



6 Simple Ways to Be

Happy

That Boost Your

Health

An AdventHealth
Discovery Guide



AdventHealth



We often tell ourselves that once we achieve a certain level of health, then we can be happy. But what if we could generate feelings of happiness without waiting to be healthier? And then because we felt so good, we made healthier choices? If we feel happy, we will be less likely to eat foods we don't really want to eat in an attempt to feel better. Happiness can also increase our energy making it easier to exercise and be more active. Which can improve our health.

Can it be as simple as making the choice to be happy?

God designed our brains with a frontal lobe located just behind our forehead in order to give us the power of choice. It provides us with the ability to live purposefully and manage our destiny. Rather than being completely controlled by outside forces, we can take control of our existence. For the most part, we are the decisions that we make. Without a frontal lobe, our lives would simply be reactive, directionless, pushed and pulled by whatever came our way.

When we realize we have a choice in how we feel, we realize we can choose feelings like happiness. But how do we do that?

Scientists have discovered that each of us has what is called a *happiness set point* which is more the result of biology and genetics than anything else. It is a baseline to which we are bound to return, even after significant reverses or dramatic good fortune. Research indicates that our set point cannot be changed and accounts for about 50 percent of our sense of well-being.¹

Studies also reveal that the circumstances of life account for only about 10 percent of our happiness. As hard as it might be to accept, all the events and life experiences that come our way actually play a

relatively minor role, including such things as job, income, housing, marriage, location, and looks. For instance, a well-known study concluded that the wealthiest Americans, who earn more than ten million dollars annually, were only slightly happier than their staff and blue-collar employees.²

The great news is that our set point and the circumstances of life are not the final word. We can choose to rise above them. *About 40 percent of our happiness can be determined by our own actions and way of thinking.* We can either be controlled by our genes and life circumstances, or we can proactively build into our lives happiness-producing activities that can permanently raise our sense of well-being if they become an integral part of our attitude and lifestyle. *Our happiness set point might be fixed, but that does not mean our happiness level can't be significantly higher.*³

Abundant living is within everyone's grasp, but it won't just happen. It takes commitment and must be intentionality practiced on a regular basis. *Happiness is not something that you find, it is something you create.*

Here are six ways to boost your overall sense of happiness and well-being. Look them over carefully and find one or two that are a good fit for you and consider the others later. Think of these activities not as a long to-do list to make you feel guilty but as a cafeteria of opportunities to grow.

Different activities have different impacts on people. It is crucial to discover the ones that work for you. You will tend to maintain abundant living endeavors if they fit your goals, play to your strengths, capture your interest, and don't turn your schedule completely upside down.



1 Gratitude

The world's most prominent researcher on the benefits of gratitude, Robert Emmons, defines it as, "A knowing awareness that we are the recipients of goodness. In gratitude we remember the contribution that others have made for the sake of our well-being."⁴ It also includes the notion of undeserved merit.

Each year a teacher in a psychology class gives her undergraduate students the assignment to write a gratitude letter. One of those students, Nicole, describes her experience in writing to her mom:

*I felt overwhelmed with a sense of happiness. I noticed I was typing very quickly, probably because it was very easy for me to express gratitude that was long overdue. As I was typing, I could feel my heart beating faster and faster... Towards the end of the letter, as I reread what I had already, I began to get teary eyed and even a little bit choked up. Expressing my gratitude to my mom overwhelmed me to such a point that tears streamed down my face.*⁵

Later that week, frustrated with her lack of progress on a research paper, Nicole decided to take a break and again read the letter. Instantly a smile broke out and her mood quickly shifted. She felt much happier and less stressed for the rest of the day. Such is the power of gratitude. Consistently practiced, it can be life changing.

Gratitude is a powerful way of acknowledging the presence of God in our life and the numerous gifts he brings our way. It is being thankful for what we have, see, hear, and feel. We need not be thankful for pain and tragedy, but we can help ourselves immensely by being grateful for good things that happen despite them.

Science has now confirmed the many benefits of gratitude. Studies at the Universities of California and Miami concluded that keeping a weekly

gratitude journal resulted in people exercising more regularly, having fewer illnesses, feeling better about their lives overall, and being more optimistic. These thankful individuals also made better progress toward their most important goals – academic, interpersonal, or health-based.⁶

Stephen Post, PhD, professor of bioethics at Case Western Reserve University's School of Medicine, has discovered that gratitude increases our body's natural antibodies, helps us focus mentally, avoid depression, and have healthier blood pressure and heart rate.⁷

Researchers have discovered some important guidelines for making gratitude an integral part of your abundant living lifestyle:⁸

1. It is more impactful to record your blessings once a week than every day. Otherwise it can become routine and simply another part of your to-do list.
2. Keep the way you express thankfulness fresh. You may keep a journal for a few weeks, then simply keep track mentally for a while, or utilize the arts such as painting, or share your thinking with a friend.
3. Make thankfulness a regular part of your prayer life.
4. Express gratitude directly to people.
5. Don't just look for big things. Focus primarily on the small, often overlooked blessings. Life is mostly the small stuff. One author highlights our tendency to overlook what's all around us, "Instead of noticing the beauty of the flowers, you can complain about having to water them. Instead of being grateful for your food you eat, you can complain about how hard it is to cook it, or how expensive it is to buy it."⁹



