



How to be happy: Tips for cultivating contentment

Are you tired of waiting around for happiness to find you? Stop waiting and start getting happy with these tips.

By Mayo Clinic staff

Do you know how to be happy? Or are you waiting for happiness to find you? Despite what the fairy tales depict, happiness doesn't appear by magic. It's not even something that happens to you. It's something you can cultivate. So, what are you waiting for? Start discovering how to be happy.

How to be happy: What science tells us

Only 10 percent or so of the variation in people's reports of happiness can be explained by differences in their circumstances. It appears that the bulk of what determines happiness is due to personality and —more importantly —thoughts and behaviors that can be changed. So, yes, you can learn how to be happy —or at least happier.

Although you may have thought, as many people do, that happiness comes from being born rich or beautiful or living a stress-free life, the reality is that people who have wealth, beauty or less stress are not happier on average than those of who don't enjoy those blessings. People who are happy seem to intuitively know that their happiness is the sum of their life choices, and their lives are built on the following pillars:

- Devoting time to family and friends
- Appreciating what they have
- Maintaining an optimistic outlook
- Feeling a sense of purpose
- Living in the moment

How to be happy: Practice, practice, practice

If you have been looking for happiness, the good news is that your choices, thoughts and actions can influence your level of happiness. It's not as easy as flipping a switch, but you can turn up your happiness level. Here's how to get started on the path to creating a happier you

Invest in relationships

Surround yourself with happy people. Being around people who are content buoys your own mood. And by being happy yourself, you give something back to those around you.

Friends and family help you celebrate life's successes and support you in difficult times. Although it's easy to take friends and family for granted, these relationships need nurturing.

Build up your emotional account with kind words and actions. Be careful and gracious with critique. Let people know that you appreciate what they do for you or even just that you're glad they're part of your life.

Express gratitude

Gratitude is more than saying thank you. It's a sense of wonder, appreciation and, yes, thankfulness for life. It's easy to go through life without recognizing your good fortune. Often, it takes a serious illness or other tragic event to jolt people into appreciating the good things in their lives. Don't wait for something like that to happen to you.

Make a commitment to practice gratitude. Each day identify at least one thing that enriches your life. When you find yourself thinking an ungrateful thought, try substituting a grateful one. For example, replace "my sister forgot my birthday" with "my sister has always been there for me in tough times."

Let gratitude be the last thought before you go to sleep. Let gratitude also be your first thought when you wake up in the morning

Cultivate optimism

Develop the habit of seeing the positive side of things. You needn't become a Pollyanna —after all, bad things do happen. It would be silly to pretend otherwise. But you don't have to let the negatives color your whole outlook on life. Remember that what is right about you almost always trumps what is wrong.

If you're not an optimistic person by nature, it may take time for you to change your pessimistic thinking. Start by recognizing negative thoughts as you have them. Then take a step back and ask yourself these key questions:

- Is the situation really as bad as I think?
- Is there another way to look at the situation?
- What can I learn from this experience that I can use in the future?

Find your purpose

People who strive to meet a goal or fulfill a mission —whether it's growing a garden, caring for children or finding one's spirituality—are happier than those who don't have such aspirations.

Having a goal provides a sense of purpose, bolsters self-esteem and brings people together. What your goal is doesn't matter as much as whether the process of working toward it is meaningful to you.

Try to align your daily activities with the long-term meaning and purpose of your life. Research studies suggest that relationships provide the strongest meaning and purpose to your life. So cultivate meaningful relationships.

Are you engaged in something you love? If not, ask yourself these questions to discover how you can find your purpose:

- What excites and energizes me?
- What are my proudest achievements?
- How do I want other to remember me?

Live in the moment

Don't postpone joy waiting for a day when your life is less busy or less stressful. That day may never come.

Instead, look for opportunities to savor the small pleasures of everyday life. Focus on the positives in the present moment, instead of dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.