

Four Ways to Achieve Greater Happiness in Your Life

Positive psychology is about how to improve the quality of our lives and feel better and happier. Experts call this the "science of happiness." In this article, you'll read about four ways to achieve greater happiness in your life, based on the teachings of the psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar, the author of *Happier* (McGraw-Hill, 2007).

Give yourself permission to be human

Giving yourself permission to be human means allowing yourself to fully experience all of your emotions – the positive and the negative. "We think that if we experience anxiety, sadness, fear, or envy, that there must be something wrong with us," says Dr. Ben-Shahar. "Actually, the opposite is true. There is something wrong with us if we don't, at times, experience envy, anger, disappointment, sadness, or anxiety."

Accept that painful emotions are a natural part of life. Don't try to block them, avoid feeling them or pretend they're not there. Recognize that feeling down, disappointed or unhappy is, at times, normal and natural. Similarly, emotions such as joy and pleasure and delight are also natural, so accept and embrace them as well.

Admit to yourself and to those you are close with when you are feeling unhappy. Be sincere and open with yourself and those who are close to you when you are feeling down, feeling afraid, or experiencing other difficult emotions.

Allow yourself to experience negative feelings but not to give up, lose hope or feel resigned. "Practice active acceptance rather than passive resignation," says Dr. Ben-Shahar. For example, if you find yourself feeling anxious before a conversation with your manager or a customer, that's OK. Many people feel this way. But you can still choose to go ahead with the conversation, accept your nervousness and proceed with your work responsibility.

Focus on your emotions by practicing the "unconditional acceptance" exercise. Here is what to do: Sit comfortably in a chair or lie down if you prefer. Close your eyes. Focus on your breathing. Now shift your focus to how you are feeling – whether it is sad, happy, anxious, nervous, joyous or bored. Allow yourself to feel whatever emotions come up. For the next few minutes, take deep breaths and allow whatever you are feeling to flow through you. Gradually and calmly open your eyes.

Simplify your life

We often feel too busy, as if we're trying to squeeze in more and more activities into less and less time. As a result, we sometimes fail to enjoy the potential sources of happiness all around us – feeling happiness at work, with a friend, a loved one, or a child; listening to music; noticing a beautiful landscape. Time pressure leads to feelings of frustration and can have a negative effect on productivity and creativity. Here are tips from Dr. Ben-Shahar on ways to simplify your life, do "less rather than more," and achieve more happiness as a result:

Look within yourself and examine how your life feels. Are you constantly rushed? Stressed? Always behind? Do you have sufficient time to pursue activities that are personally meaningful to you?

Reduce the time pressure in your life. Reduce the overall number of activities in your day and reduce the number of things you do all at once. For example, if you can, when spending time with loved ones,

don't answer the phone, check your email or send text messages. You'll be happier and more effective in all realms of your life.

Be careful about over-committing yourself and about taking on new projects. Learn to say "no" to extra demands on your time.

Turn off distractions during times of leisure. Mobile phones, email and text messages, computers and the rising complexity of modern life – these all contribute to the constant time pressures we feel. And they can contribute to our feeling distracted from fully enjoying the time we spend with family and friends.

As much as possible, give yourself uninterrupted time at work as well. When we can focus on a single activity without distractions, we are not only happier – we are also more effective, productive, and creative.

Simplify your life to achieve a healthier love relationship. Researchers have found that stress and overwork are significant barriers to a healthy love relationship.

Recognize the importance of the mind-body connection

Physical exercise is essential for our physical and emotional health. It helps alleviate symptoms of depression, stress and anxiety, and can improve relationships, work, sleep and levels of happiness. Meditation and deep breathing can have additional benefits in all of those areas and can make you feel more in control of your life.

Many of us know about the importance of getting physical exercise, but we often ignore the importance of the mind-body connection. Here are two tips from Dr. Ben-Shahar:

Practice deep breathing. Focus on breathing more deeply for five breaths on your way to work, while sitting in front of the computer, before an important meeting, or whenever you want a moment of calm. Breathe in, fill your lungs with air until you see your belly rising, and then exhale. Practice this exercise regularly. And practice deep breathing for longer periods to achieve a greater sense of inner calm and relaxation.

Meditate. Meditation is the exercise of bringing your full attention to one thing. It might be your breathing, candlelight, music, or word chanting. Here is how to get started, focusing on your breathing as you meditate. Find a quiet spot at home or elsewhere where you will not have distractions. Sit comfortably in a chair or lie down if you prefer. Close your eyes or leave them open. Shift your focus to your breath. Now breathe deeply into your belly. Feel your stomach expanding as you breathe in and then lowering as you slowly and gently breathe out.

For the next couple of minutes, focus on your stomach being filled and then being emptied. If your mind wanders to other places, simply and gently bring it back and focus it on your stomach filling up and emptying. Breathe in deeply and then slowly and gently breathe out. Return to your breath. As you continue with your deep breathing, scan your body. If any part is tense, release it by breathing into it and then breathing out from it. Continue to scan your body and if any other part feels tense, once again breathe into it and breathe out from it. Take a few more deep breaths. Your focus, again, is on your rising and falling belly.

Focus on the positive

Our happiness depends not only on what we have but also on whether we appreciate what we have. This is why a person who seems to have everything may be unhappy, whereas a person with relatively little may be living a full and happy life. Research shows that by focusing on the positive and learning to be grateful for the things you have, you'll achieve greater levels of happiness.

Be grateful for what you have. "One of the main barriers to happiness is that we tend to take for granted the good things in our lives," says Dr. Ben-Shahar. "We rarely consciously think about how blessed we are to have our health, or our friends, or the food on our table." What can you be grateful for today? Is it your family? Your health? Your work?

Make gratefulness a habit and a way of life. Take a few minutes each day to remind yourself of the people and things you have to be grateful for in your life. You might write down your thoughts. Doing this each day will help you appreciate all that you have and will help you make gratefulness a lifelong habit.

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