2 Acts of Kindness and Generosity

One morning an education consultant was making her rounds of schools, when she noticed something colorful on her car's windshield. As she got closer, she realized that it was a gorgeous yellow rose covered with dewdrops sparkling like diamonds. There was no note attached. Coupled with the morning sunshine, this unexpected gift created a wave of positive feelings and wonderment. The giver would never know about the many times that anonymous rose inspired the consultant to put roses on other people's windshields in joyful response. They had started a chain of kindness that multiplied to uplift many.¹⁰

All four Gospels record the story of the miraculous feeding of 5,000 men and, most likely, at least twice that number of women and children (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:35-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13). Jesus was teaching all day and concern arose that people on the crowded hillside would be getting hungry and it was a long journey home.

The primary focus is on Christ who multiplied five loaves and two fishes to feed the masses with twelve baskets left over. We should also reflect on the little boy who offered his few morsels in the first place – “Hey mister, you can have my lunch.” Undoubtedly his mother had packed the lunch before he left home to listen to the Master. The lad had become so engrossed in Jesus' teaching that he'd forgotten to eat. Everyone else had apparently already downed their own provisions long ago. The youngster generously offered his meal even though it was late in the day and his own stomach must have been growling big time.¹¹

The five loaves were only little barley buns, the food of the poor. The fish were nothing more than sardines, used as a kind of relish.¹² Someone sitting next to him might have elbowed him and counseled, “Might as well eat that yourself, boy, it isn't going to make a lick of difference in this crowd.” Despite the apparent futility of the gesture, the youngster gave what he could and Jesus provided the miracle of multiplication. The same can happen in our own lives. As we partner with God, he takes our little acts of kindness and generosity and multiplies them to bless others.

Just like the little boy must have gone home with renewed delight and satisfaction at what his gift had become, helping others reverberates to bless and uplift our own lives. Dave Toyce states, “Generous acts have the unique ability to lift us to a higher level where we are more human, more the person we really want to be.”¹³ So what's in your lunch bag?

Volunteering is one of the most widespread and rewarding ways to spread kindness and generosity. Researchers have discovered tremendous reflex benefits for the giver. In his book, *The Healing Power of Doing Good*, Allan Luks surveyed 3,000 volunteers serving twenty organizations and concluded that service helped sustain good health and reduce the impact of diseases, both physical and psychological.¹⁴

As the Scriptures indicate, “A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor” (Proverbs 22:9, NIV).



3 Savor Life's Joys

Savoring is like sucking up the last bit of a milkshake with the noisy, prolonged “sslllrrrrppp” of a straw. It’s like catching a whiff of sweet floral scent on a walk and taking time to seek out the source. It’s like replaying a favorite tune over and over to let every note have its day.

Research indicates that savorers are more self-confident, outgoing, more hopeful, less neurotic, and less likely to experience depression, stress, or guilt.¹⁵ Here are some pointers to enhance your savory experience:¹⁶

1. Be present in the present.
2. Relish everyday experiences.
3. Reminisce and reflect with family and friends.
4. Recall happy days.
5. Celebrate upbeat news.
6. Be aware of beauty.
7. Take pleasure in what your senses absorb.

4 Increase Flow Experiences

A “Flow Experience” is when you get so absorbed in something captivating and enjoyable that you lose track of time. Time just seems to flow quickly by. To boost your happiness level, build more of these types of experiences into your life. Flow experiences happen most often when we are pursuing activities we care deeply about.¹⁷

5 Act Happy

Many times our feelings follow our actions. In a study, one group of students were told to hold a felt-tip marker in their teeth, mimicking a smile, and the other group held a marker between puckered lips, mimicking a frown. The two groups were then shown cartoons and the first group actually found them to be considerably funnier.¹⁸ This study and others like it indicate that choosing to adopt facial expressions and characteristics of happiness can go a long way to helping you experience inner joy.

6 Forgive Yourself and Others

The subject of forgiveness is both crucial and difficult. It deserves much more exploration than can be devoted to it here.* Nonetheless, abundant living can remain at arm's length if we cling to either guilt over our shortcomings of the past or bitterness over the awful way we were treated by someone else.

Anyone suffering from self-punishment over mistakes of the past can take comfort in God's amazing grace. The apostle John wrote, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NKJV).

And refusing to forgive others for past wrongs is like taking poison ourselves in order to get back at someone else. Forgiveness is not forgetting or condoning. It is not about the perpetrator. It is about releasing us from the hate that stifles our joy.

In order to insulate ourselves from the corrosive effects of prolonged anger, forgiveness should become a habitual attitude and way of life.

As you reflect on the various ways to generate happiness, choose to enter a journey of discovery to determine which ones you are willing to make happen in your own life.

You have the choice to change the way you feel and to increase abundant living. Gratitude, kindness, noticing moments of joy, experiencing flow, smiling, and forgiveness are all possible ways to improve your mood and then your health.

*For further guidance on forgiveness, see the book *Forgive to Live*, by Dr. Dick Tibbits

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