Become a Student of *Positive Psychology*: Tips for Success

Debby Hagenmaier MSN, RN

For centuries, philosophers, poets, indeed, humankind have contemplated the keys to happiness. Today we can add scientific researchers to the mix. The past several decades have revealed scientific data to support what Abraham Lincoln understood when he said, “Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be”. The field of Positive Psychology headed by American psychologists Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson from the University of Michigan condensed their studies on happiness to three main pathways: 1) *feeling good* 2) *engaging fully* and 3) *doing good*.

Keep in mind we can offer you the following suggestions, but the necessary ingredient is *you*. Without your motivation and desire the route to happiness is merely a guide. So, I encourage you to check in with yourself, become more aware of your unique level of happiness. If you’d like to raise it, peruse the list below. No need to take on everything. Start small. Choose one or two tips that appeal to you and give them a try. Keep in mind, your basic temperament is genetic (50%), 10% you can contribute to circumstances in your life, but ultimately 40% is within your power to control:

**Feeling Good** involves seeking pleasant experiences—emotional and sensory. Some would call this a hedonistic view of happiness which encourages maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain:

- Celebrate—savor your accomplishments
- Share the moment—including someone in your enjoyment of (a beautiful sunset, a piece of music, a meal) can enhance your enjoyment.
- Slow down—this is frequently a challenge. Can you eliminate several of the less enjoyable ways you spend your time so to afford more time for pleasurable experiences?
- Be active—try something new –a new recipe, a new skill, hike a different mountain.
- Single-task—the surest way to minimize pleasure is to multi-task. Ask yourself how can you enjoy a concert while you are texting a friend?
- Cultivate your memory—sit quietly somewhere and for 5 minutes recall a pleasant memory.

**Engage Fully.** Select activities that “hold” you. Have you ever been so pleasurably involved in an endeavor—painting, golf, teaching a class, planting flowers that you completely lose track of time? These are experiences that the researcher, Mihaly Gsikszentmihalyi terms “flow”. How do you achieve flow?

- You lose awareness of time.
You are active—that is, you have some control over that which you are involved.

You aren’t focused on yourself—you don’t care about how you look or sound; you have lost awareness of yourself.

You feel the work as effortless.

You want to repeat the experience.

You aren’t distracted by other worries or mundane thoughts.

Interestingly, a 1989 University of Chicago study led by Csikszentmihalyi revealed that the experience of “flow” occurs three times as often at work than it does during leisure time. Surprising? You might find it helpful to become more aware of those moments of satisfaction and involvement at your work.

**Doing Good** involves finding meaning in life apart from your own pleasure and gratification. We have Aristotle to thank for this realization, and current research backs this up. Finding meaning to life boosts your happiness.

Consider your goals—you don’t know how long you will live, but if you knew your time were limited how would you answer the question, “What have I contributed to this world? What legacy have I left to others or to my children?”

Volunteer—a 2008 study published in *Social Science and Medicine* indicates that the more people volunteer the happier they are.

Count your blessings *on others*—for one week try keeping a log of your small acts of kindness to others. See if you don’t feel happier by the end of that week.

Contribute $ to those in need.

Sources:


