

The Telegraph

How to be happy: 20 pressing questions (and answers) for a more fulfilling life

Happiness is unique in the enormous variety of pseudoscience and claptrap that surrounds it. “No medicine cures what happiness cannot” – Gabriel García Márquez. False. “Sanity and happiness are impossible combinations” – Mark Twain. Incorrect. “Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city” – George Burns. Funny... but false.

Fortunately, the study of happiness has over the past few years vastly improved, and, among the waffle and chaff, there are some useful, scientifically proven principles that we can all apply to our lives.

We bring you an expert panel comprising: Dr Dean Burnett (DB), a neuroscientist and the author of *The Happy Brain*; Prof Felice Jacka (FJ), the director of Deakin University’s Food and Mood Centre and president of the International Society for Nutritional Psychiatry Research; Paul Dolan (PD), author of *Happiness by Design* and professor of behavioural science at the London School of Economics; Andrew Oswald (AO), a professor of economics at the University of Warwick and a pioneer in the field of economics and happiness; and Prof Andreas Mogensen (AM), an ethics specialist from the University of Oxford’s faculty of philosophy and a former assistant director of Giving What We Can, a charity project whose aim is to find the most effective ways of doing good.

If this A-team of happiness won’t make you feel better, nobody will. Here, they answer 20 frequently asked questions about happiness.

1. What does ‘happiness’ actually mean?

DB: “Happiness” can be described as an umbrella term for all the different ways in which we can feel positive and good, from feeling euphoric to feeling relaxed. At its most basic level, it’s your brain’s way of encouraging behaviours that it thinks are beneficial to you, such as eating, improving your social standing or reproducing, and there are several neurological chemicals and processes involved. One of them is dopamine, the neurotransmitter that allows the reward pathway of the brain to function.

Endorphins come in as well: they are chemicals that cause intense pleasure, but they are more used for pain suppression, or dealing with trauma, than being responsible for causing happiness. There’s also oxytocin, the one that helps with emotional bonds and is nicknamed the “cuddle molecule”, and serotonin seems to be a mood regulator that allows us to articulate and process our moods more effectively. It’s important to remember that these chemicals themselves do not cause happiness – you can’t just ingest them and expect to be happier – but are part of a complex system. Think of them like the different materials and processes you need to build a house.



Endorphins improve our mood CREDIT: E+

2. Does this mean happiness is predetermined?

DB: Our underlying biology is always going to have a role to play in our mental state. For example, there are data that suggest that some people have a different level of receptors or sensitivity in their reward pathway, often meaning that it takes more stimulation to make them feel standard amounts of pleasure: you might enjoy a decent biscuit or watching your football team score a goal, but they need a more visceral thrill. A lot of it is developmentally based, too: the age of four is a particularly key one for forming a long-term ability to process and experience various emotions, including happiness.

So if you're that age and you have detached parents in a bad environment, that will affect your ability to feel happiness later in life. And then there are conditions such as borderline personality disorder, which seem to be partially heritable. But there is a lot we can do: if you exercise more, eat better, and so on, then your body becomes more efficient and better able to support your brain – which is the most demanding organ in the body – with the conditions it requires for its health and your happiness.



The joy of winning CREDIT: CARL RECINE

3. What kinds of happiness should I prioritise?

PD: Happiness is our experience of pleasure and purpose in our lives, and we need both of them. Pleasurable things are things that make us feel good while we're doing them, like spending time with our families, watching television, and eating food we like. Purposeful experiences are those that involve delayed gratification, such as gruelling exercise or learning something new or working on a demanding project. Both of these things are important, and we need a balance between them.

4. We hear a lot about how exercise makes us happy. What kind of exercise is best?

DB: The link between exercise and well-being isn't as clear as people like to make out, but, broadly, anything that improves your general health will also improve your ability to be happy. Interval training, in which you alternate between working very hard and resting, tends to be the kind of exercise most recommended for rapid improvement in health. Exercise in a group tends to be associated with better mental health. But keep pushing yourself, because your brain stops responding to anything that is too familiar.

5. How much does food affect mood?

FJ: We now understand that your gut microbiome seems to be very important in driving mood and behaviour, and diet appears to be the most important variable that affects the microbiome. Your gut microbes ferment dietary fibre, and the molecules they produce in that process have a large range of functions within the body. Gut microbes influence our metabolism, body weight, blood glucose, gene activity and the health of our brain, and all of these factors have a tight relationship with mood and even depression.

A leaky gut lining, which can be caused by a bad diet, allows food and bacteria to leak into your bloodstream. This prompts an immune response from your body, which results in what we call inflammation. Inflammation is a risk factor for a number of chronic diseases, including heart disease, cancer and depression. By eating and drinking well, you can change your microbiome and thus potentially improve your health and happiness within days.



The right food can give you a happiness boost CREDIT: FSTOP

6. So what's a good diet?

FJ: You need fibre – it's great for your gut bugs. A diverse range of vegetables and fruit should be your starting point. Then wholegrain cereals, as unprocessed as possible: quinoa, barley, brown rice, and rolled oats. They also provide important types of fibres. Legumes, such as lentils, chickpeas and beans, also provide really terrific substrates for your gut bugs to ferment. Healthy fats, too, seem to be particularly important: the monounsaturated fats that you get from olive oil and the sorts of fats you can get in fish and seafood. Fermented foods are really wonderful too, because they provide prebiotic substrates, which means they provide food for our bugs.

7. And what should we avoid?

FJ: Everywhere you go you will find unhealthy food products that have been deliberately manufactured to interact with the reward systems and the addiction centres in our brain. We can't even fill up a car with petrol without getting the prompts to consume these food products. They are completely normalised, they are heavily marketed, they are very cheap, and our primal brains crave them. We are talking here about any of the foods that we know are not good for us: foods such as chips, sweets, ice cream, pies and fried foods. Foods that contain artificial sugars and emulsifiers tend to be bad for the gut, as are foods that are high in saturated fat and trans fats and salt, and all of these are common in processed foods. Even ignoring the gut, we know that Western-type diets, which are high in sugar, added fats and salt, affect the brain's hippocampus region very quickly. As well as governing your ability to learn and remember, the hippocampus is very important in mood regulation.

8. And... what about booze?

FJ: Alcohol consumed in small amounts is part of a Mediterranean-style diet and doesn't seem to be harmful. Moderate consumption may be linked to improved well-being because of the social interaction it usually involves, but the problem is that as soon as we exceed small amounts, that promotes leaky gut, and anything that promotes leaky gut is going to promote inflammation, which will be problematic for your physical and mental health. Binge drinking is extremely problematic.



You won't find happiness at the bottom of a bottle CREDIT: GETTY

9. How do I know what makes me happy?

PD: We tell ourselves lots of stories about what should make us happy: the job and the marriage and the house and the kids and so on. But what counts is moment-to-moment happiness, not our abstract evaluations of our lives. This is something people often lose sight of. For example, people sometimes stay in jobs they don't like for reasons such as the job's prestige, or simply because they hope to earn money to enjoy later. Or they read a book because it's highbrow, but don't enjoy any of it. That's not a sensible approach: you can't rely on recouping that happiness. Lost happiness is lost forever. Humans are so bad at evaluating their own happiness that it's often more useful to ask friends or family: people who know us well tend to have a clearer view of what makes us happy from day to day.

10. I just want a quick fix. What about winning the lottery?

AJ: Of course, everybody thinks that, if they win the lottery, they'll be much happier. They probably don't realise that the rate of return on the UK lottery, for example, is minus 50 per cent a time, so if I take £1 million, put it in the National Lottery in January, and put all my weekly winnings into weekly tickets, by late May my £1 million will have turned into 50p. Even if you win, the paradox is that no research team has ever managed to show that lottery winners are happier 12 months later. But I don't think people buy tickets as investments: they get fun out of lotteries because they think about what they might do with the money.

11. I've figured out what makes me happy, but it's hard to change my habits. How do I do it?

PD: Psychological theory has traditionally told us that intention leads to actions, but it's the other way around. Willpower is finite and all of us need help forming habits. Don't just set yourself a goal like "doing more exercise" – break it down into manageable steps, and prime yourself into following them by doing things such as proactively putting gym trips into your calendar. Involve other people, whether it's by telling them what you plan to do, which makes you more likely to actually do it, or by having them join you in whatever activity you've planned. And rehearse how you will respond to obstacles: "If I am tired, then I will still go to the gym"; "If I'm having a meal with my family and my phone rings, I'll turn it off."

12. What are some sure-fire, easy, proven happiness wins?

PD: All humans are happier when they're around nature – even proximity to pot plants has been shown to have this effect. Socialising is good for us, and so is exercise. Laughter has been shown to relax us. Doing things for other people makes us much happier. Finally, pay attention to the activities that make you happy. We are what we attend to – distractions such as mobile phones ruin our focus on pleasurable experiences.



