



# Happiness, Redefined

The latest research (and our collective recent life) points to the fact that you may be most likely to find joy where you least expect it.

By Nicole Blades

**IF THE PAST FEW YEARS HAVE TAUGHT US ANYTHING,** it's that the typical avenues to happiness—travel, big gatherings, career achievements—aren't always readily accessible. But honestly (and here's where we go deep), it wouldn't matter if they were, thanks to a pesky thing called hedonic adaptation. That's the idea that after the initial euphoria from a new win in your life, the great mood it inspires fades over time, per researchers. It's also why winning the lottery or dating someone "out of your league" can't guarantee long-term happiness beyond the initial thrill. In that way, many of us learned we can be happier with less if we focus on the right things (read: the less-sparkly, counterintuitive stuff). And that's a good skill to have now *and* in the future. Curious where your elephant of happiness is hiding? Might be in your daily grind, in the way you think about your mortality, or even in your approach to positivity. Here, six unexpected ways to take the road less traveled to lasting bliss.



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Jiaqi Wang

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## Learn to Balance What You *Need* to Do With What You *Want* to Do

*Make your future self proud without neglecting necessary R&R.*

● ● When you ask people about the happiest moments in their lives, they'll point to activities that gave them meaning—running a marathon, publishing poetry, raising children. But if you tap these people in the midst of their working toward those achievements (say, during a long training run, a night of writer's block, or a child's public tantrum), they'll tell you those

things are making them miserable, studies show. Here's why: The big events contribute to what's known in psychology research as the "narrative self," or the version of yourself that's trying to create an identity and make you the hero of a triumphant story. Unfortunately, that narrative self is often at odds with what would make your "daily self" happy (naps and Netflix).

So how do you stay motivated to keep going after the hard stuff that will make you smile with pride later? One strategy is temptation bundling, says Laurie Santos, PhD, a professor of psychology at Yale University and host of *The Happiness Lab* podcast. This is when you pair a rewarding activity with a need-to-do one that feels like a slog. (The concept was developed by behavioral scientist Katy Milkman.) "But don't do the rewarding thing after; do it *during* the hard activity itself," Santos says. Need to get through that hour of budgeting for your business? Pair it with a nice candle that feels special and indulgent, she says. And use that candle only while working. Time to hit that grueling CrossFit workout? "Make that the only time you listen to your favorite podcast," says Santos. Temptation bundling is like that spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down—it's an excellent way to serve both your narrative and daily selves at the same time.

It's also helpful to reframe how you think about the middle of a tough activity. Try to "make the middle short," says psychologist Ayelet Fishbach, PhD, author of *Get It Done*. So if you're writing a novel, don't think of your achievement as completing the whole shebang. Frame your goals as single chapters, or 10-page units. The grind will seem shorter because you'll make it to the mini goal faster.

Another tip? Write down all the reasons to stick with your objective, says psychotherapist Amy Morin, author of *13 Things Mentally Strong Women Don't Do*. "Then even on the days you don't feel like doing it, you'll have a detailed list reminding you that crossing the finish line will be worth the effort," she says.

! "Happiness is...a mind-cleansing long run." —Madeline Howard, *Women's Health* editorial assistant



# 2

## Think About Death More Often (Really!)

Confronting her mortality helped writer, outdoor enthusiast, and film-set horse wrangler **Maggie Slepian** feel joy more easily.

●● Drowning is an agonizing way to go. Not that it's physically painful; more that the minutes drag on and on and on. While trapped upside down in an unfamiliar kayak, coursing down a rapidly flowing, icy river, I watched the last grains of sand run through my hourglass.

*Why did I say yes to this?* I thought. *I'm sorry for my family and friends. Who will tell my parents? I am scared. I wish I hadn't come out here.* Then, in my last few moments of consciousness, I forced myself to stop the onslaught of sadness. If I had only seconds to live, I didn't want to spend them regretting my final choices. That's the last thought I remember.

When I came to, I heard the roar of water before I opened my eyes. I blinked droplets from my eyelashes and saw the blue spring sky studded with fast-moving clouds. I felt a pressure on my chest. It was my partner's arm squeezing my ribs as he kicked us toward

shore. My knees buckled as I sank into the mud, trying to comprehend what had—and hadn't—just happened.

