You can add “negative affect” to the list of risk factors for cardiovascular disease which include overweight, smoking, hypertension, high cholesterol and lack of exercise because research (Ostir, et. al, *Hypertension in Older Adults and the Role of Positive Emotions*, 2006; Davidson, *The Nova Scotia Health Survey*, 1995, and Fredrickson, *The Value of Positive Emotions*, www.americanscientist.org, 2003). For instance, Davidson’s research demonstrates that people who experience more positive emotions or who possess a “positive affect”—a generally positive, optimistic view of life—have a lower risk of heart disease than those with more negative perspectives or “affect”.

What these studies indicate is not a clear cause-and-effect relationship but a definite connection. Davidson suggests that perhaps people who tend to be happier deal with stressors differently than their more unhappy counterparts or they may tend to take better care of themselves—exercise, diet, connections with others, passion for life. Or happiness, like its opposing emotions, depression and anxiety, may impact hormones. We do know that hormones have both negative and positive effects on heart health.

Researchers have established that biochemicals released when your brain registers some mood state—be that stressful or pleasurable—trigger profound physiological responses. Negative experiences, thoughts or feelings (fear, depression, anger, anxiety) stimulate the surge of stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) which increase heart rate, blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, inflammation and suppress the immune system. Meanwhile, pleasant thoughts and emotions (pleasure, love, compassion) trigger an increase in hormones like oxytocin and dopamine which bring about the opposite physiological responses. Heart rate, blood pressure, blood sugar and inflammation decrease while your immune system works more effectively.

Cultivating more happiness and joy in your life simply makes the time you have on earth more gratifying.

Karina Davidson, lead researcher in the Nova Scotia Study suggests: “Like the observational finding that moderate wine consumption is healthy (and enjoyable), at this point ordinary people can insure they have some pleasurable activities in their daily lives. Some people wait for their two weeks of vacation to have fun, and that would be analogous to binge drinking (moderation and consistency, not deprivation and binging, is what is needed). If you enjoy reading novels, but never get around to it, commit to getting 15 minutes or so of reading in. If walking or listening to music improves your mood, get those activities in your schedule. Essentially, spending some few minutes each day truly relaxed and enjoying your self is certainly good for your mental health, and may improve your physical health as well.”

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