

Get to work... on your happiness

by Cathy Johnson

If you want to get fitter, you need to work at it. The same goes for becoming happier, a growing body of research shows.

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Some of us might have been born happier than others, but all of us can increase our happiness – and science is showing us how.

"With happiness, people tend to think you've either got it or you haven't," says Sydney psychologist, Dr Tony Grant. "But that's only partly true."

We all seem to be born with a tendency to be either jolly or morose or somewhere in between, says Grant, director of coaching psychology at the University of Sydney. We tend to return to that level of happiness, even after major setbacks or triumphs.

But research shows the choices we make in our daily lives can nonetheless make a big difference to our wellbeing, Grant says.

In fact, as much as 40 per cent of the variation in happiness from one person to the next is thought to be due to the behaviours and activities we engage in.

As US-based happiness researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky puts it: "Sustainable happiness is attainable, if you are prepared to do the work."

If you want permanent weight loss or fitness, you need to make permanent

changes requiring effort and commitment every day of your life. And it's the same with happiness, Lyubomirsky says.

But don't expect constant bliss. "Happiness is about living a full, rich and meaningful life – being truly human, warts and all. It's not about being happy all the time. Mood fluctuations are part of normal life," Grant says.

How to be happier

Research shows there are some behaviours associated with life satisfaction and optimal wellbeing.

These include:

- practising acts of kindness towards others – both in your existing social circle and outside of it.
- devoting time to nurturing and enjoying relationships with family and friends.
- acknowledging and expressing gratitude for the good things in your life.
- practising optimism when thinking about the future.
- focusing on what you do well rather than your mistakes when you approach a new task.
- learning forgiveness.
- spending periods of time being "mindful" – focusing on the "here and now" rather than planning or worrying about your future.
- identifying goals that are important to you and actively pursuing them.
- working out what so-called "character strengths" you have (such as perseverance or playfulness) and finding ways to apply them often.

While some of these might seem daunting – how do you become more kind or more grateful? – the research has highlighted some specific ways you can take action.

Keeping a diary outlining three good things that happen to you each day can help you develop gratitude, for instance. Studies have shown groups who keep such journals have improved wellbeing and decreased depressive

symptoms compared to control groups. (While it gets harder over time not to repeat things on the list, looking for new sources of gratitude apparently helps hone the skill.)

And if you want to act kindly, you could consider doing some kind of regular volunteer work. There's evidence volunteering boosts not just your wellbeing, but possibly even your immunity to illness as well.

It might sound trite, but even routine chores like washing the dishes or brushing your teeth can play a role in boosting wellbeing. Mindfulness expert and former GP, Dr Russ Harris, says simple daily exercises where you engage your senses – such as touch, sound and smell – while doing household tasks can help you get better at being "fully present in the moment". This is one of the key skills linked to happiness.

"The heightened sense of awareness that you develop when you cultivate mindfulness is not something that comes naturally," Harris says. "You really need to practise regularly."

Working out what matters

But some techniques require careful thought. Setting goals and working towards them can definitely boost wellbeing, says Grant, who has run six high-quality scientific trials showing this.

But you have to focus on the right sort of goals – ones related to things you truly value, not things you think you should or ought to do.

While it sounds paradoxical, he says one way to explore values that bring meaning and purpose to your life is to think about your death and write the eulogy you'd like to hear read at your funeral.

While it's a confronting technique, it's been shown to be powerful because it can help highlight what really matters to you. (You can find more details about how to approach the eulogy exercise and other techniques shown to help improve wellbeing on the Making Australia Happy website based on the ABC documentary series.)

But exactly how much of a difference any exercise or strategy will make for you is hard to predict. The evidence tends to come from studies of groups of

people. So you might need to consider a suite of strategies to see which ones work best for you.

"The pursuit of happiness and wellbeing is such an individual thing," Grant says.

"Learning forgiveness could be enormously powerful for one individual, but less so for another. For another person, doing small acts of kindness – if they're trapped in a very self-centred, self-focused world – that might be huge."

Try and try again

It's not just your mental focus that affects how happy and fulfilled you feel. Maximising your physical health is also critical.

"If you're not getting enough sleep, if you're living on rubbish food and you're not getting any exercise, that's a very poor foundation on which to build wellbeing," Grant says.

And even then, there are no magic quick fixes. Not only will it take sustained commitment, but you should expect to relapse many times along the way.

"For any behaviour change program, it takes between seven and eight attempts on average before you cement down that change. If you're trying to create any meaningful change, that's just the way it is," Grant says.