

# The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here



This title is a quote from Robert G. Ingersoll, it concludes with the words: “The way to be happy is to make others so.”

It could have just as easily come from an article on positive psychology, which is a branch of science that focuses not on what impedes life, but on what makes life worth living, what it takes to have a happy life and how to help people to flourish.

## A short guide to happiness

Research by Martin Seligman, one of the founders of the positive psychology movement, established that there are three types of happy life.

**The pleasant life:** socialising and seeking as much pleasure and positive emotion as possible.

**The good life:** concentrating on engagement, pursuing personal growth and flow. Flow is that wonderful state of total absorption in an activity you are enjoying.

**The meaningful life:** knowing your strengths and using them in the service of something larger than yourself.

Research has shown that humans have an ingrained negative emotion bias, which means we are more aware of our negative emotions than our positive ones, even though we actually experience far more positive emotions in a day. Researchers have identified that we have one positive emotion for every three or four negative emotions. The reasoning is that at the beginning of human evolution, our negative emotions of fear, anxiety and disgust helped to keep us alive, while positive ones just kept us happy. In our modern world, research now shows that happier people, people who flourish and have meaning and flow in their lives, have stronger relationships, are more creative and have stronger immune systems than those who are not as happy.

## So why does all this science matter?

It matters because to flourish, you need more than champagne and a peer group. You need five things that Seligman identified and put in a formula called PERMA: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement.

If the benefits of being happy and having positive emotions will cause me to flourish, increase my quality of life and help me live a longer, healthier and more fulfilled life, then I say: “Yes please!” We are all facing a somewhat uncertain future. There are many things that can cause us stress, so it has never been more important for us to learn simple ways to help increase positive emotions. I would like to offer you four practices that I try to use to help elevate my positive emotions and increase my happiness.

## Positivity

Training yourself to becoming aware of the positive events in your day, however small, will have a positive effect on your happiness. Start to be aware of the little things that give you positive emotions during your daily routine which you would normally not be aware of. Allow yourself to savour them and be grateful for them. You will be amazed how quickly you will feel the benefits.

During a routine day, give yourself time to look around and enjoy the little things that are so easy to ignore. Look at the constantly changing trees or at a small weed that has decided to flower profusely along the side of the road. Enjoy the smell of freshly baked cookies or wood-burning

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stoves. Listen to the sounds of nature all around you; what else can you hear?

Allowing yourself time to enjoy these things will increase your positivity and give you time to be grateful for all these experiences, however fleeting. If possible, share them with someone you care about, as this too will increase your positivity and therefore your happiness. Soon you will find you are treasuring these little moments of joy and actively searching them out.

### Exercise

Exercise is so important for your mental health. It does not have to be an exhausting workout; a gentle walk around your neighbourhood is fine. If you can practise looking for positive things and little changes each time you walk, even better. Try exercising with someone else, as this will add to your pleasure and well-being. We are living in difficult times but wherever possible try to encourage someone from your household to walk with you. By adding meaning to your exercise, you will have increased your positive emotion and happiness.

### Being kind and caring

The other wonderful thing about positive emotion is that it is contagious. Smile or say hello or thank you or wave to someone as you walk down the streets and you will share your positive emotion with them, making them happier and increase your positivity and therefore your happiness. Being helpful has a similar effect, because when you do something for someone else, not only do you get a little jolt of positivity but the person you helped does too and, wonderfully, so do the people watching you.

“We are living in difficult times but wherever possible try to encourage a friend to walk with you – your socially-distanced walk might be the only social contact that person has.”

### Gratitude

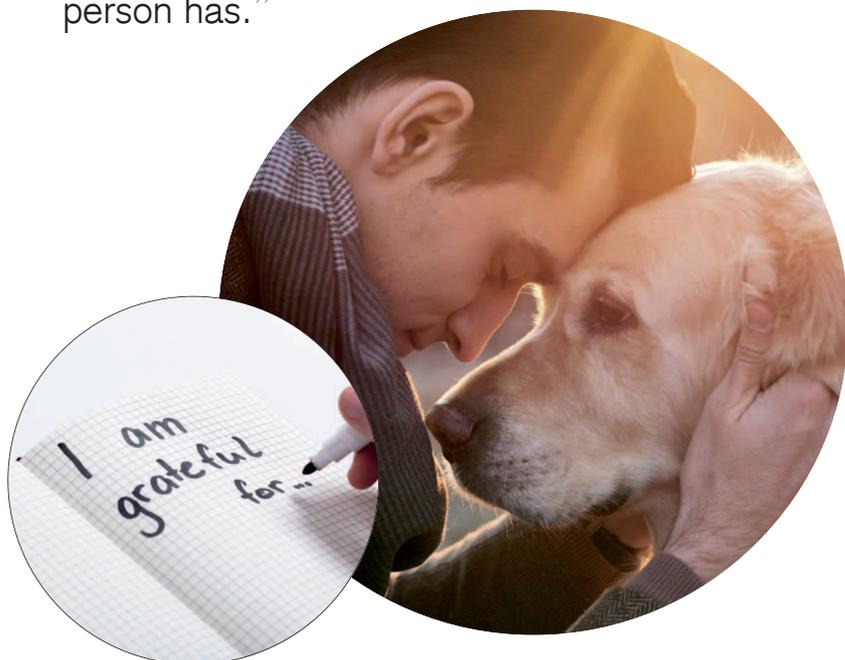
Gratitude is one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction. Gratitude is important in how we feel emotionally and psychologically: it increases our positive emotions, which simultaneously decreases our negative ones. I know sometimes it feels we have nothing to be grateful for, but that is exactly when you need to look deeper. For example, your partner has been told he has been repatriated just when the children were doing well at school and you have at last found a great group of friends – what have you got to be grateful for? What about the fact the kids have had a great experience at school, that you had the opportunity to live in a different country and that you made great friends?

One way to practise gratitude is to go over the day's events and find three things that went well and reflect on your role in them. If you like, you can write them down in a gratitude journal. Research has shown that people who did this for just one week were less depressed and happier for as much as six months after doing this exercise. If you feel your mood sliding, just take up your gratitude journal again.

To conclude, psychological research suggests that our happiness is only partially due to genetics. It is almost equally dependent on outlook and intention. This means that although we cannot control our genetics, we can work to change our outlook and intentions. Training ourselves to be aware of the importance of positive emotions and gratitude is good for our mental health.

I cannot think of a better summing up of positive psychology than this quote from Leo Tolstoy:

“If you want to be happy, be.”



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