

Mayo mindfulness: Grow happiness through focus and practice

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Many people wait around for happiness to find them, when in reality it's sometimes only a positive thought away. Being happy can be a choice

you make. There are many small techniques you can try to create a happier and more enjoyable life.

What science says about happiness

"Research has shown you have control over your happiness," explains Stacy Blackburn, D.O., Mayo Clinic Health System family physician. "It all relates back to your personality and also your thoughts and behaviors, which can be changed."

While some people think landing their dream job or driving a fancy car will bring them lots of joy, this is not often the case. On average, people who have wealth, beauty or less stress are no happier than anyone else.

This is great news for many, because there are ways to live a happier [life](#) that don't reflect your income or appearance. Happy people seem to build their life choices around five pillars, says Dr. Blackburn. They include:

- Appreciating what you have
 - Devoting time to friends and family
 - Feeling a sense of purpose
 - Living in the moment
 - Maintaining an optimistic outlook
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Choose optimism

Optimism is one aspect of your life over which you have complete control. Being optimistic involves seeing your situation from the positive side instead of the negative. It can be easy for [negative thoughts](#) to take over, but they don't have to. If you aren't naturally an optimistic person, there are ways you can challenge your pessimistic thinking. Dr. Blackburn suggests combating negative thoughts by recognizing them and asking these questions:

- Is the situation really as bad as I think?
- Is there another way to look at the situation?
- What can I learn from this experience that I can use in the future?

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Invest in relationships

Relationships are an important part of being happy. Can you think of a friend who can always make you laugh? When you surround yourself with happy people, their happiness is likely to rub off on you and improve your mood. Dr. Blackburn says research suggests that relationships provide the strongest meaning and bring the most purpose to your life.

While it can be easy to take family and friends for granted, they're typically the people who are there through good and bad times. It's important you make time for these relationships and give happiness in return. Communicating kind words and actions to the special people in your life and showing appreciation can help you become a happier person.

Express gratitude

Gratitude is a sense of wonder, appreciation and thankfulness for life. Taking time out of your day to recognize the good things in your life and appreciate what you have can help practice gratitude. It can be as simple as taking a minute every day to identify at least one thing that enriches your life. Practice substituting ungrateful thoughts for grateful ones. Try practicing gratitude before you go to sleep at night and right away when you wake up in the morning.

Find your purpose

People who strive to meet a goal or fulfill a mission are happier than those who don't have such aspirations. Goals provide a sense of purpose, boost self-esteem and bring people together. The goal itself doesn't matter as long as it is moving you closer toward living a happier life.

"Aligning everyday activities with the long-term meaning and purpose of your life can help you feel more content," says Dr. Blackburn. "Some people are engaged in activities they love, while others aren't. If you're searching for your purpose, ask yourself these questions:

- What excites and energizes me?
 - What are my proudest achievements?
 - How do I want others to remember me?
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Practice

While all of the aforementioned advice suggests ways to help you become happier, practice is the key to achieving happiness. Remember that your choices, thoughts and actions all carry influence over your [happiness](#). Making an effort to cultivate optimism and express gratitude can become a simple habit over time.

Live in the moment

"Don't wait for joy to come on a day when you're less busy or stressed, because that day may never come," says Dr. Blackburn. "Look for opportunities throughout your day to enjoy the small pleasures in life. Focus your energy on the positives of the present instead of dwelling on the past or worrying about the future."

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