

How to Rewire Your Brain for Happiness

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Happiness is recognized as an unalienable right in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, yet the U.S. has dropped to No. 23 in the latest Happiness Report, from No. 15 the previous year
- › In an interview with CNN's Chasing Life podcast, cognitive scientist and Yale University psychology professor Laurie Santos explains that our brains are evolutionarily wired to prioritize negative stimuli for survival, which can hinder our pursuit of happiness in modern life
- › Countries with better mental health tend to prioritize family and community over individual success, while countries that are performance-oriented, like the U.S., tend to have worse mental health
- › Nurturing social connections, practicing gratitude and mindfulness, having self-compassion and getting enough sleep and exercise can help you rewire your brain for happiness

Seeking happiness is a universal pursuit that transcends cultures and civilizations. It's even recognized as an unalienable right in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. Yet, despite its foundational importance, many Americans still find it elusive, with the U.S. dropping to No. 23 in the 2024 World Happiness Report,¹ from No. 15 the previous year.²

However, the challenge of achieving happiness isn't limited to America; data show that it's a global struggle.³ So, how do we effectively pursue happiness? Is our capacity for happiness predetermined, or can we nurture and enhance it?

In the featured episode of the Chasing Life podcast, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, a neurosurgeon and CNN's chief medical correspondent, delves into these questions with cognitive scientist and Yale University psychology professor Laurie Santos, who asserts that happiness is something we can cultivate – the key is learning how to rewire our brains.^{4,5}

Humans Are Not Wired to Prioritize Happiness

In the interview,⁶ Santos revealed that evolution has shaped our brains to be more responsive to negative stimuli as a survival mechanism. According to her, natural selection doesn't care much about our happiness.

"Natural selection's job is just to keep us alive and keep us around to reproduce. And it does that not by making us feel these moments of contentment, but maybe just the opposite. It does that by building in the negativity bias," Santos elaborated.⁷

However, this negativity bias, while useful for surviving dangerous environments in the past, can be harmful in modern life where it may lead to dissatisfaction, anxiety and stress. Gupta purported that the evolutionary predisposition to negativity might be why he feels "constructively dissatisfied" despite being happy, which he explains is a state wherein dissatisfaction propels him into motion, keeping him from being complacent and stagnant.

However, it also puts him in a regular state of struggle and tension. Santos cautioned that while some people may benefit from this struggle, it's important not to overdo it and to maintain balance. If you're losing sleep, neglecting friendships and making yourself miserable, "maybe think about pushing yourself in a different way."⁸

She also highlighted that each person has a unique set point of happiness. For instance, Gupta observed that his happiness baseline seems lower than his brother's, who is naturally more outgoing and cheerful, despite their similar upbringing. While that may be true, with diligent and intentional practice, you can elevate your own happiness set point.

These perspectives address the common misconceptions about happiness, which are that it's either purely genetic or solely based on external circumstances, and that if you're unhappy, "you're screwed." While genetics and life situations do play roles, they are not the full story. Santos emphasized that we have a significant degree of control over our happiness through our actions and mindset.⁹

You Wield the Power of Choice

In essence, their interview¹⁰ underscores that while our evolutionary wiring may predispose us to focus on negative stimuli, we are not bound by this bias. We can overcome these innate tendencies by consciously and actively working toward cultivating happiness. This resonates strongly with my belief that you have the power to change, create and shape your own life, which I discuss in my upcoming book, "The Power of Choice."

Up until now, all my books, nearly all of which have become best-sellers, have focused purely on diet and lifestyle strategies for physical health and longevity. "The Power of Choice" is also, ultimately, about health, but approaches it from a different perspective — that of connection to your consciousness.

One of the key lessons from this book is that life is about creating Joy. I believe that there is an important distinction between Joy and happiness. While happiness can be passive, joy is active — it's a verb representing the ultimate pursuit and realization of life's purpose.

You hold the ultimate authority over the experiences you encounter, as they are entirely shaped by your individual choices. If your life lacks fulfillment, then it could be your true Self telling you to make different choices that could steer you toward a more satisfying existence.

I intentionally capitalize "Self" and "Joy" to indicate their deeper, transcendent nature. Self represents unlimited, immortal consciousness, while Joy denotes a profound state of contentment that emanates from within yourself.

Choosing to rewire your brain for happiness can be considered an act of Joy because it reflects an active engagement with life, a pursuit of meaning and a commitment to personal growth. It involves making conscious decisions and taking intentional actions that ultimately lead to happiness and a more fulfilling, satisfying existence.

Understanding the Neuroscience of Happiness

Knowing the neuroscientific aspects of happiness gives you a better understanding of how you can rewire your brain. In the video above, Axel Bouchon, Ph.D., a biochemist, neuroscientist and entrepreneur, explained how neurotransmitters evolved:

"The starting point was dopamine. Dopamine creates motivation, primarily to find food. So, whoever in evolution had more dopamine was finding more food, and they proliferated more ... The split of sexual reproduction came together with the onset of testosterone. Testosterone is the second reward system. Together with dopamine, [it] gives you the experience of sexual desire.