For someone continually seeking adrenaline rushes, my own mortality was something I'd adamantly refused to acknowledge. The finality was haunting. But on the river that day, I was forced to face it.

The funny thing is, confronting your own death can actually *increase* your happiness, per a study from the University of Kentucky. Why? Becoming more familiar with death creates a shift in perspective, helping us appreciate what matters most, says Michael Easter, author of *The Comfort Crisis*. "The thought that you're going to die is uncomfortable and terrifying," Easter says. "But on the other side is happiness. It changes your behavior toward more meaning, and people with more meaningful lives are happier."

Did my second chance mean I was destined to do great things? While I don't know that answer yet, almost dying did make me stop taking life for granted. The first time it rained after the accident, I was grateful to witness the storm. When it came time to mow my lawn, a chore I resented, I was happy for the opportunity to pull the mower from

the garage. When switching jobs, I looked for experiences that felt worthwhile instead of what looked best on a résumé. I was continuously just happy to be here.

To be clear, you don't need to seek out a drastic experience to uncover an awe for life. A good start is considering the reality of death. Maybe you think of it occasionally during meditation, reflecting on what it might feel like. If you're unnerved, lean into it. Use the thoughts to push yourself toward something you're putting off, says Easter.

When I think about the day I almost died, I am filled with a surge of gratitude for having experienced life's fragility. I feel less of a frantic desire to take risks the way I did that day and to chase forever-receding finish lines. I'd like to think I wouldn't spend my last moments in regret anymore. I'm content. I didn't discover the meaning of life, and I still don't know what I'm "supposed" to be doing, but the simple fact that I wake up each day? That's something to be excited about.



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Olivia  
Fields



! **"Happiness is...drinking bubble tea, lighting a candle, and expressing myself through movement or art."**  
—Jewelyn Butron, Women's Health associate art director

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## Flex Your Mental Muscle

*Open yourself up to the idea that happiness is a skill. Class is in session.*

● ● You've probably heard the old adage that happiness is a journey, not a destination. True! But it might be even more productive to think of it as a muscle, skill, or strength. Hear us out: There's a connection between genetics and your baseline happiness, a new study shows. Basically, a portion of your subjective well-being may be predetermined by your DNA and effectively out of your control (a lot like your ability to put on muscle mass), per Dutch research. But the good news is that no matter where your natural base-

line is, you can build it up and establish a stronger one, just like you would by lifting weights. This shift of POV alone can increase your joy, and there are cognitive skills you can practice to help you strengthen your capacity for bliss. "Your mood and your life satisfaction can be changed based on your behaviors," says Santos. "That means you engage in habits [to bolster happiness] similar to how you might go to the gym regularly." Three intentional strategies to work that happiness muscle, ahead.

## Have Thanksgiving Every Day

● ● "People who count their blessings instead of their hassles tend to be happier," says Santos. "The act of writing three to five things you're grateful for every single day can significantly improve your outlook in as little as two weeks."

