

HAPPINESS

I discovered Dennis Prager, a modern-day philosopher whom I have already mentioned. I heard about his book *Happiness Is a Serious Problem* (1998), immediately bought a copy, read it, and learned to become a much happier person.



First, I learned that our propensity for happiness varies according to our DNA. Some people are just naturally happier than others. Italians are happier than the Scottish. Irish are happier than Germans. Extroverts are happier than introverts. You are who you are. Accept it and move on.

Second, I learned that most of our unhappiness is self-inflicted. By seeing what's wrong instead of right, by focusing on ourselves instead of others, by wanting more instead of being grateful, we make ourselves unhappy.

And third, I learned there are many specific ways we can increase (or decrease) our own personal happiness. Based on Prager's book and on my own reflection, I believe there are at least twenty specific habits that almost anyone can develop to increase his or her level of happiness.

TO INCREASE HAPPINESS	TO REDUCE HAPPINESS
Love others	Be angry at others
Help others	Focus on yourself
See the good	See the bad
Admire others	Envy others
Cultivate wide interests	Maintain limited interests
Be grateful for what you have	Always want more
Be responsible	Be a victim
Have low expectations	Have high expectations
Seek internal approval	Seek external approval
Face reality	Protect yourself through self-deception
Take action	Worry but do nothing

Live in harmony with family	Live in turmoil with family
Accept Yourself	Criticize yourself
Have a friendly attitude	Have a hostile attitude
Be slow to anger	Take offense easily
Do things that make you proud	Do things that cause you shame
Take pleasure in small things	Require excitement
Maintain hope	Resign easily
Accept imperfection	Seek perfection
Focus on purpose	Focus on happiness

Several years ago, I heard about a study on happiness in which the researchers selected about 1,000 people to participate. Researchers gave participants a beeper to carry with them at all times, and the beepers went off randomly. The participants' assignment was to identify what they were doing at that moment and then to score their happiness on a scale of 1 to 10.

The researchers found most people were happier when they were just doing normal activities they enjoyed—like working, exercising, or interacting with family or friends. In other words, they were most happy when they were just living in the present, enjoying where they were and what they were doing.

Only yesterday I was working out at a gym when the guy next to me on a stationary bike pulled out his phone to talk with his mother. After a few minutes, I tapped him on the shoulder and asked, "How long will you be on the phone?" It was the nicest way I could think of to let him know that his lack of cell phone etiquette was annoying. Not surprisingly, he got upset, called me a clueless jerk, and stormed out of the room.

One of the obvious downsides to having the ubiquitous cell phone is that it makes it so easy to be somewhere else and so hard to just be where you are. And this, along with heavy social media use, is having a major negative impact on our national happiness.

According to recent findings published in *Psychiatric Quarterly* by psychologists Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell, there is a large correlation between heavy social media use and reduced life satisfaction among adolescents. They reported heavy users of digital media were about fifty to 170 percent more likely than light users to be unhappy, suffer from a reduced sense of well-being, or exhibit suicide risk factors.

The addictive qualities of social media are not only a “happiness” problem for young people but are also becoming a major issue for many older adults. The key to managing this, according to writer and philosopher Arthur Brooks, is to make social media a complement, not a substitute, for real human connections. He is clearly right on this.

In his book *The Conservative Heart*, published in 2015, Brooks lays out some simple facts about his research on the topic of happiness. First, he explains that three components control our propensity for being happy: The key to happiness then, according to Brooks (and I agree with this wholeheartedly), is to accept the parts of our happiness that we can't control and to take full advantage of the parts that we *can* control. How might we do this? Here are my top ten recommendations for improving your personal happiness:

- Improve your virtues. Grow as a person.
- Be grateful. Count your blessings.
- Improve your relationships. Family and close friends.
- See the good. Nothing is perfect.
- Enjoy your work. Make sure it's meaningful.
- Add variety and fullness. Happiness depends on broad conditions.
- Set and achieve meaningful goals. Inspire yourself.
- Lower your expectations. Appreciate where you are.
- Increase your giving. Time, money, and talent.
- Deepen your faith. Believe in something bigger than yourself.