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The Secret to Happiness

It's in the Declaration of Independence: the right to the pursuit of happiness. We feel we deserve to be happy, and we strive for it in our lives. But what does being happy really mean, and how can we do it?

Happiness "is the overall sense of being satisfied with your life as a whole," says psychologist Ken M. Sheldon, Ph.D., associate professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Dr. Sheldon and Tim Kasser, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., say three top needs seem to drive happiness:

- Autonomy (a sense that you've chosen to do what you do)
- Competence (you're good at what you do)
- Relatedness (you feel close to others)

In general, if you're happy, you feel confident and in control. You're more optimistic, energetic, decisive and creative. You view the world as a safer place than those who aren't happy. You have high self-esteem and a sense of meaning to your life, and you're more capable of intimacy with others.

"You're happy if you're doing the things that you want (and you're doing them well), and doing what brings you closer to other people," says Dr. Kasser.

When you're happy, work and leisure activities use your strongest skills, you form close and supportive relationships, and you're more willing to help others in need. You're also healthier.

"Our body's immune system fights disease more effectively when we are happy rather than depressed," says social psychologist David G. Myers, Ph.D., professor at Michigan's Hope College and author of several books, including *The Pursuit of Happiness*.

Just as happiness affects our overall health, your genetic makeup decides how happy you'll be -- something shown by studies with separately raised twins.

"Our happiness fluctuates around our 'happiness set point,' which disposes some people to be ever upbeat, and others down," says Dr. Myers.

Your happiness potential is a bit like your cholesterol level. Both are influenced genetically, as well as by diet, sleep and exercise. Your emotional attitude and the quality of your relationships with others also affect happiness.

But being healthy doesn't mean you're happy, and vice versa. "There are plenty of people in poor health who are happy," says Dr. Sheldon. We humans tend to adapt to change, both positive and negative.

"That helps explain why, despite the realities of triumph and tragedy, million-dollar lottery winners and people who become paralyzed report, after a while, roughly similar levels of happiness as before," says Dr. Myers.

Whether you were happy or not in your past, you'll tend toward a similar degree of happiness today and in the future, no matter how your circumstances may change. However, "there's some indication that older people, above 60, are happier [than when they were younger]," says Dr. Sheldon. Why? Because, in their later years, they're likely to pursue goals based on personal fulfillment rather than obligation.

Steps to a happier life

- Decide to be happy. Think and act happy, so you can create the state of mind for yourself and inspire it in others.
- Take control. If possible, take charge of your time to make effective change in your life.
- Set goals. Choose ones that urge you forward yet also let you realistically reach them.
- Engage your skills. Seek work and leisure activities that challenge your talents and abilities without overwhelming you.



- Be healthy. Eat well, exercise regularly and get plenty of sleep.
- Seek out others. Surround yourself with happy people and nurture these relationships.
- Reach out. Be compassionate and focus beyond yourself, to help those in greater need.
- Remain curious. Stay open to new people and experiences so you continue to grow.
- Keep perspective. Take a moment each day to reflect on the positive things in your life that can make you feel grateful.

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Financial Planning for Divorce: Making the Most of a Bad Situation



Their marriage may be over, but before parting ways, divorcing couples should take steps to ensure their finances do not meet a similar fate.

The decisions people make during the divorce process will have major and lifelong financial implications for each spouse and their children. It is vital that couples start thinking through those decisions early in the process, said Wendy W. Spencer, a Certified Divorce Financial Analyst (CDFA) and family law mediator who runs Spencer Capital Strategies in Arvada, Colo. Divorcing couples “need to get real about their financial situation, to think through the details and the what-ifs,” she explains.

With so much at stake, and given the complexities that come into play in many divorces, consulting a financial adviser who specializes in divorce issues can help avert some of the financial hardship and hard feelings that often accompany the dissolution of a marriage. To find one, search the Financial Planning Association’s national database at www.FPAnet.org/PlannerSearch/PlannerSearch.aspx. Additionally, you may want to have your financial planner who is an expert on divorce matters work collaboratively with your family law attorney and/or tax professionals. To learn more important steps to take during the divorce process visit www.FPAnet.org/LifeCrisis/GettingaDivorce/.

