

The psychology behind...

what REALLY makes us happy



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Psychologist and author

That's it. All the stuff we worry about and work so hard to achieve only accounts for 10% of how happy we feel.

The activities that really seem to matter when it comes to happiness are things like gratitude, forgiveness and savouring the present moment. Indeed the happiness levels of Buddhist monks are off the charts. It seems the simple act of sitting quietly and just thinking about kindness and compassion will alter brain activity noticeably – reportedly in just two weeks. Here's what else you can do:

Take care of your health

People who exercise regularly handle stress better, are more alert and generally have a more positive mental attitude.

Be grateful

We're always so quick to note when things go bad for us, but research has consistently shown that reflecting on the good things in our lives and

celebrating small successes makes us happier.

Embrace a growth mindset

Carol Dweck, a psychologist from Stanford, explains that we have a fixed mindset, which "assumes that our character, intelligence and creative ability are static", and a growth mindset, which "thrives on challenge and sees failure not as evidence of unintelligence but as a springboard for growth". Nurture your growth mindset by taking risks and learning from failure.

Live in the now

Engage with life in the present, rather than regretting the past of feeling anxious about the future. Relish the now.

Be kind and generous

Studies have found that people who volunteer tend to have higher levels self-esteem, physical and psychological well-being and happiness. But self care is important also, so make sure that you are kind and generous to yourself too.

Research from the University of California-Riverside suggests that as much as 40% of our happiness comes down to how we choose to interact with and perceive the world around us.

The researchers had lab subjects engage in happiness-inducing activities like being kind, losing themselves in activities they enjoyed and avoiding dwelling on problems. They found that people could actually force themselves to become significantly happier.

Then about 50% of our attitude can be traced to our genes. You're born either a "glass half full" or "a glass half empty" kind of person.

That leaves us with 10%, which relates to our social conditions – how much money we earn, how we look, where we live and our marital status.

Reflections

Humanist
MATHEW HULBERT

As an atheist and a humanist I believe we only have one life and need to make the most of it.

One way we can do this is by volunteering our time to help others – something I love to do.

Among other things I volunteer as a trustee for a number of charities and to help run my village's annual carnival.

Volunteering is often challenging, hugely rewarding and great fun – at last year's carnival I got my photo taken with a zombie.

Well, someone dressed up as one anyway... at least I think so.

Seriously though, we really need to value our volunteers and



ensure they're treated with the respect they deserve.

Some in authority don't always do this and it can seem like volunteers are belittled or taken for granted. If all volunteers downed tools, much of the country would come to a standstill. Britain would be less Great without us.

Your Stars...probably

JANETTE JACQUES
She knows, you know



ARIES

March 21-April 20

Even if someone offered to throttle the Go Compare man today, you'd still find the downside. But lots can happen between now and Emmerdale, so chin up. Cheer yourself by making Wookiee noises. Lucky Star Wars film: 2

TAURUS

April 21-May 21

There's a bit of spring madness in you today. Give in to it. Go to Krispy Kreme and complain your doughnut has a hole in it. Or to McDonalds and demand extra happy with your happy meal. You'll calm down later. Lucky verse: Limerick

GEMINI

May 22-June 21

You feel discombobulated. Comedian and Gemini Sarah Bernhard says: "When you're constantly looking for things from other people, you're not looking within yourself." Start in a small way by looking for your car keys. Lucky duck: Mallard

CANCER

June 22-July 23

Needy Cancerian Prince William seems to be getting by in India. Like yourself he has had to adapt. Unlike yourself he has a palace to return to. Time to get more house proud. You'll feel good evicting those dust bunnies. Lucky weapon: Cillit Bang

LEO

July 24-August 23

I'm not saying you're badly groomed but the last time you had your hands on an iron, you were playing Monopoly. Stop pressing T-shirts underneath the mattress. There's a point when boho becomes hobo. Lucky china: Dresden

VIRGO

August 24-September 23

Any self-respecting Virgo regulates their breathing and colour coordinates their socks. Keeping everything pristine is tiring. So make your family do the work. They won't like you, but they aren't expected to. Lucky bowl: Super

LIBRA

September 24-October 23

You worry about what people think of you. Ironically you'd probably have more fans if you behaved like you didn't care. Look at Libran actress Brie Larson. Being named after a cheese never held her back. Avoid joggers. Lucky joint: Knee

SCORPIO

October 24-November 22

Your thoughts may turn to a holiday, but to vacation or staycation? Since Easyjet will charge you extra for leg cramps, the UK may be best. But no caravans. If the family quarrel in the house, why risk a four-berth? Lucky destination: Clacton

SAGITTARIUS

November 23-December 21

Why do people say "no offence" right before they offend you? Today you deflect unfair criticism. But golly, are you smooth! Intelligence is like underwear – important to have, but not necessary to show off. Lucky pie: Humble

CAPRICORN

December 22-January 20

Today you must make like demure fellow Capricorn Duchess Kate and smile while saying little. At least you don't have to bare your tootsies like she did in India. What about those bunions! Your life's rosy in comparison. Lucky toe: Little

AQUARIUS

January 21-February 19

You are one of the Zodiac's most liberated signs. Sometimes your friends want you to be liberated further – and not in a good way. Problems arise today when your mouth pips your brain to the post. It'll blow over. Lucky flan: Rhubarb

PISCES

February 20-March 20

Some days you want to throw a sickie. And by the time by the time you've watched Jeremy Kyle, Heir Hunters and A Place In The Sun, you do feel genuinely ill. So just mosey on. A decent dinner could improve things. Lucky excuse: Hives