

Happiness Hacks – How to Find Lasting Joy in Your Daily Life

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April 18, 2024

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Finland has earned the title of the happiest country in the world for seven years
- › The country describes a close connection to nature, a down-to-earth lifestyle, food from fresh ingredients and a sustainable approach to life as key tenets of happiness
- › Reconnecting with nature is another common theme in happiness hacks the world over
- › Altruism and volunteering are associated with greater happiness, as is getting proper sleep
- › Strong relationships with family, friends and the community are also fundamental to mental well-being

The International Day of Happiness takes place on March 20 each year to spread awareness that "happiness is a fundamental human goal."¹ In 2024, it also marked the day the World Happiness Report was released. It includes a happiness ranking of 39 countries, based on six factors – social support, income, health, freedom, generosity and the absence of corruption.²

Finland took the top spot, followed by Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and Israel.³ By looking into the happiness hacks embraced by some of the world's happiest people, you may be able to find ways to weave more lasting joy into your own daily life.

Happiness Hacks From the World's Happiest Country – Finland

Finland has earned the title of the happiest country in the world for seven years running.⁴ Their secret to joy lies not in the pursuit of material possessions or climbing up the proverbial ladder in a daily rat race, but rather in much more simple endeavors. Good News Network (GNN) reported:⁵

"Finns are proud and grateful for this prestigious title, believing that the key to their unique style of happiness is found in four basic elements: a close connection to nature, a down-to-earth lifestyle, food from fresh ingredients, and a sustainable approach to life.

According to Finns themselves, Finnish happiness is not a state secret or great mystery; instead, it is a learnable set of skills. From a walk in the forest or a dip in the sea after sauna to a meal made of freshly foraged local ingredients, these are the daily hacks of Finnish happiness."

The country even hosted a Masterclass of Happiness, focused on several key themes that promote joy in the country, including nature and lifestyle, health and balance, "design and everyday" and food and well-being.⁶ Those living in Finland's capital city, Helsinki, shared a range of specific happiness hacks they say help create a positive lifestyle.

From taking a morning ride on a sailboat or a bike ride through the city's Central Park, to eating salmon by the seaside or enjoying a visit to a public sauna,⁷ each experience helps nourish the mind and body.

"Finns are often asked, 'why are you so happy?' We believe Finnish happiness stems from a close relationship with nature and our down-to-earth lifestyle," Heli Jimenez, senior director of international marketing at Business Finland, told GNN. "Finland is full of immersive experiences among nature. Our energizing forests, charming lakes, and vibrant archipelago landscapes are all perfect places to relax, unwind and get in touch with your inner happiness."⁸

Need a Happiness Boost? Get Outside

Taking a cue from the Finns, reconnecting with nature is a common theme in happiness hacks the world over. Yet, Americans may spend up to 92% of their time inside,⁹ missing out on key benefits. Time spent in nature – be it green spaces like forest preserves and parks or blue spaces like rivers, lakes, beaches and coastal areas – offers significant benefits to well-being.

For instance, visiting green spaces, inland blue spaces or coastal blue spaces in the last four weeks was positively associated with well-being and negatively associated with mental distress. Nature connectedness, or feeling psychologically connected to the natural world, was similarly associated with mental well-being and was additionally linked to a lower likelihood of using medication for depression.¹⁰

The 20-5-3 nature pyramid suggests a guideline for optimal outdoor time to improve mental health, which includes 20 minutes a day of being outside in a park-like setting, five hours a month in a semi-wild area with more nature and fewer signs of people, and three days a year in a wilderness area where nature dominates and there are few signs of human influence.¹¹

For another happiness hack, try finding a natural spots that birds like to frequent. The melodic sound of birds chirping brings a smile to many people's faces. It turns out these sweet melodies may yield lasting mental health benefits, according to research from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London.¹²

In fact, significant improvements were reported in the mental well-being of people with and without depression upon seeing a bird or hearing birdsongs compared to not seeing or hearing a bird.¹³ The positive benefits to mood lasted up to eight hours.¹⁴

Optimize Mitochondrial Function to Facilitate Life Choices That Bring Joy

At a foundational level, joy comes from curiosity and the ability to make choices in your life. But if you don't have enough cellular energy, you can't think properly, let alone have enough energy left over to navigate positive life choices.

In the video above, Ashley Armstrong, cofounder of Angel Acres Egg Co. and the Nourish Cooperative, provides a real-world example of how improving your mitochondrial energy production can bring you joy. Your brain, being the most energy-dependent organ, makes up only about 2% of your bodyweight yet consumes 20% of the energy used by your entire body.¹⁵

This is why a surplus of cellular energy creation is necessary to have the ability to allow your brain to work optimally. In the video above, Armstrong discusses her journey in regaining the ability to create cellular energy and how it changed her life.

Avoiding dietary pitfalls like excess linoleic acid, in the form of vegetable and seed oils, is instrumental in optimizing mitochondrial function and realizing your full capacity to experience joy. Factors like estrogen and endotoxins can also deplete your cellular energy.

