

HERE COMES THE Sun

YOU'RE UP. YOU'RE DOWN.
YOU'RE BACK UP AGAIN.
WANT TO GET OFF THE
EMOTIONAL ROLLER-
COASTER AND START LOVING
YOUR LIFE? HERE ARE SOME
SURPRISINGLY SIMPLE WAYS
TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE
HAPPINESS.

by Patti Verbanas



WHAT IS YOUR AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS LEVEL?

Visit www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu to take the *Authentic Happiness Inventory Questionnaire*, developed at the University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center.

CHARLIE BROWN WALKS OVER TO LUCY'S psychiatrist booth, plunks down his nickel, and laments, "I'm depressed. What can I do to be happier?" Lucy casts him a disgusted look and responds, "That's simple, Charlie Brown: Buy real estate."

Unfortunately, our dear Lucy has been suckered into the quick-fix approach that we've all been sold: Happiness can be bought. Of course, we're students of our environment. We're bombarded by ads populated by people appearing more gleeful than we are, suggesting that there is something inherently wrong with our

lives (but their product will fix that!). To complicate matters, we benchmark ourselves against our friends, co-workers, and neighbors, projecting realities upon these people who seemingly "have it all" — deep relationships, successful careers, wealth. They always seem to be laughing and engaged, and by comparison, our lives appear woefully deficient.

"This 'Keeping Up With the Joneses' is a surefire recipe for unhappiness," says Clifford Lazarus, co-founder of the Lazarus Institute in Skillman and author of *The 60-Second Shrink: 101 Strategies for Staying Sane in a Crazy World*. "We never

really know another person's conscious experience; we just make inferences on what is observable. For example, you see someone with a fancy car, but what you don't see is the tremendous debt pressure they have."

"Conditional happiness is a trap we fall into. We tell ourselves, 'I'll be happy when I have this house, lose some weight, get promoted,'" says Alan Gettis, a psychologist in Bergen County and the author of *The Happiness Solution* and other books on positive psychology. "We should not postpone our happiness until we have all these things. We should give ourselves permission to be happy *now*."

The good news is that sustained happiness is within your reach. Following are the key techniques positive-psychology experts recommend for achieving your optimal happiness, which can soon become second nature with commitment, patience, and practice.

Rethink Your Definition of "Happiness"

"People have this mistaken idea that happiness is something that can be chased and achieved, but really the best we can hope for is periods of happiness," says Lazarus, who writes a blog on such misconceptions for *Psychology Today*. Happiness, he explains, is not a state of constant joy, but rather one of contentment, where there is little stress and a sense of peace.

Another mistake, according to Gettis, is equating happiness with "fun." "It becomes all about pleasure — but then it's never enough," he says. When the euphoria of each pleasure wave fades, your baseline of what brings you that pleasure is raised. "When you get hooked on one pleasurable thing after another, it's like an addiction," he says. "You have to keep upping the dosage to get that high."

Invest in Experiences OK, sure, a recent international survey by the University of Chicago discovered that having money does influence happiness — but only to the extent that living comfortably can decrease levels of stress and contribute to a sense of well-being. In the money-and-happiness equation, what you buy is what really counts. "Spend money on experiences that can go into a portfolio of memories, not things, since happiness derived from things does not last," Lazarus says. He also recommends trading money for time. "If it's in your budget, pay someone to do chores that you would rather not do, and spend that time with family and friends."

Be a Daydream Believer "Don't just do something — sit there" is the mantra of Sheryl Sarnak, a life coach in Tenafly. "We have so much to do that we run around frenetically and just need to stop." Daydreaming is a good way to rejuvenate your sense

of well-being and reduce your blood pressure and stress hormones, she notes. To make the most of your flights of fancy, use strong imagery. “Visualize something positive and evoke all your senses,” Lazarus says. “Say it’s a beach scene: Feel the texture of the sand and the warmth of the sun, smell the tinge of salt in the air, notice the fluffy clouds high in the bright, blue sky.”

