



Week 10 – Raising your Happiness Levels for High Performance

Scientists once thought happiness was almost completely hereditary (dictated by a genetically determined standpoint). But thankfully, they've since discovered that in fact we have far more control over our emotional well-being than previously believed. We have a happiness baseline that we fluctuate around on a daily basis, with concerted effort, we can raise that baseline permanently so that even when we are going up and down, we are doing so at a higher level.

Scientists have found that the following areas are crucial to human happiness, like pursuing meaningful life goals, scanning the world for opportunities, cultivating optimistic and grateful mindset, and holding on to rich social relationships.

As important as these larger shifts in thinking and behaviour are, it's equally important to realise that happiness also lies in the small, momentary blips of positivity that pepper our lives each and every day. Just a short humorous video clip, a quick conversation with a friend, or even a small gift of chocolate can produce significant and immediate boosts in cognitive power and job performance.

With this in mind, here are several proven ways we can improve our moods and raise our happiness throughout the day.

Each activity listed not only gives us a quick boost of positive emotions, improving our performance and focus in the moment; but if performed habitually over time, each has shown to help permanently raise our happiness baseline. Of course, since happiness is subjective and not the same for everyone, we all have our own favourite happiness booster. Maybe yours is listening to a particular song, petting the dog, or even cleaning your kitchen. The goal is simply to lift your spirits and put you in a more positive mindset.

Meditate

Neuroscientists have found that monks who spend years meditating actually grow their left prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain most responsible for feeling happy. But don't worry, you don't have to spend years in isolation to experience a boost. Take just five minutes a day to watch your breath go in and out. While you do so try to remain patient. If you find your mind drifting, just slowly bring it back to focus.

Meditation takes practice, but it's one of the most powerful happiness interventions. Studies show that in the minutes right after meditating, we experience feelings of calm and contentment, as well as heightened awareness and empathy. And, research even shows that regular meditation can permanently rewire the brain to raise levels of happiness, lower stress, even improved immune function.

Find something to look forward to

One study found that people who just thought about watching their favourite movie actually raised their endorphin levels by 27%. Often, the most enjoyable part of the activity is the anticipation. If you can't take the time for a vacation right now, or even a night out with friends, put something on the calendar – even if it's a month or year down the road. Then whenever you need a boost of happiness, remind yourself about it. Anticipating future rewards can actually light up the pleasure centres in your brain much as the actual reward well.

Commit conscious acts of kindness

A long line of empirical research, including one study of over 2000 people, has shown that acts of altruism - giving to friends and strangers alike - decrease stress and strongly contribute to enhanced mental health. Pick one day a week and make a point of committing five acts of kindness. But if you want to reap the psychological benefits, make sure you do these things deliberately and consciously – you can't just look back over the last 24 hours and declare your acts of ad hoc kindness for example (oh yeah I held the door for that guy coming back into the bank, that was nice).

Infuse positivity into your surroundings

Physical environment can have an enormous impact on our mindset and our sense of well-being. While we may not always have complete control over our surroundings, we can make specific efforts to infuse them with positivity. Think about your office: what feelings does it inspire? People who cover their computers with pictures of love ones aren't just decorating – they're ensuring a hit a positive emotion each time they glance in that direction. Making time

to go outside on a nice day also delivers a huge advantage; one study found that spending 20 minutes outside in good weather not only boosted a positive mood, but broadened thinking and improved working memory. The smartest bosses encourage employees to take a breath of fresh air at least once a day, and they reap the benefits in heightened team performance.

We can also change our surroundings to keep negative emotions at bay. You might try watching less TV in general; studies have shown that the less negative TV we watch, specifically violent media, the happier we are. This doesn't mean shutting yourself off from the real world or ignoring problems. Psychologists found that people who watch less TV are actually more acute judges of life's risks and rewards than those who subject themselves to tales of crime, tragedy, and death that appear on the news. That's because these people are less likely to see sensationalised or one-sided sources of information, and thus see reality more clearly.

Exercise

You have probably heard that exercise releases pleasure inducing chemicals called endorphins, but that's not its only benefit. Physical activity can boost the mood and enhance your work performance in a number of ways as well, by improving motivation and feelings of mastery, and helping us get inflow – that feeling of total engagement that we usually get when we are in our most productive mode.

Spend Money (but not on stuff)

Contrary to the popular saying, money can buy happiness, but only if used to do things as opposed to simply have things. In his book *luxury favour*, Robert Frank explains that while the positive feelings we get from material objects are frustratingly fleeting, spending money on experiences, especially ones with other people, produces positive emotions that are both more meaningful and lasting.

Exercise a signature strength

Everyone is good at something perhaps you give excellent advice, or you're great with kids, or you whip up a mean batch of blueberry pancakes. Each time we use a skill whatever it is, we experience a burst of positivity. If you find yourself in need of a happiness booster, revisit a talent you haven't used in a while.

Even more fulfilling than using a skill, though, is exercising a strength of character, a trait that is deeply embedded in who we are. A team of psychologists recently catalogued the 24 cross-cultural character strengths that most contribute to human flourishing. They then developed a

comprehensive survey that identifies an individual's top five. To learn what's in your own top five go to www.viasurvey.org and take the survey for free. Studies have shown that the more you use your signature strengths in your daily life, the happier you become.

As you integrate these happiness exercises into your daily life, you'll not only start to feel better, but you'll also start to notice how your enhanced positivity makes you more efficient, motivated, and productive, and opens up opportunities for greater achievement. By changing the way, you work, and the way you lead the people around you, you can enhance the success of your team and your whole organisation.