

Happiness and Stress: Change Your Mindset

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“Stress Busters/Happiness Boosters”

20 Daily Practices that Promote Positive Emotions and Engagement with Life

Remember that it takes repetitions of 21-30 days to establish a new habit.

Ritualize these practices, just as you do with bedtime routines, working out, etc.

1. Express Gratitude—Gratitude focuses on what is working. It is the opposite of complaining. “When you pay more attention to what works in your life, you get more of a life that works.” Grateful people are more satisfied with their lives and deal with life’s challenges in more positive ways. Get in touch with the feeling of gratitude. Keep a daily gratitude journal; write thank-you letters; look for the seed of something positive in every situation.

2. Stop Complaining, Blaming, Gossiping—Complaining is the common habit of dwelling on what is wrong or missing, and it has the effect of diminishing both complainers and hearers. Critical thoughts release a cascade of stress chemicals that increase anxiety and irritability. Practice observing your thoughts and choosing not to voice negative messages. We can learn to stop seeing ourselves as victims of our circumstances and choose to stop complaining, blaming, and gossiping. (Will Bowen, *A Complaint-free World*) “Be impeccable with your word,” is the first of *The Four Agreements* (Don Miguel Ruiz). We create the life we want when we express our desires in the positive, instead of dwelling on what is wrong or missing or could be better.

3. Perform Acts of Kindness—Showing kindness is a natural response to gratitude. Positive feelings increase for the one who performs the kindness and the recipient of the good deed, as well as for observing bystanders. Both financial and non-financial acts of kindness increase happiness. “*We should give as we would receive: cheerfully, quickly, and without hesitation; for there is no grace in a benefit that sticks to the fingers.*”—Seneca, Roman Statesman

4. Exercise Regularly—Physical activity enhances our sense of accomplishment and well-being, raises our self-esteem, improves our thinking, and increases our health. Even a 30-minute brisk walk daily (or three 10-minute walks) can raise your level of happiness.

5. Get 8 Hours of Sleep Each Night—Getting enough sleep is a key component of good health and well-being. Raise your energy level by going to bed earlier and taking guilt-free naps. Awaking well rested improves your morning mood and level of functioning. “Sleep knits up the raveled sleeve of care.” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*).

6. Experience Human Touch— Human touch has a powerful effect on behavior and moods, reducing depression, anxiety, stress and physical pain. Touch reassures, relaxes, and comforts, in addition to improving the immune system and aiding in healing. Give at least two hugs daily; hold a baby; hug a child; hold hands; get a massage. If you can't hug another person, hug yourself. Compliments are verbal hugs.

7. Smile More Often— People smile when they are happier, and they feel happier when they smile. Your brain doesn't know the difference between a spontaneous and a forced smile. When you smile, others smile back, making both of you happier.

8. Set and Reach Goals—Goals raise our self-esteem and self-confidence, and keep us more engaged with life. Choose both long-term and short-term goals, pleasurable and meaningful goals, and goals involving growth, connection, and contribution.

9. Practice Your Spiritual or Religious Beliefs—Survey data show that religious people are moderately happier than nonreligious people. If spirituality is important to you, make time for daily prayer, devotions, or meditation; weekly worship, small group meetings/Bible studies; or enjoying spiritual music.

10. Nurture Your Relationships—These include your primary family relationships, as well as extended family, friends and colleagues, or even pet companions. The best relationships have a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions. Being with others raises happiness, so make an effort to get out and socialize. If feasible, get a pet companion...or at least nurture a plant.

11. Experience Moments of Flow—Regularly engage in those special activities that provide both peak experiences and performance. We experience flow when we perform at our best and enjoy what we are doing. Activities that may create experiences of flow include: engaging in an athletic endeavor, reading a good book, playing bridge, meditating, painting, writing, or studying a topic about which you are passionate.

12. Schedule Some Simple Pleasures Each Day—Define the small things that give you pleasure—enjoying a fresh brewed cup of coffee or tea; reading the paper or a good book; preparing a healthy meal; taking a leisurely bath; savoring a piece of chocolate. Focus on the warmth of the sun, the majesty of the mountains, or the sweetness of an orange.

13. Prime Your Environment—Our environment influences how we feel, think, act, and perform. Prime your environment with pictures of those you love, art that feeds your spirit, household plants, reminders of your goals, inspirational quotes and affirmations. Reduce clutter and chaos in your environment.

14. Donate and Volunteer on Behalf of a Meaningful Cause. Just as when we perform acts of kindness, whenever we focus on the needs of others, we reap benefits ourselves. Self-absorption contributes to depression. Volunteering on behalf of others is associated with better health and greater life satisfaction. Get involved with a cause that is meaningful to you, and use your signature strengths to make a positive difference.

15. Adopt a Humor Perspective—Laughter diffuses tension, relaxes your muscles, shrinks your problems, buoys your spirits, aids in healing and helps the immune system. Laugh at your own foibles, watch comedies, read the comics, and lighten up.

16. Use Retail Therapy Wisely—Invest in enjoyable experiences over acquiring more material possessions. Happy experiences tend to be remembered even more positively over time, while the momentary joy associated with a new purchase quickly fades.

17. Focus on What You Want in Life, Not on What You Don't Want—Remember that your thoughts trigger your feelings. Positive thoughts are stronger than negative notions. State your desires in the positive, since positive feelings make it more likely that you will draw into your life what you want.

18. Live in the Present Moment—Most of the stress we experience is based on something we interpret as bad that has already happened, or some disaster we anticipate in the future. Yet, the past is gone, and the future calamities we dread may never materialize. Life comes to us one present moment at a time, and happiness is found in savoring the *now*.

19. Practice Mindfulness Meditation—Mindfulness is the practice of shifting your thoughts away from your usual preoccupations and focusing on the present moment. Research suggests that mindfulness meditation may improve mood, decrease stress, boost immune function and promote health. Calm your mind for about 10 minutes twice a day by focusing on your breathing, while observing intruding feelings and thoughts without judging them. You also can practice informal mindfulness in your daily life by performing an ordinary task, such as walking or eating, more slowly and deliberately, with increased awareness of the sensations of the moment.

20. Simplify and De-Clutter Your Life—Too many possessions and commitments can create disharmony in our lives and increase our stress level. Taking things out of our life can bring us more happiness. Begin with small steps to downscale, slow your pace, and simplify your life.