I hope you consider Armstrong's journey to help empower you to make similar choices in your own life and reclaim the joy that you deserve. For a glimpse into what true happiness looks like, watch Armstrong interacting with her dogs and farm animals below.

15 More Secrets to Happiness

The pursuit of happiness is more a choice than something that occurs by happenstance, but there are verifiable traits that those who achieve happiness tend to share.

Journalist Dan Buettner, author of "The Blue Zones of Happiness: Lessons From the World's Happiest People," spoke with Dan Witters, research director of the Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index, while doing research for his book.¹⁶ Witters revealed a set of interconnected elements that often signify authentic happiness. If you can relate to all or most of these statements, you're likely to be happy:¹⁷

1. You manage your finances well and live within your means. You have enough money to do everything you want to do.
2. You set and reach goals on an ongoing basis.
3. You always make time for trips or vacations with family and friends.
4. You use your strengths to do what you do best every day.
5. You feel safe and secure in your community.
6. You learn something new or interesting every day.
7. You have someone in your life who encourages you to be healthy.
8. You eat healthy every day.
9. You eat five servings of fruits and vegetables at least four days every week.
10. You go to the dentist at least once per year.
11. In the last 12 months, you have received recognition for helping to improve the city or area where you live.
12. You don't smoke.
13. You are of a normal, healthy weight.
14. You exercise at least 30 minutes at least three days per week.
15. You are active and productive every day.

Giving to Others Can Make You Happy

Altruism and volunteering are associated with greater happiness. Helping others can create a sense of meaning, reduce stress and increase feelings of social connection. While research shows that generous behavior may increase happiness,¹⁸ it may seem counterintuitive, since giving to others means you must sacrifice some of your own physical or emotional resources.

But even though the decision to give can be costly, many people decide to do it anyway, perhaps because they anticipate the feel-good afterglow.¹⁹ One study even revealed a

neural link between generosity and happiness, which may explain why charitable acts make people feel so good. The researchers explained in Nature Communications:²⁰

"We hypothesized that participants who had committed to spending their endowment on others would behave more generously in the decision-making task as well as self-report greater increases in happiness as compared to the control group.

Importantly, we predicted that the neural link between generosity and happiness would involve functional interactions between brain regions engaged in generous behavior (TPJ) and those mediating happiness (ventral striatum).

The results confirmed our hypotheses. We found significantly higher levels of generous behavior and happiness, as reflected by greater TPJ activity for generous choices and generosity-related connectivity of the TPJ with striatal happiness regions in the experimental group. We thus conclude that the interplay of these brain regions links commitment-induced generosity with happiness."

Like generosity, gratitude can also produce measurable effects on a number of systems in your body, leading to better sleep, more positive emotions²¹ and more. Gratitude is associated with life satisfaction²² and may lead to better psychological health, an increase in healthy activities and a willingness to seek help for health problems.²³

Gratitude is also known to facilitate improvements in healthy eating²⁴ and benefits depression by enhancing self-esteem and wellbeing.²⁵

Happy People Are Healthier

People who have higher levels of happiness tend to have longer life expectancies, and research supports the fact that happiness is significantly associated with lower mortality.²⁶ In a study that looked into the protective effect of happiness on health among 6,073 adults aged 55 and older, it's explained:²⁷

"Much of the association between happiness and increased life expectancy could be explained by socio-demographic, lifestyle, health and functioning factors, and especially psychological health and functioning factors.

... Simply put, our results suggest that happy people live longer because happy people are healthy people. Policymaking should realistically adopt tangible strategies such as preventing or alleviating depression, improving physical and mental health, and psychological functioning and wellbeing. This promotes both healthy and happy longevity."

Happy people even tend to get sick from colds and flu less often. Researchers evaluated over 300 individuals for their emotional style, which included assessing how often they experience positive emotions, such as happiness, pleasure and relaxation, and negative emotions like anxiety, hostility and depression.²⁸

The participants were then exposed to one of two cold viruses via nasal droplets. Across both viruses, individuals with a happier disposition had a reduced risk of catching a cold.²⁹

Is Happiness a Choice?

Buettner believes that up to 50% of happiness is controlled by each individual, while the rest is dictated by a combination of genes and luck.³⁰ Living in an area that's safe with clean air and water and healthy food, for instance, are certainly foundations of building happiness.

But once the basic needs are met, there are choices you can make to increase your daily happiness. Along with the happiness hacks mentioned above, the following choices can also help you find contentment and joy in your life:

- **Get proper sleep** — People who sleep well are also more satisfied with life, even after controlling for other factors like personality.³¹

- **Prioritize social connections** – Strong relationships with family, friends and the community are fundamental.³² The happiest people invest time and effort into building and maintaining meaningful connections.
- **Engage in regular physical activity and daily movement** – Regular exercise is not just good for your body but also for your mind. It can boost mood and increase life satisfaction.³³
- **Savor life's joys** – Taking time to enjoy the moment and appreciate the small pleasures of life can boost your mood and overall sense of happiness.
- **Engage in lifelong learning** – Curiosity and the pursuit of learning new things can contribute to a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

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