Fake It Till You Make It When you’re feeling low, laughter might be the last thing on your mind, but experts say it is one of the most effective tools in regaining a sense of happiness. Studies have shown that you can alter your emotional outlook simply by acting how you would like to feel. “Our brains are constantly monitoring what we are doing, not just what we are feeling or thinking,” Lazarus explains. “The self-reflective part of our mind starts to form an opinion of ourselves based on our actions. Acting positively tends to buoy happiness.”

Cast Yourself as the Hero The story you tell about yourself and your life goes a long way to creating sustainable happiness.

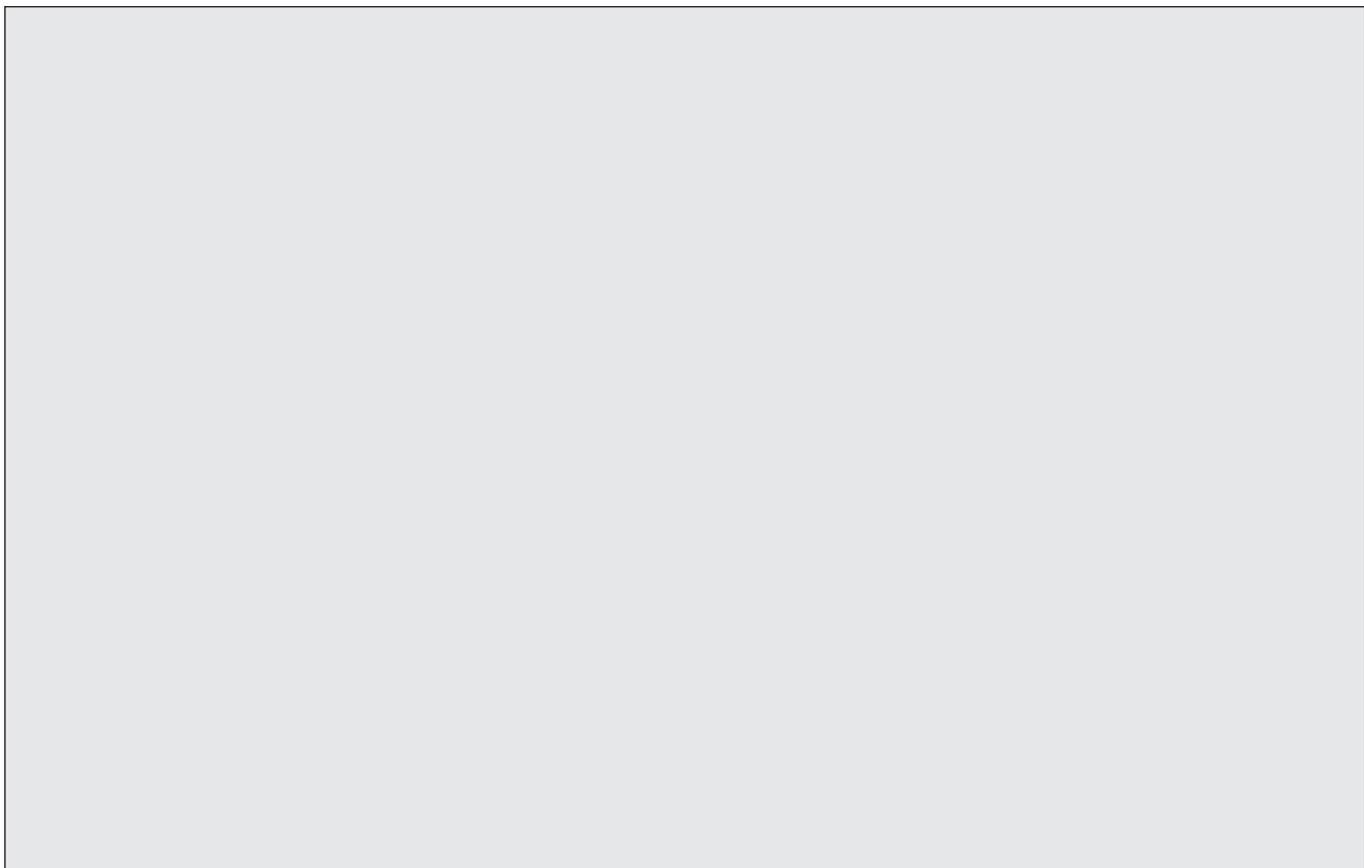
Though you can’t change your history, you can reinterpret it. For example, Gettis says, you might have had a tumultuous childhood, but instead of focusing on the trials, concentrate on how you learned and grew from them. In your story, cast yourself as a “happy person,” not a victim. “At the base level, most of us feel we’re not good enough, not worthy enough, not deserving,” Sarnak says. “Those beliefs keep us trapped in self-created cages of misery. Be aware of the dialogue in your head — what you are telling yourself — and adapt a new inner voice, one with less self-judgment.”

