

FOCUS NEWSLETTER

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Use Your Mood To Improve The World

Good health can be both the cause and the consequence of being happy. That's why two pioneering scientists wanted to see if they could actually measure how happiness works in groups. What they discovered took everyone by happy surprise—the happiness of others, even those you don't know, has a direct influence on your happiness.

The coauthor of this novel study on happiness, James Fowler, PhD, told me how the research was done. First his team combed through the records of 5,000 participants in the Framingham Heart Study, many of whom had identified one another as spouses, friends or neighbors. His team established a happiness baseline for these participants by checking their periodic answers to questions regarding their happiness over the past 20 years (1983-2003). Then they used a sophisticated statistical analysis tool to create a map of social connections among the initial 5,000 and other participants within the Framingham study. It showed how one person's happiness rippled like a network, creating a cascade of happiness that increased the likelihood of others being happy too.

They discovered that there were various degrees of influence depending on the degree of social connection and that it was quite predictable. For example, within your social network, the happiness of someone with whom you have frequent and regular personal contact, called an immediate social contact (for instance, your spouse or closest nearby friend), increases the likelihood of your happiness by an average of 15%. The happiness of a second-degree contact (for instance, your closest friend's spouse) increases your chances for happiness by 10%, while the happiness of a third-degree contact (your closest friend's friend) increases it by 6%. In other words, your happiness is directly influenced by strangers.

Proximity is the key. The closer your happy friends and family live to you, the greater the probability that their happiness will affect you. For example, the happiness of your next door neighbor is more influential than the happiness of a neighbor who lives down the street.

More social connections adds to your happiness. The bigger your social network of nearby happy friends and family, the greater the likelihood of your happiness.

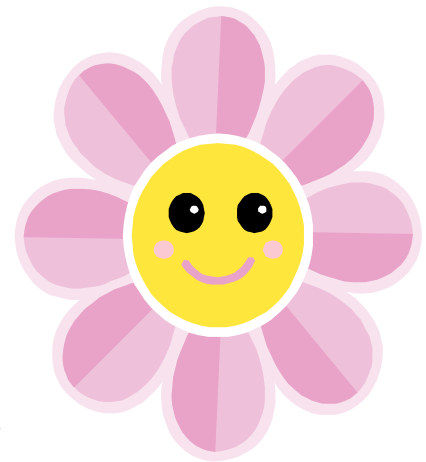
Unhappy people cluster together in unhappy networks. As the saying goes, misery loves company.

Whether or not you were happy in the past and whether your social contacts are happy are more important predictors of happiness than your income, gender or education.

Happiness is more powerful than unhappiness. The happiness of a friend increases the probability of your happiness by 9%, while his unhappiness decreases the chances of your happiness by only 7%.

It's not fleeting. The impact of another's happiness on your happiness lasts about a year, on average, before fading.

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Use Your Mood To Improve The World (continued from cover)

Dr. Fowler and his coauthor Nicholas Christakis, MD, PhD, MPH, are now looking at the question of whether happiness spreads the same way via the Internet, specifically using the Facebook network. They assumed that those who posted smiling pictures of themselves with smiling friends were happy. Since Facebook automatically tags or uploads your photos to those registered as your “friend,” they were able to trace the paths of these happy pictures. They found that smiling friends had photos of other smiling friends and so on and so on. (People who didn’t smile in their photos didn’t have photos with friends who smiled, who in turn also didn’t have photos of smiling friends.) Again—happiness begets happiness and the same goes for unhappiness. Next they’ll study how contagious online happiness turns out to be.

Dr. Fowler himself has been moved by his findings. “I think our study shows that the best thing we can do for ourselves is to connect to friends and family,” says Dr. Fowler. “I have been personally affected by the study—I have now seen the evidence that my happiness potentially ripples out and touches the lives of dozens or even hundreds of other people. In this very challenging time, creating a ripple of happiness can result in a tidal wave of change.”

Source(s):

James H. Fowler, PhD, professor of political science, University of California-San Diego



Say No With A Smile

Many women have trouble saying *no*. Perhaps deep down, we still believe we must be good little girls, compliant and charming, so people will love us. But when we’re pushovers, others take us for granted—and we feel resentful. Here’s how to stop being a martyr without giving offense.

Sleep on it. Your nephew asks for a loan. If you’re not sure how to respond, instead of agreeing now and kicking your self later, say, “I’ll get back to you.” Take time to decide whether you have the means and the desire to comply, then give your answer.

Suggest an alternative. Suppose a friend invites you over for a holiday cookie-baking marathon. A lame excuse (“Sorry, I...um...have to bathe the cat”) may insult her. Instead, be honest—“I’d love to see you, but I’m dieting. Can we take a walk together instead?”

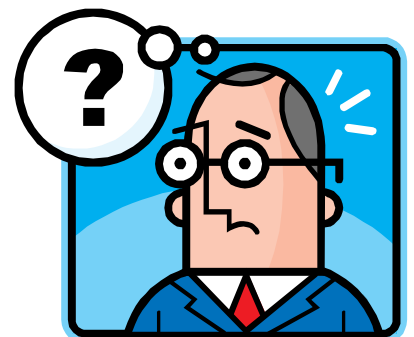
Set limits. If charity work eats up family time, for instance, resolve to volunteer only a certain number of hours. Once those hours are booked, decline all additional requests.

Remember that yes rhymes with stress. If you agree to a task and then can’t follow through, it’s worse for everyone than if you had just said no from the get-go. It’s far harder to change a yes to a no than it is to change a no to a yes.

Joy Brown, PHD, a clinical psychologist in New York City. Her internationally syndicated call-in radio show, *The Dr. Joy Browne Show*, is the longest-running of its kind (www.drjoy.com). She is the author of many books, including *Getting Unstuck: 8 Simple Steps to Solving Any Problem* (Hay House).