A pot plant might make you happier CREDIT: TETRA IMAGES RF

13. Love seems pleasurable. How do I get the most out of it?

DB: It's possible to be completely happy without it, which is often overlooked, but sex is a fundamental human drive and, as a species, we are geared towards pair-bonding. It's a very intense process that can have huge and enjoyable effects on brain chemistry, but one of the problems is that we approach both love and sex in a way that is determined by society. Dr Petra Boynton (the Telegraph's sex and relationships expert) talks about "the relationship escalator", in which people expect step-by-step progression that includes meeting someone, marriage at a certain age, then kids, a place in the country, etc, etc. Humans have really varied psychology – some are polyamorous, some are asexuals, some don't want kids – and one tip would be to check whether your concerns are your own or society's. People have this idea of a fairy-tale ending and happy-ever-after, which things like the Royal Wedding exacerbate, but that's not how the brain works: nothing makes you happy forever, and to stay happy with one person requires effort and novelty.

14. And what about sex?

DB: People have different wants and needs when it comes to sex. It's not possible to have the wrong amount of it – it really depends what you and your partner are into. If you have different sex drives, that can be a problem, but it's not insurmountable. As with love, we need to detach our individual sexual preferences from what society tells us is the norm. Like love, sex can make us very happy, but relationships are about interaction and sex is just one part of that. Doing things together, such going for a walk or even cleaning the garage, help us feel companionship once the initial phase of madness and lust is over.



Try going for a walk with your partner CREDIT: E+

15. What do I need from my job for me to be happy?

DB: We need money to meet basic biological requirements, such as food and shelter, but there qualities, sensations and positions that the human brain responds to because of the way it's evolved. Autonomy is one – doctors and teachers have this. We want to feel that we are good at something, because the brain is egocentric, and we also want to see the consequences of our work. Getting on well with our colleagues is important, and so is anything that allows us to work towards our ambitions.

16. Sure, but... how much money do I really need?

AJ: First of all, we should remember that there are many other things in our lives that are more important to our happiness than money. For example, one of the key things we've learned in the study of the economics of happiness is that a good marriage is worth about £100,000 a year. Money is important, though. If you're low down the distribution of income, another £5,000 a year will push you a long way up the happiness rankings. After that, there are diminishing returns. There are some researchers who believe that happiness doesn't increase after £100,000 a year; my view is that after this level it just goes up much more slowly.



Can you buy happiness? CREDIT: GETTY

17. Isn't the main thing just to out-earn my friends?

AJ: An important part of the relationship between happiness and wealth is relative income: everyone cares about what they earn, and what they own, compared with those around them. That is the curse of being human, and it is a problem for capitalism: as countries get richer, they don't get happier, a much-debated phenomenon called the Easterlin paradox. We adjust quickly to income and, while all the boats lift up with the tide of GDP, unfortunately my neighbour's boat lifts at the same rate as mine.

18. Yeah, but... if I'm going to spend money, how should I spend it?

AJ: There's some evidence from the psychology literature that buying experiences is more valuable than buying things. A lot of our spending goes on status-seeking, but if we compete over material things, we'll suffer as a group and so will the planet. Spending our money on the public good, including the environment, allows everyone to gain. Elsewhere, there's a lot of counter-intuitive work showing that giving away money produces more happiness than keeping it.

19. Oh. How much happier do we get by helping others?

AM: There's evidence that strongly suggests that altruism makes us happy. A survey in 2013, which looked at data from 136 countries, examined whether there was a relationship between people's self-reported subjective well-being – aka happiness – and whether they'd donated to charity in the previous month. Even controlling for income and other variables, it was an astonishingly strong relationship. Having donated in the past month was associated with similar levels of happiness as a doubling of income. That study was correlational, but there are a number of experimental studies that point to a causal relationship between giving and happiness.

20. And what kind of giving makes us happiest?

AM: Putting aside the great benefits to other people's happiness that we can cause through giving time and particularly money, there are three important factors that determine how happy we are made by our own giving. It helps where there is an opportunity to connect with other people, and it needn't be with the beneficiary: it can simply be with someone who works for a charity we donate to. It's important to have a concrete picture of the impact you are making. When you give to Against Malaria Foundation, for instance, you know that your money is buying anti-malarial bed nets and that the charity needs about \$4,500 (£3,460) to save the life of a child under the age of five. Finally, autonomy is important: an experiment involving fMRI scanning showed that the reward centres of the participants' brains lit up when money was transferred to a food bank from an account that they had been given, but that they lit up even more when the donation was made freely. It's obviously very hard to come up with a uniquely correct percentage that fits everyone's circumstances, but I think a good rule of thumb would be for those earning at least the median income in the UK to give at least 10 per cent of their income to wherever it will do the most good. If we give effectively, we can achieve extraordinary things. To find out just how much good you can do, I would suggest having a look at the top charities recommended at givewell.org.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/health-fitness/mind/happiness-faqs-20-questions-fulfilling-life/>