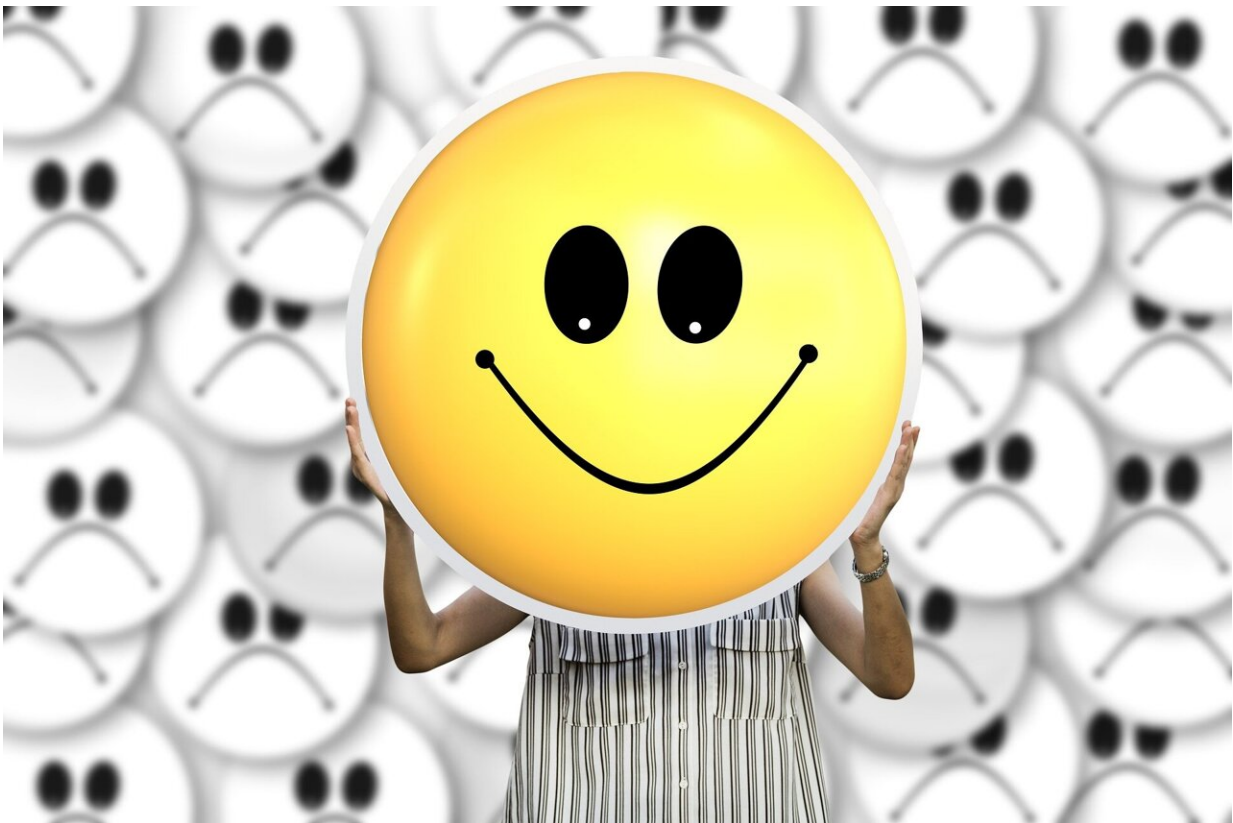


Happiness can be learned, but you have to work at it, study finds

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We can learn to be happy, but only get lasting benefits if we keep practicing, a new study has revealed. "[Long-term analysis of a psychoeducational course on university students' mental well-being](#)," was published in *Higher Education*.

The team behind the University of Bristol's "Science of Happiness" course had already discovered that teaching students the latest scientific studies on happiness created a marked improvement in their well-being.

But their latest study found that these well-being boosts are short-lived unless the evidence-informed habits learnt on the course—"such as gratitude, exercise, meditation or journaling"—are kept up over the long-term.

Senior author Prof Bruce Hood said, "It's like going to the gym;"we can't expect to do one class and be fit forever. Just as with [physical health](#), we have to continuously work on our [mental health](#), otherwise the improvements are temporary."

Launched in 2018, the University of Bristol's Science of Happiness course was the first of its kind in the UK. It involves no exams or coursework, and teaches students what the latest peer-reviewed studies in psychology and neuroscience say really makes us happy.

Students who took the course reported a 10 to 15% improvement in well-being. But only those who continued implementing the course learnings maintained that improved well-being when they were surveyed again two years on.

Published in the journal *Higher Education*, is the first to track well-being of students on a happiness course long after they have left the course.

Prof Hood said, "This study shows that just doing a courseâ€"be that at the gym, a meditation retreat or on an evidence-based happiness course like oursâ€"is just the start: you must commit to using what you learn on a regular basis.

"Much of what we teach revolves around positive psychology interventions that divert your attention away from yourself, by helping others, being with friends, gratitude or meditating.

"This is the opposite of the current 'selfcare' doctrine, but countless studies have shown that getting out of our own heads helps gets us away from negative ruminations which can be the basis of so many mental health problems."

Prof Hood has distilled the Science of Happiness course into a new book, out on March 10. "The Science of Happiness: Seven Lessons for Living Well" reveals an evidence-informed roadmap to better well-being.

The other paper authors are fellow University of Bristol academics Catherine Hobbs and Sarah Jelbert, and Laurie R Santos, a Yale academic whose course inspired Bristol's Science of Happiness course.

Surprising findings from the "Science of Happiness" course include:

- Talking to strangers makes us happier, despite a majority of us shying away from such encounters.
- Social media is not bad for everyone, but it can be bad for those who focus on their reputation.
- Loneliness impacts on our health by impairing our immune systems.
- Optimism increases life expectancy.
- Giving gifts to others activates the reward centers in our

brainâ€"often providing more of a happiness boost than spending money on oneself.

- Sleep deprivation impacts on how well we are liked by others.
- Walking in nature deactivates part of the brain related to negative ruminations, which are associated with depression.
- Kindness and [happiness](#) are correlated.

More information: Catherine Hobbs et al, Long-term analysis of a psychoeducational course on university students' mental well-being, *Higher Education* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s10734-024-01202-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01202-4)

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