An Easy Way to More Peaceful Relationships

Stop assuming that you know what someone else is thinking. Whatever you think another is thinking, you are wrong. Assuming and acting on what you think another person is thinking leads to misunderstandings and upset. If we remember and accept that we’re all different and we see the world in our own ways, relationships improve and we are happier. Source(s): Andy Feld, entrepreneur based in Morrison, Colorado, and author of *Simple Happy: Finally Learning to Listen to Yourself* (iUniverse).



Rational Responses to Irrational Verbal Attacks

Differences of opinion are inevitable, but occasionally we find ourselves on the receiving end of verbal attacks that are unprovoked and unnecessary. As tempting as it may be to respond in a kind, calm response is the better option. Psychologist Nando Pelusi, Ph.D, offers these strategies...

- Ask the person what he/she is upset about. This shows that you want to communicate, not argue — and it puts the responsibility back on him/her.
- Concede one kernel of truth, if there is one, but deny the generalization. *Example:* If your sister-in-law calls you a screw-up, admit to one specific error but say that it does not represent everything you do.
- Take a stab at what you think the person is feeling: “You sound angry right now. I’m sorry you feel that way.” Do not blame.
- Resist the urge to win. Instead, listen and ask questions, which will ultimately help the other person independently arrive at a workable solution.

Happy Marriages by the Numbers

When 4,000 couples in the UK who had been married for more than 16 years, on average, were polled on the keys to a long-lasting relationship, some interesting facts were discovered. On average, these married couples wanted four cuddles a day...romantic gestures from their partners every 10 days...unsolicited helpful gestures three times a month...and seven cozy nights in and two dates out a month.

We can make our own marriages happier by incorporating these “happy marriage behaviors” into our lives. Striving to give your spouse, say four cuddles a day might start out feeling artificial but eventually will become a rich part of the fabric of your relationship. Because kindness reaps kindness in relationships, you will encourage your spouse to reciprocate.

Romantic Gestures Every 10 Days

In a long-term relationship, we tend to think romantic gestures are no longer necessary. But surprising your spouse with flowers or a romantic dinner reminds your partner that you still are in love with him/her. If you decide to run a bath for your wife because she had a bad day, it shows that you are thinking specifically about what would please her, and that thoughtfulness is far more important than even the action itself. To be truly romantic, don’t ask your partner what he might want. Instead come up with your own idea—something that shows great attention to your partner’s unique likes and dislikes.

4 Cuddles A Day Make sure to hug or affectionately touch your partner at least four times a day. The happiest couples touch a lot. Try a slight squeeze on the shoulder at breakfast or hug before you run off to work.

Helpful Actions a Month Thoughtful actions that lighten a partner’s load are perceived as tender and caring—especially when done without anyone asking. Taking the initiative to do the dishes or make your spouse coffee in the morning shows that you are paying attention and makes your partner realize how central he/she is in your thoughts. You even can come right out and tell your partner, “I’m doing this because I love you and I want to make sure you know that.”

7 Cozy Nights In And 2 Dinner Dates Out A Month Your “cozy nights in” should be different from your everyday routine—make sure you aren’t parked in front of the television. Instead, have dinner together, talk about your week, make plans, check in about upcoming activities. Also, reserve special nights two times a month. Making the effort to dress up and go outside the family home together reinforces your “coupleness” and adds vitality to a relationship.

Pamela C. Reagan, PhD, a professor of psychology at California State University, Los Angeles. Her work with thousands of couples over the years led her to write the book *The Mating Game* (Sage).





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101 Family Fitness Activities

Plant a garden* Explore a state park* Roller skate* Shoot baskets* Play catch* Take walks after dinner* Clean the house in time to music* Join in a parade* Visit a museum* Do stretches* Toss a Frisbee* Go swimming* Join a family gym* Play tennis* Walk to school together* Play volleyball* Clean up your yard* Go on a picnic* Take dance lessons* Go camping* Do aerobics* Walk on the beach* Go hiking* Go canoeing* Ski* Play soccer* Take up yoga* Do jumping jacks* Act out plays* Take bike rides* Take walking tours of historic sights* Play touch football* Do pull-ups* Go bowling* Water ski* Have a snowball fight* Go sledding* Build a tree house* Set family fitness goals* Ice skate* Build a snow house* Go fishing* Walk through the zoo* Do a home decorating project* Play tag* Go horseback riding* Lift weights* Make snow angels* Work in a community garden* Do push-ups* Take karate lessons* Play paddle ball* Walk with pedometers on* Wash the family car* Paint a family mural* Attend a local fair* Jump rope* Invent your own active games* Play hide and seek* Bounce on a trampoline* Play hopscotch* Toss around a beach ball* Build a snowman* Walk a circuit around the mall* Run an obstacle course* Play miniature golf* Walk on stilts* Have a water balloon toss* Exercise at home to music* Walk to the store* Clean out the garage* Play table tennis* Visit a farm where you can pick fruit* Walk the dog* Go to the local playground* Learn a new sport* Play badminton* Participate in fund-raising walks* Race each other in the swimming pool* Work out to exercise video tapes* Play horseshoes* Have a squirt-gun battle* Walk or jog for short trips* Try a kickboxing class* Have fun at a batting cage* Go on an art gallery tour* Keep an exercise log* Have a window washing party* Play racquetball* Play softball* Have races (give youngsters a head start)* Give fitness-oriented gifts to each other* Have a Hula Hoop contest* Take a nature walk* Hold a family treasure hunt* Learn to juggle* Fly kites* Wash and dry dishes by hand* Check out new family fitness ideas on the Web* Join in a neighborhood clean-up* Enjoy more family fitness activities by cutting down on TV, video game and computer time.

