



TIP SHEET: HAPPINESS

You can learn to be happy in 10 minutes a day. Most people would scoff at that remark. But there is a big grain of truth in it.

You probably know someone who is generally happy; life never seems to get them down. Until recently, psychologists chalked that up to “being an optimist.” And it wasn’t necessarily a great thing: Many psychologists believed the optimistic person was fooling themselves in some ways--their rose-colored glasses were tinting their view of the world. Although “fooling” oneself had a lot of pluses--optimism is well-known to have many health & other benefits.

We now have a much better understanding of what leads people to be happy, and there is much more to it than optimism. Of course, happiness isn’t entirely within our control. There is absolutely a genetic factor with happiness. For example, just like some people are prone to weigh more due to genetics, some people’s brain chemistry and biology make them more prone to depression

What exactly is happiness?

Consider these 3 definitions of happiness:

- Happiness is having a pleasant life: Feeling positive emotions as much as realistically possible and minimizing the times I feel negative emotions
- Happiness is getting the things that I want in life
- Happiness is achieving meaningful, worthwhile goals

People who are most happy will experience all 3: Positive emotions more than negative ones, getting the things they desire, and having a life they find meaningful. *Source: Martin Seligman, Authentic Happiness (2002, Free Press)*

and/or lower levels of happiness. And we all know of life situations that can lead even the most optimistic, easy-going, adaptable person to be less happy.

But just like weight, happiness is somewhat within your control. While certain people will never be thin due to biological and genetic factors, their lifestyle (calorie intake, exercise, etc), can lead them to be heavier than they “are meant

to be.” And that person will have to struggle more to lose weight than a thinner person. Happiness is similar. With about 40% of happiness within our control, it is possible to change our “happiness set point” to some extent. Just like weight loss, it is not easy: It takes time, commitment, and lots of effort. But by practicing specific strategies that are backed by research, you can reset your baseline happiness level.

Key Steps to Happiness

Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky is a leading researcher in the field of positive psychology. She recently authored an excellent self-help book (*The How of Happiness*) that discusses research-supported steps to being happier, summarized below:

- Express Gratitude - Each week, write down 3 to 5 things you are thankful for and/or thank people you are grateful to
- Cultivate Optimism - Think accurately about situations (see the good as well as the bad)
- Avoid Overthinking - Will this matter to you a year from now?
- Practice Acts of Kindness - Do good things for others
- Nurture Social Relationships
- Develop Coping Strategies
- Learn to Forgive - Write a letter to the person who wronged you (but don’t send it)
- Increase Flow - Spend some time each day being fully involved in a personally rewarding activity that is a good match for your abilities
- Savor Life’s Joys - Think about happy life events (however small) for eight minutes every day
- Commit to your goals - Determine 1 to 3 meaningful, specific, achievable goals and then actively work towards them in small steps
- Practice spiritual or religious activities
- Practice meditation
- Physical Activity - Regular aerobic exercise is approaching “gold standard” status as a treatment for depression
- Act like a Happy Person - Forcing yourself to smile 5 times a day can make you feel happier

