

Are you happy now? If not, when will you be happy? It sounds like a simple question, but it's often difficult to answer.

Do any of these phrases sound familiar?

I'll be happy when...

I find the perfect mate.

I get that raise or promotion.

I get my dream home.

I am debt-free.

I go on vacation.

I have more friends.

I'm retired.

The pandemic is over.

The reality is that many of us are waiting for happiness. We think it's something that we will find one day. We fervently (and erroneously) believe the myth that if we're not happy now, we will be when we find our soul mate, strike it rich, or buy our dream car.

The truth is happiness isn't a destination; it's a practice. Much like fitness, becoming happier requires regular effort and commitment.

There are many things in your life you can't control, and there are some things you can. You are in control of your mind and your thoughts. So, you can train your brain to focus on the present moment. Looking too much to the past or future takes you out of the present moment and away from happiness. When you notice your mind wandering, try to bring it back to the "now" by looking around and noticing the things you appreciate, are grateful for, or that make you happy.

Sad ≠ bad. The pursuit of happiness doesn't mean the goal is to be happy all the time.

You can't just hope for happiness. You must take deliberate action in order to be happy.



Happiness Habits to Adopt Now

While smiles may come more quickly for some people than for others, the truth is that with practice, anyone can be happier. Research shows us that happiness is something we can create daily.

Letting go of the idea that you will one day arrive at happiness and instead practicing happiness habits is the most effective way to increase your happiness. Research shows that committing to one new happiness habit at a time and practicing it regularly can make a big difference towards living a happier life.¹¹

Here are some of the most powerful happiness habits, backed by science:



1. Savour

Stopping to smell the roses (which in scientific literature is called savouring) means recognizing the good things in your life (e.g. a beautiful flower, a delicious cup of coffee, or the sun shining on your face) and then basking in the positive feelings associated with them. Instead of letting a positive experience pass by with little attention or appreciation, savouring means taking time to acknowledge, appreciate, and thoroughly enjoy it. Research shows that savouring can be a potent happiness booster, and it doesn't matter what you choose to savour (as long as you enjoy it.)¹²

Try to slow down 2-3 times per day to notice what is good or makes you feel happy at that moment. Then, once you've found something to appreciate, take at least 10 seconds to really enjoy the feeling of that moment and notice how that affects your mood.



2. Monitor your media consumption

Have you ever watched the news and noticed that you feel less happy or more anxious after? Scientists have found that watching the news can trigger negative feelings and can have an immediate effect on your happiness.¹³

One study found that people who watched just 3 minutes of negative news in the morning had a 27% greater likelihood of reporting their day as unhappy 6-8 hours later compared to people who watched positive news or no news at all.¹⁴

Social media can also affect your mental health and be a happiness drain. A study from the University of Michigan found that the more time people spent on Facebook, the less happy and satisfied they were with their life.¹⁵

Happy people often limit their news consumption and are intentional about what media and social media they consume. Try to notice your media and social media habits and eliminate or minimize those that made you feel less happy.



3. Do something nice for someone else

When you do something nice for someone, it releases endorphins (feel-good hormones) that activate the parts of your brain associated with happiness, pleasure, and social connection. There is a positive feedback loop created by doing something nice for someone: when you are happy, it increases the likelihood that you will be altruistic, and when you are altruistic, it makes you feel happier.¹⁶

Doing something nice doesn't need to mean a grand gesture. Small things (such as buying a stranger behind you in the coffee line a cup of coffee, putting a coin in an expired meter, or giving someone a genuine compliment) can make a significant impact on someone's day.



4. Practice gratitude

Gratitude is a feeling of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation¹⁷, and it can significantly increase your happiness and protect you from stress, anxiety, and depression.¹⁸

A recent study found that 90% of respondents said that practicing gratitude helped them feel happier.¹⁹

By intentionally focusing on what you are grateful for, happiness and life satisfaction increase.²⁰ A regular gratitude practice is one of the easiest ways to counter the brain's negativity bias (the tendency to focus on or cling to negative thoughts and things in the environment).



5. Get moving!

Have you ever noticed that you feel great after an intense workout? There is a reason for that! Happiness and exercise are independently associated with the release of endorphins and increased immune function; it also decreases cortisol (a stress hormone).²¹

Exercise is not just good for your body; it's also sublime for your mind! Regular physical activity increases happiness and can help reduce anxiety, stress, and depression.²²

Bonus tip: Get some zzzz's.

Sleep and happiness are positively correlated,²³ and growing evidence finds that poor sleep patterns are related to decreased physical health, mood, and psychological wellbeing.²⁴

Let it go, let it go!

Happiness comes down to basic math. It requires both subtraction and addition. If you want to be happy now, you need to let go of the past.²⁵ The past is valuable (it provides a solid foundation for the present), you can learn from it (both the mistakes and the successes), and then you can let it go.

Why wait when you can be happy today?

It's the sum of small joys experienced each day that adds up to a more fulfilling and happy life.



About the Author

[Dr. Gillian Mandich](#) is an award-winning, internationally recognized happiness researcher, speaker, educator, and author. She is the founder of The International Happiness Institute of Health Science Research, a Research Associate at The World Database of Happiness, co-lead investigator of The Canadian Happiness at Work Study, and was recently named one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women.

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