

In pursuit of a happiness gene

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This is Prof. Yoram Barak of Tel Aviv University. Credit: AFTAU

The pursuit of happiness characterizes the human condition. But for those suffering from stress, money trouble or chronic illness, a positive outlook on life can be difficult to find. Now, a Tel Aviv University researcher says we should look to our genes.

Prof. Yoram Barak of Tel Aviv University's Sackler School of Medicine is engaged in the "attempt to find the happiness gene, the [genetic component](#) of happiness," which may be 50% responsible for an optimistic outlook. The research is a collaboration between Tel Aviv University and its affiliated research hospital, the Chaim Sheba Medical Centre at Tel Hashomer, which is the largest hospital in Israel.

Initial research findings have made Prof. Barak optimistic about their ability to succeed. "If something is genetic, it should have a large concordance among twins," he says. "And the twin studies we are looking at show that 50% of happiness is genetically determined." Prof. Barak is now working with Prof. Anat Achiron of the Sheba Medical Center to identify the specific genes that are associated with happiness.

Dr. Barak's current findings in the hunt for the happiness gene were presented at The World Congress on Treatment and Research in Multiple Sclerosis in Montreal, Canada in 2008, and most recently detailed in the journal *Expert Review of Neurotherapeutics*, April 2009.

Positive psychology

We may be a long way off from being able to genetically engineer happiness, Prof. Barak says, but we can start by thinking positively. Much of his work is based on positive psychology, which is the "fastest and largest growing area of psychology in the United States — and in the world," he says.

For the 50% of happiness that is not genetic, Prof. Barak is working on a program of positive psychology workshops, with exercises he recently tested in a one-day workshop for 120 participants at the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Israel. Early results indicate that the workshops improved the happiness level of participants by as much as 30%.

This work is dedicated to finding "practical and intervention oriented research and the application of psychology into medicine," says Prof. Barak. His research into the physical affects of mental state on patients with neurological diseases is an attempt to bridge the gap between psychology and clinical medicine.

Feeling good in mind and body

Prof. Barak says that the psychological benefits of the program were accompanied by physical benefits as well. "We were able to raise levels of happiness in these patients so they were just about equal to those of healthy subjects," he says. "If we can apply positive psychology, we can better their adherence to their treatment regime. And we have been able to show that there is a stabilization of the neurological disability as well."

For healthy individuals, Prof. Barak says that his happiness exercises can enrich their lives, too. Meanwhile, his search for the [happiness](#) gene goes on.

Source: Tel Aviv University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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