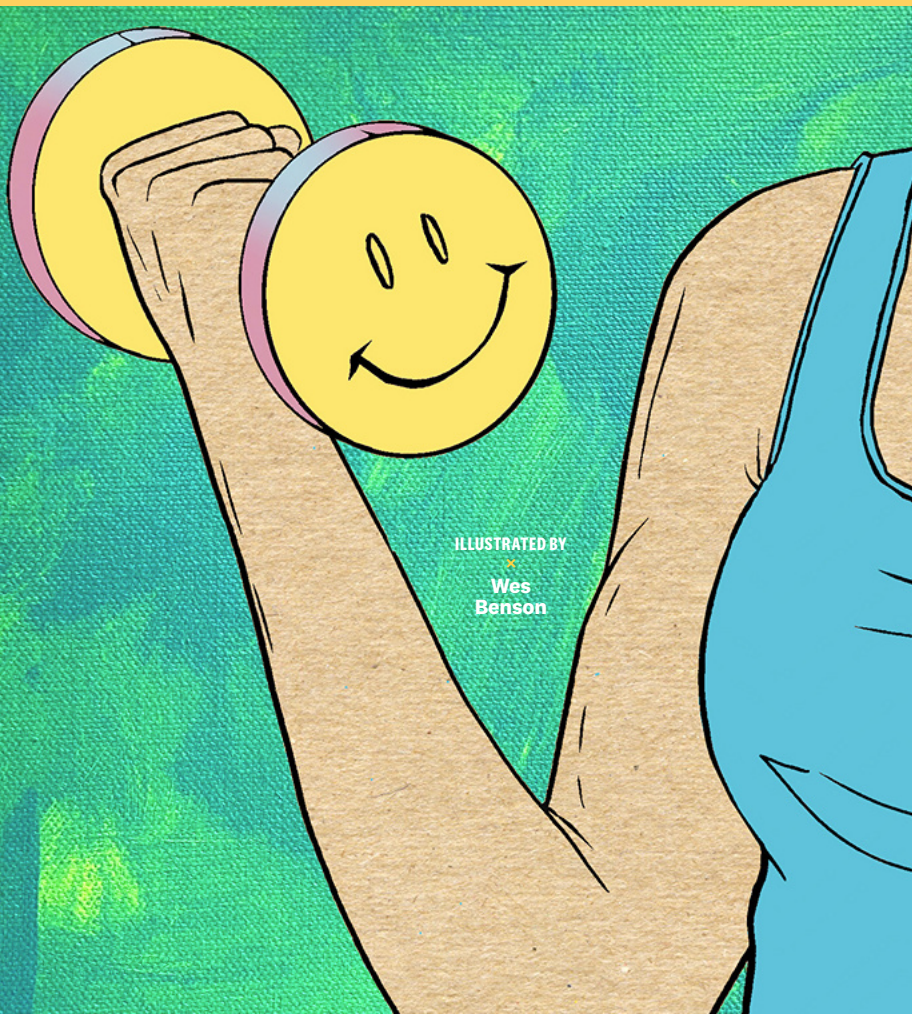
## Be Here, Now

● ● Focus on being present. "There's evidence that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind," Santos says. "Practices like meditation and 'savoring'—paying active attention to an experience—can bring you more mindfulness and, by extension, more happiness," Santos says. For example, if you're drinking a latte, take a second to fully immerse yourself in the moment. Consider the temperature of the cup, the color of the coffee, the actual taste of the drink, she says. "How might you describe it to someone?"

## Set Social Media Boundaries

● ● If you haven't set a social media time limit on your phone yet, prioritize it, stat. "People who capped their social media at 30 minutes a day saw a reduction in loneliness and depression and a significant improvement in overall well-being within three weeks," says cognitive scientist Sian Beilock, PhD, president of Barnard College. Swap that scroll time for (IRL) hangs with friends for better cognition, motivation, and health, research shows. The more screen-free hobbies on your cal, the better.

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Wes  
Benson







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Allie Sullberg

## 4 Define Your Own Norms

Nancy Schlossberg, counseling psychologist, author, and copresident of consulting firm TransitionWorks, on defying odds

●● As a professor of more than 27 years who studied life transitions—and particularly big career changes—I thought I was prepared to leave my work behind and retire. But when that happened and my husband and I moved to Florida, it wasn't the relaxing piece of cake I thought it would be. I was restless and had trouble adjusting to my new routine. I missed feeling inspired. When I realized how hard the change was, I started interviewing people about their experiences.

I learned that retirement isn't a one-time transition; it's more like a series of them. And the way you react to the beginning of a transition will most likely not be the way you end up feeling about it. Between one title (like "professor") and another ("retired professor"), there is a period sociologists refer to as "liminality." It's the in-between, and there are lots of ups and downs. The typical retirement, where you stop working altogether, doesn't make sense for everyone. Many of us identify ourselves through our work, so when that label is gone, it can be daunting. For me, it was better to make adjustments to *how* I worked than to stop. I was happy to step back from being a professor, but not from work entirely.

Now, at 92, I have been retired for 22 years and written three books and conducted research in that time. I've also cofounded a group, the Aging Rebels, that focuses on feelings of invisibility and irrelevance among the elderly, among other issues. My new label for my identity is "explorer." I'm exploring different paths and keeping busy with work that feels meaningful. And along the way, I'm enjoying sunsets, my partner, and my kids.

—As told to Fortesa Latifi



**"Happiness is...**waking up early and drinking a cup—or two—of coffee before my oldest meanders downstairs to have deep, 5-year-old talks as we snuggle on the couch." —Abby Cuffey, *Women's Health* executive editor





ILLUSTRATED BY  
Bee Johnson

# 5 Let Go of Stuff— Literally

A lifestyle of less can feel unsettling, especially in such a material world. But it could clear space for more.