With or without a specialist’s help, here are a few of the planning steps that experts such as Spencer recommend divorcing couples take:

Develop a spending or cash-flow plan. Each spouse needs to establish a plan for handling their finances once the divorce is final with full appreciation of the “new normal”.

Compile a complete financial picture including all assets and liabilities on the couple’s balance sheet. Include real estate holdings, insurance policies, stock, bank accounts and retirement portfolios. When analyzing assets keep in mind some assets such as real estate have significant expenses and do not produce income. “This way you can make smart judgments about how to divide things,” said Spencer. “The court is going to require you to gather all your financial information anyway.”

Be flexible and ready to make financial trade-offs: Such as child support or spousal support, to dissolve the family business or keep it, and to keep or sell the house. Additionally, a couple must decide how to divide the debt burden. Handling of issues like these will have a major financial impact both short term and long term which is one more reason to enlist the help of a specialist.

Weigh the tax ramifications of divorce-related decisions. This is one area where a specialist can really help. From how spousal support and child support payments are treated to how retirement plans are divided and beyond, said Spencer, “the tax code is full of weird little nuances that create big problems if they are not handled the right way.”

Consider contingencies. Plan thoroughly for the what-ifs: What if we cannot sell the house or refinance the mortgage? What if one of us loses our job or must file for bankruptcy? Be sure the divorce settlement agreement accounts for those kinds of uncertainties with “If...then...” steps.

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Managing Stress With Exercise



Stress can make you feel drained, anxious, even depressed. And while there are several ways to manage runaway stress, none is as enjoyable and effective as a regular exercise routine.

"Numerous studies have shown exercise provides excellent stress-relieving benefits," says Cedric Bryant, chief exercise physiologist for the American Council on Exercise (ACE). "And let's face it, we all could do with less stress in our lives."

How it works

Exercise causes the brain to release endorphins, opium-like substances that ease pain and produce a sense of comfort and euphoria. It also encourages the nerve cells in the brain to secrete other neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine, which improve mood.

Deficiencies of these substances, particularly serotonin, have been linked to symptoms of depression, anxiety, impulsiveness, aggression and increased appetite. According to a study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine, when depressed people exercise, they increase their levels of these natural antidepressants.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), exercise also improves people's ability to relax and sleep, promotes self-esteem and enhances energy, concentration and memory.

Exercise also provides an outlet for negative emotions, such as frustration, anger and irritability, thereby promoting a more positive mood and outlook.

Moderate exercise done regularly interrupts the cyclic thinking process associated with depression. A person who is worried about a particular problem may dwell at length on the problem, bringing on more worry. Depression deepens the worry, in a descending cycle. Exercise can break the cycle.

Finally, exercise helps you take time for yourself.

"Whether you exercise alone or with a friend, it's important to take time for yourself during stressful periods," says Mr. Bryant. "In this way, exercise functions as a positive distraction from the problems of the day that are causing your stress."

Stress-reduction moves

Almost any exercise can provide stress relief, but the following guidelines can help you find those likely to be more effective for you.

Choose an exercise you enjoy. The kinds of activities you choose depend on your physical ability as well as your preferences.

"It's important to choose activities that are accessible and feasible for you to do regularly," says Mr. Bryant. "You also need to determine if you want to play competitive sports, such as basketball or tennis, or if you'd rather do noncompetitive activities, such as walking, bicycling or taking an aerobics class."

You also should consider whether you want to do your exercise routine on your own or with others.

Exercise every day if you can. The U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health recommends 30 minutes of activity on most, if not all, days of the week.

"You'll benefit from exercising three to five times a week, but you'll see more consistent stress reduction if you can be physically active every day," says Mr. Bryant.

Consider mind/body activities. In yoga and tai chi, your mind relaxes progressively as your body increases its amount of muscular work. "If you're attracted to a spiritual component, these forms of exercise are effective for honing stress-management and relaxation skills," says Mr. Bryant.

Controlling stress ultimately comes down to making time to exercise. Physical activity provides an enjoyable and effective way to cope with life's troubles as it promotes lasting strength and empowerment.