Rubberneck for What is Going Right “We are a society that rubbernecks accidents — it’s what we slow down for,” Gettis notes. “Try rubbernecking for what is going *right*, and then spend five minutes each day writing what you’re thankful for.”

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Research has shown that the act of writing strengthens the neural pathways in the brain that govern conscious awareness in a way that simply thinking cannot. “Keeping a daily ‘gratitude journal’ — chronicling your blessings, good deeds, accomplishments, moments of pleasure — recruits the right brain muscles and improves your optimism and your self-esteem,” Lazarus says. “We think it. We write it. We read it.”

Practice Random Acts of Kindness Alfred



Adler, a colleague of Freud, advised his depressed patients to “do two nice things each day,” a notion that gained pop culture status with the Random Acts of Kindness movement. “Getting outside of ourselves paradoxically makes us happier because we become less preoccupied with ourselves,” Gettis says. “It allows us to change the channel.”

And there is strength in numbers. Research by psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of *The How of Happiness*, discovered that people who performed five small kind deeds over the course of one day were happier than those who did five good deeds over a week. So, let the woman with one item step in front of you at the market, or open a door for a stranger — you’ll both be happier for it.

Live in the Now Happiness is what happens when you’re pursuing other things: Blink, and you might miss it. You increase your potential for happiness when you live consciously in the moment. “We often live our lives being wedged between future concerns and past regrets — but the present is the only thing we can control,” Lazarus says. “We should be focused on our satisfaction *now*.” Take stock of how you feel at this moment, putting aside thoughts of past or future: Chances are, you will feel in control and satisfied — and, dare we say it, even happy. Give yourself permission to savor what comes to your senses: the taste of artisan cheese paired with wine, the soft sound of your child’s voice drifting up in the dark as he says good night, the wildflowers seen blooming in the median during your commute. By concentrating on these quotidian moments, you will discover opportunities for joy that you would otherwise miss, moments that collectively can lead to sustained happiness.

Meditate – Even Momentarily The trick to remaining rooted in the present is to recognize when you are veering away and then to gently lead yourself back. “Achieving happiness often means ‘learning how to get out of your own way,’” Gettis says. “That’s what meditation teaches you.” Wendy Gross-Pinto of Yoga & Healing

Center in Scotch Plains offers this quick and easy meditation to help return yourself to the present: Inhale deeply for a count of seven, hold for a count of seven, exhale strongly for a count of seven. Repeat this seven times, concentrating on each breath, and you’ll notice your mind returning to the present.

Lose Yourself and Get into the Flow One effective way to live in the present is to immerse yourself in a task — a state of mind psychologists refer to as *flow*. “When you’re in flow, there’s no self-consciousness, no self-evaluation; it’s just you and the experience,” Gettis says. “This type of engagement is a big player in the happiness formula.” Find something to lose yourself in, whether it’s painting, swimming, or doing chores. Tip: Practice monotasking, which can help you better reach a state of flow and the joy it reaps.

Connect – in a Real Way Strong relationships of any kind are key to sustained happiness: They give us a sense of belonging, validation, and purpose. It’s not the amount of time you spend with others, but the quality of that time that gives you a sense of connection. Facebook is a fine way to stay in touch, but real connection comes from real conversation. “We are social beings, and interactions are significant,” Lazarus says. Schedule a few small events each week that will allow you time to interact with people in a non-virtual way.

The benefits are not limited to human relationships. Numerous studies have found that people who own pets enjoy an increased sense of well-being and connection to their community.

And in this regard, Lucy was absolutely right: “Happiness is a warm puppy.” *