**“If you’re intentional with your home, that intentionality will trickle into every area of your life.”**

—Christine Platt, author, *The Afrominimalist’s Guide to Living With Less*

●● Five years ago, I took a hard look at my life and spending habits. What I saw: debt from purchases I didn’t need that I was trying to fit into space I didn’t have. I was always a bargain shopper who got a jolt from a sale, but it was temporary. I’d get home and the thrill would be gone. The items would go in the closet, never to be used again. I finally realized I had to do something different if I wanted lasting happiness, and that’s when I began my minimalist journey. But as a Black woman, I felt lost in what I saw online. It seemed like you had to be white and live in a tiny, monochrome house with white walls and white furniture. I wanted to show other people of color that it was

possible to find their space in this movement, too, so I wrote about my process, leading to my book.

The biggest step has been focusing on intentionality. If you’re intentional with your home, that will trickle into every area of your life, from work to friendships to how you manage your time. You become discerning. And it’s not like you can’t shop. It’s more about the “why behind the buy.” Are you seeking purchases that bring you real joy, or trying to fill a hole in your life? I used to have attachments to objects that were rooted in fear or the belief that a material good could give me comfort or impress someone. Now, I choose authenticity over aesthetics. —As told to Fortesa Latifi

! “Happiness is...long walks on the beach and journaling.” —Deasia Lamar, *Women’s Health* assistant social media editor



**“Divesting from my image helped me feel comfortable with less.”**

—Kristin Canning, *Women’s Health* features director

● ● When I put nearly all the contents of my New York City apartment into storage a year ago and flew to Aspen, Colorado, to start couch-surfing and car-camping for a year, I didn’t think of myself as a minimalist. I just wanted to get out of the city, reconnect with far-flung friends, and spend more time in nature. Paring down my possessions to what could fit in a carry-on suitcase was a by-product of being nomadic, but it quickly made me realize how much my stuff had been weighing me down. Personally, feeling comfortable with less mostly meant divesting from my image. I quickly realized how unfulfilling and stressful it was to constantly worry about my clothes and accessories and home decor and what the cumulative appearance of those things said about me.

With fewer options at my disposal, the time and mental space I’d devoted to figuring out what I wanted to look like every day was diverted into creative pursuits that were more “me,” like reading, planning a hike, and journaling. What I lost in outfits and comfort I made up for in self-acceptance and mobility, which brought me exponentially more joy. Turns out, most of what I owned wasn’t even for me, but for looking a certain way for others. I needed to spend time away from my “typical” life, and all the stuff that felt necessary there, to really understand that. Holding on to less created more room for the friends, experiences, and connections that were truly important to me. I’m lucky I took the leap I did; it taught me that I’m more at peace, active, open, and happier this way. Now, I have more space to just be myself.

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## Forget Positivity; Reach for Flexibility

*Going with the flow works better than forcing it.*

● ● It might seem as if the key to happiness is having a glass-half-full mentality, 24/7. But trying to focus on the positive all the time can actually become a hindrance to happiness, says neuroscientist and author Caroline Leaf, PhD, host of the *Cleaning Up the Mental Mess* podcast. The push to be smiley at every turn is when optimistic thinking shifts into toxic positivity: the misconception that in a happy life, you never feel sad, angry, or frustrated.

In fact, we “need” our negative emotions. “They exist to signal something to us, teach us things,” says Santos. They may be temporarily unpleasant, but you learn something important from the experience. (This isn’t to say you shouldn’t strive to be thankful, as mentioned earlier; rather, you should create space for a whole spectrum of feels. You can even be grateful for what those uncomfortable ones are teaching you, but you have to acknowledge and experience them first.)

So instead of immediately going Positive Patty—or Negative Nelly—on a situation, the more helpful approach is to be flexible and adopt what Leaf calls a “possibilities mindset.”

A positive mindset might mask or suppress how you feel, but a possibilities mindset recognizes that you have options, “allowing flexibility in your path so you can try a new direction,” Leaf says. Think of it like this: Instead of looking at a glass as half-full or half-empty, what if you allowed the glass to be either option on any given day, knowing you could handle it no matter what? People with a flexible mindset experienced less depression and found better ways to deal with negative moods, studies show. Basically, don’t try to change how you typically view the glass; try to change how you’re affected by what you see.

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June Lee

