

Research shows how to increase mental wellbeing and feel happy

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Why is it that some people seem to waltz through life in a bubble of happiness, when for others each day is a struggle? Should we just accept the personality we're born with? Or can we act and think ourselves to happiness?

Victoria University PhD researcher Dr Erica Chadwick spent three years examining 'savouring strategies'—the thoughts and behaviours people use to create, maintain or enhance positive experiences—to ascertain what strategies were most effective for overall wellbeing and [happiness](#).

While past research has examined how people savour major but fleeting events, such as going on holiday or receiving a high mark at school, Dr Chadwick investigated the impact of the minor, everyday positive events that make up life.

"I wanted to know not only what increased the feeling of happiness for a moment, but what made a difference to mental wellbeing over time. I also wanted to examine how savouring strategies changed from adolescence to adulthood."

Her research gathered the actions and thoughts of more than 400 young New Zealanders in the Bay of Plenty and 1,500 adults from across New Zealand and overseas, and grouped them into four overall strategies.

Actively boosting feelings of happiness involved physical actions such as celebrating by jumping up and down, high fiving or rushing over to a

friend to share good news.

Subtle actions included being more mindful of your surroundings, living in the moment and paying greater attention to your enjoyment of minor events—such as savouring a meal.

Self-focused actions included thinking about being a lucky or fortunate person. They also included congratulating oneself after an achievement and actively realising a moment would be a memory to enjoy again in the future.

Dampening or "keeping things low key" had a negative effect on mental wellbeing.

"What I found interesting as I analysed my research results was that while subtle strategies such as mindfulness positively influenced adult wellbeing, they had a negative effect on adolescents. Instead, self-focused actions were the most powerful savouring strategies for youth," says Dr Chadwick.

"They may be the most effective because teenagers are naturally inward-looking, or it might be because New Zealanders' humble attitude and tall poppy syndrome thwart the effectiveness of more public behaviours."

Dr Chadwick says that for everyone, regardless of age, research clearly shows that meaningful social connections with family and friends remains the most valuable tool for feeling happy and mentally well.

Dr Chadwick graduated with a Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at Tuesday's Graduation ceremony.

How to feel happier and improve your mental

wellbeing:

1. Activate your mind: savouring is a conscious process so look for opportunities to make more of an experience or event, but don't over think it.
2. Share positive news with other people, especially with those who'll be happy for you too.
3. Acknowledge your achievements: although this might be anathema to New Zealanders, the research showed taking a moment to congratulate yourself, even silently, greatly improves your wellbeing.
4. And for adults particularly, slow down to more mindfully appreciate day to day activities. Be in the moment.

Provided by Victoria University

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