

The Happiness Advantage:

I recently watched Shaun Achor talking about 'happiness' on a PBS special and thought it was really great. Shaun, a positive psychology expert, began with more than a decade at Harvard University researching the 'science' behind happiness and the human potential. What I especially liked are the 5 simple habits or techniques that have actually been clinically proven to make you happier! The advantage of happiness is that your stress levels go down, your health improves, your energy goes up, along with clarity, memory, intelligence, productivity, success, and you will even feel younger and live longer.

The basis of his message is changing our perspective that happiness is something we will find when . . . or, if I work harder then I will be more successful and then I will be happy. What they found is that the opposite is true. Actually, those who tend to be more optimistic and happy, are then able work harder, more efficiently and ultimately achieve the most success. So by focusing on the positive and prioritizing happiness, we will continue to manifest more of the same.

Happiness is not something you find, rather it is a mindset. It turns out that your external world, things like how much money you make, how big your house is, the car you drive, how many kids you have, and so on, can only predict 10% of your long term happiness. On the other hand, 90% of your long term happiness can be determined by your overall outlook on life.

Scientifically, happiness is a choice. We actually have limited resources and ability to perceive everything going on around us, so if we are concentrating on the negative there is literally no room in our brain for the positive. Likewise, when we choose to focus on the positive, there is much less room for the negative.

There are 5 techniques that have been found especially useful in accentuating optimism, positivity and happiness in our life. You may choose only one of these techniques to start, and you must do it for at least 21 days in a row in order for it to stick (this is true for anything you may like to do more of, after doing it for only 21 days in a row transforms it into a life habit where you no longer need to think about doing it, you just do it).

1. The Three Gratitude's

Write down 3 new things you are grateful for each day. They should each be unique and specific, possibly about something over the last 24hours, and you need to describe why you are grateful.

This is a great one to do before bed. If you do it together with your spouse or partner, you may find you learn a lot of beautiful things you normally may not have about them or their day. A bonus is that it can actually make them seem more attractive, as well as generally strengthening your relationship and love for each other.

2. The Doubler

For 2 minutes each day, write down the most meaningful positive experience you had in the last 24 hours. Write down every detail you can remember about the experience.

Neurologically the brain cannot tell the difference between a real experience and a remembered one. So by going over a positive experience in your head, 'doubles' the positive aspects of the original experience. This exercise also reminds us in the power of our words. In using positive expressions or statements about ourselves, compared to negative ones, reinforces the same energy in our bodies that can then impact our health emotionally as well as physically.

3. The Fun Fifteen

Add 15 minutes of fun activity to your day. It must be something physically active and that you enjoy at the same time.

Of course, exercise is the best medicine for a variety of reasons, and almost always makes you feel better. One study showed that by changing the mindset of certain aspects of employees 'work' as 'exercise', actually made people lose more weight, lowered blood pressure, etc., even though their level of physical work had stayed the same.

4. The Ripple Effect

Consciously add 3 smiles per day. It should be in a time or place where you normally wouldn't have.

Even raising the corners of your mouth by sticking a pen in sideways, signals your brain to release dopamine making you feel better! But the great thing is, it also helps others feel better. When someone smiles at us, it makes us feel good, and this is one great reason to try and surround ourselves with positive optimistic happy people. Similarly, we could avoid those who are negative, or better yet we could radiate our positivity and happiness and if we are lucky it can ripple out to help many others feel the same.

In addition to smiles, I would also say that a random act of kindness would be equally as effective. "A good deed each day" would also serve the same purpose. Likewise, it could be giving someone a compliment, or giving a loved one an extra hug where you normally wouldn't have. What goes around comes around, and anything that makes others feel better will make us feel good too.

5. Charge your Battery

Think about a new person each day and spend as little as 2 minutes writing them a positive note or email. It may be someone you have not even spoken to in years.

Shaun jokes that after writing such a note, you will spend the rest of the day thinking about how amazing you are for doing something like that! It not only makes us feel great, but it also charges the happiness batteries of others as well.

This technique emphasizes the connections we have to our social support network.

Having meaningful connections with others has been shown to be the single common trait in studies of the happiest people. A sense of social belonging has also been shown to be a major factor in studies of longevity.

Information is not Transformation:

So, once you know these great tips, Shaun offers a quick technique that can help you actually do them. It is the 20 second rule, and it is based on how the brain works and something called 'activation energy'. Whatever the task, there is an initial amount of energy needed to get the ball rolling and often the rest comes easily. That amount of energy could take as little as 20 seconds. For example, reaching over to turn on the TV with the remote control requires very little activation energy. In only seconds we can initiate hours of wasted and unconscious time sitting in front of the TV. If however, you took the batteries out of the remote control and put them on the top shelf 20 seconds away, you would actually be much less likely to follow through. In the reverse manner, if you place that book you have wanted to start on the arm of your couch, rather than in the next room, you are much more likely to just reach over and start reading. You could also leave a set of dumbbells in front of the couch, a yoga mat already laid out on the floor, a guitar already sitting on a stand, or whatever you may have wanted to do more of. You can facilitate hours of productive time back into your life, simply by making it 20 seconds easier to start.

So there you have it. Choose just one of the 5 exercises and commit to just 21 days in a row, and think about how you can make it 20 seconds easier to start. After doing any of them, you will quickly realize much our mindset and our behaviour really matters. How adding just a little more optimism, gratitude and positivity back into our day can make us feel so good. Rather than being an exercise, it actually starts to become part of our nature. We become more optimistic and more joyful. We can more easily perceive stresses as challenges, rather than threats. We will feel more at peace. We may start to see more beauty and feel more love. Even physically, we may become healthier and live longer. We may discover more meaning and purpose. Our support network gets stronger, and if we are positive and happy those around us start to feel the same. It spreads to those around us, and to those around them and quite possibly to the rest of the world. For ourselves and for others, there is no limit to what amazing things we can do.

If you have any questions about this article or if you would like to share a story or any positive experience you have had from it I would love to hear from you.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

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Much more material can be found in Shaun Achor's book "The Happiness Advantage" (found in most bookstores) as well as his website which also provides online courses and other resource material that focus on generating a positive mindset to fuel happiness and success:

<http://goodthinkinc.com/media/>

A few more videos clips can also be found here:

http://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work.html

<http://bigthink.com/ideas/24069>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iLI8V6PFwA> (this is the longest talk I found online - for the beginning of Shaun's talk, fast forward 34 minutes in)