That came together with a third reward system. It's called serotonin. Serotonin, together with dopamine, gives you the experience of recognition. And then mammals showed up, a group of organisms that actually were interested in really taking care of the kids, and that goes with the onset of a fourth molecule called oxytocin. Oxytocin with dopamine provides you family love ...

And then a molecule came up that is called cannabinoids, that apparently have a very strong benefit because cannabinoids plus dopamine together gives you friendship love, fundamental for something that is entirely new – collaboration ... The last step was a combination of dopamine and opioids, [which] is actually creating the experience of gratitude and pleasure ..."

These six neurotransmitters are the language of your brain, and they play a role in every emotion you experience. Many people, particularly in the Western world, believe that achieving certain professional milestones or making a lot of money will lead to lasting

happiness. However, Bouchon explained that these only trigger two neurotransmitters – dopamine and serotonin.

It doesn't fill the gaps left by other important aspects of life, like family and social connections. Excessive amounts of one neurotransmitter cannot compensate for the ones you're missing. In fact, having **excessive serotonin** can even harm your health, as it impairs mitochondrial energy production. To achieve true happiness, Bouchon emphasized that you need all six neurotransmitters to be activated.

I agree with this, as I believe that everything and everyone on this Earth is interconnected. Achieving Joy is not just about being successful. It's about having meaningful relationships, feeling a sense of community, having gratitude, finding pleasure in the small things and being recognized and appreciated.

The Importance of Social Relationships

The film¹¹ also featured Dr. Tara Thiagarajan, a neuroscientist and the founder of Sapien Labs, which conducts mental health surveys worldwide. She pointed out that countries with better mental health tend to prioritize family and community over individual success. The top three countries with the best mental health are Tanzania, Sri Lanka and the Dominican Republic.¹²

In contrast, countries that are performance-oriented, like the U.S., tend to have worse mental health. According to Thiagarajan, performance orientation is "the idea that your individual worth is based on achieving certain specific types of successes and productivity performance and so on," which is negatively correlated with mental health.¹³

"Our well-being is deeply relational. A huge part of our being is wired for social relationships. It's been constructed over a few hundred thousand years of existence. The family, the friendships – all of these have huge impacts on our ability to function. And so, the lack of social relationships is very damaging to our biology itself," she explained.

Santos echoes these sentiments. In the course she teaches at Yale University, one of the "rewirements" she gives her students is to nurture social connections and adopt a more "other"-oriented mindset by staying in touch with their friends and loved ones, and doing nice things for other people.¹⁴

There's scientific evidence supporting the link between generous behaviors and greater happiness.¹⁵ If you're the one receiving help, the feeling of gratitude can also increase your life satisfaction,¹⁶ improve your psychological health and lead to more positive emotions.¹⁷

Six Strategies to Rewire Your Brain

Aside from nurturing social connections, Santos recommends doing the strategies below to rewire your brain for happiness. These are the same techniques she teaches in her popular Yale course, "Psychology and the Good Life":¹⁸

- 1. Keep a gratitude journal** — Writing down the things you are grateful for helps shift your focus from negative thoughts to positive ones.
- 2. Practice mindfulness and meditation** — Engage in mindfulness exercises and meditation to stay present in the moment and reduce your stress levels.
- 3. Get proper sleep** — Getting enough, high-quality sleep is important for mental health, cognitive function and emotional stability. Research¹⁹ has shown that people who sleep well are more satisfied with their life.
- 4. Exercise regularly** — Regular exercise is good for the body and mind. One study²⁰ shows that physical activity "was significantly related to life satisfaction and happiness in young, middle-aged and older adults."
- 5. Show vulnerability** — Expressing your true feelings and emotions cultivates openness and honesty in your relationships.

6. Have compassion for yourself – Treat yourself with kindness and understanding. Acknowledge your suffering and mistakes without judgment, and remind yourself that imperfection is part of being human.

In addition to the strategies above, I recommend embracing the feeling of anticipatory Joy. The delightful expectation of future pleasures, known as "Vorfreude" in German, can help rewire your brain for happiness. It's often associated with positive events like a vacation, a holiday, a reunion with loved ones or even a delicious meal. To learn how you can increase your Vorfreude quotient, read my article "[Embrace Joy With Vorfreude](#)."

Optimize Your Mitochondrial Function to Promote Joy

Another important aspect of rewiring your brain to cultivate more Joy in your life is having enough cellular energy to think properly and make conscious positive choices.

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.²¹ This is why a surplus of cellular energy creation is necessary to have the ability to allow your brain to work optimally.

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, so make sure to lower your exposure to their sources.

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