

'Be happy' isn't so simple, especially amid coronavirus worries—but it's seriously good for health

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As nonstop news about the global pandemic of coronavirus spreads worry, there's a chance to grab a respite. By United Nations proclamation, Friday is International Day of Happiness, with events around the world aimed at spreading good cheer.

It may be a tough sell given the constant uncertainty in the United States and globally about [coronavirus](#). Yet, studies show a mind-body connection between psychological and physical well-being, including better cardiovascular health.

"There's actually quite good scientific evidence that people who are happier and more optimistic and have a brighter outlook on life are less likely to get [heart disease](#), have problems after they have heart disease, and die of heart disease," said Dr. Jeffrey Huffman, director of the Cardiac Psychiatry Research Program at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. "There's a real connection between well-being and heart health."

That connection is reflected in many factors, said Dr. Laura Kubzansky, co-director of the Lee Kum Sheung Center for Health and Happiness at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, also in Boston.

"People who have higher psychological well-being are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors, particularly doing more physical activity and eating a healthier diet, and they're less likely to smoke," she said. "Folks who are happier tend to have better [social relationships](#), and that's associated with better cardiac health. And they're better at regulating emotions, so they're able to manage stress a bit better."

Kubzansky recently co-authored a meta-analysis of 15 studies encompassing nearly 230,000 people that linked an optimistic mindset to lower risk of heart attack and stroke, as well as a lower risk of death. The 2019 review, published in *JAMA Network Open*, suggested

promoting an optimistic mindset could be good preventive medicine.

"The evidence is increasingly strong," she said. "What we do about it will be an interesting question. Long before you get to the cardiologist, you and your primary care physician should be talking about your [psychological state](#)."

Huffman designs wellness programs for people dealing with [heart](#) disease and other conditions, and a positive state of mind is an important part of the process.

"We combine exercise goal-setting programs with activities to help cultivate skills to develop positive feelings," he said. "People who have the positive psychology aspect feel more energized and optimistic, and in our preliminary work it appears to be more effective in helping people be active than the goal-setting program alone."

Those sound like good reasons to get happy, whether the UN is involved or not. But both experts agree a one-time booster shot, whether a funny movie, a piece of good news or a happiness day event—*isn't likely to make a lasting difference.*

"There is a distinction between what we call 'state' and 'trait,'" Kubzansky said. "You can enjoy happy moments here and there, but for long-term effects, you really need to sort of change your outlook on a sustained basis."

To do that, Huffman encourages his patients to build positivity by fostering a sense of purpose; satisfaction from work, friends and family; focusing on personal strengths and good memories; and emphasizing gratitude every day.

"The more you use these skills, the more it helps you to be happier,

healthier and more effective in your life."

So have a nice International Day of Happiness, but don't stop there.

"Everyone wants a quick fix," Kubzansky said. "But it's not, 'Let's just watch more cat videos!' I wish there was an easy answer for how to improve your psychological state in a meaningful way, but I don't think there's a one-size-fits-all, fast solution. Everyone needs to figure out what works for them and take care of their mental health just as much as they take care of their physical health."

She knows that's easier said than done. And now that the world is focused on the grim statistics surrounding COVID-19, the task is even more difficult.

During the current call for social distancing and the rise on social media of #stayhome, phones can be a way to spread happiness—by chatting with a family member, a friend, or a neighbor, particularly ones that may be alone.

"Many people live in really difficult circumstances," Kubzansky said. "You can't just say, 'Be happy.' That seems naive or flippant. But if people can find even small ways to increase their ability to see the world in a more positive way, that can be very beneficial to their [health](#)."

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