

What we learned from teaching a course on the science of happiness

March 26 2024, by Sarah Jelbert and Bruce Hood



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When you deliver a university course that makes students happier, everybody wants to know what the secret is. What are your tips? What are your top ten recommendations? These are the most asked questions, as if there is some quick, surefire path to happiness.

The problem is that there are no life-transforming discoveries, because

most of what works has already been talked about. Social connection, mindfulness, gratitude letters, [acts of kindness](#), going for a walk in nature, [sleep hygiene](#), limiting [social media use](#). These are some of the 80 or so [psychological interventions](#) which have been shown to work to improve our well-being (to a lesser or greater extent).

But if we already know so much about what works, then why are we still fielding requests for top happiness tips?

The data tells us that students and young people today are increasingly unhappy, with national surveys finding well-being is lowest among the young [in the UK and the US](#) compared to other age groups.

It was for this reason we began teaching the science of happiness course at the University of Bristol in 2019—to counter some worrying downward trends. During the course, we teach lessons from [positive psychology](#) and create opportunities for students to put these lessons into practice.

Learning the science of happiness

We award credit based on engagement—an important component of not only education, but also getting the most out of life—rather than graded assessments. It would be ironic to talk about the problems of performance anxiety and student perfectionism only to then give our students a [graded exam](#).

Course credit without examination? That must be a breeze you might say. However, for many students, turning up on time to over 80% of lectures and tutorials, completing journal entries on a weekly basis and submitting a final group project turned out to be more of a challenge than they predicted.

Around 5% of students fail to meet the course demands each year, and have to complete a reassessment in the summer. Creating consistent positive habits in the face of all of life's other demands is not a trivial request.

Nevertheless, the science of happiness course is extraordinarily popular. It also appears to be effective. Every year we find increases of around 10%–15% on measures of students' mental well-being at the end of the course, compared to a [waiting-list control group](#).

However, we recently published the findings from [a study](#) that followed up with students one to two years after they had taken the science of happiness course, before they graduated. When we looked at the overall trends, students' initially elevated scores of happiness had largely returned to their original levels.

We were not dejected, though. One of the mechanisms we teach on the course is [hedonic adaptation](#): we get used to both good and bad things. Since humans have a brain wired to pay extra [attention to problems](#), it comes as no surprise that the initial well-being boost we created in the course disappeared as students returned to focusing on life's hassles.

However, we observed that not all students followed this pattern. Approximately half the cohort reported that they continued to regularly practice some of the things they had learnt, such as gratitude or mindfulness, many months or years after completing the course.

Although the students who no longer practiced the activities returned to their happiness baselines, on average, those who did keep up with at least some of the recommended activities showed no such drop. They maintained their elevated levels of well-being up to two years later.

In many ways, mental health is no different from physical health. Few

people expect to see long-lasting muscle gains after one trip to the gym. For the most part, we are begrudgingly aware that there are no shortcuts if you want to remain fit and healthy. You have to stick with the program.

New habits

The same applies to our happiness. Unless we keep working at it, the improvements are temporary. Indeed, if we did have to focus on just one top tip it might be to learn how to harness lessons from psychology to [build the better habits](#) we need for lasting change. For example, aiming for small incremental changes rather than an unsustainable overhaul of your whole life.

One thing we question is whether the [self-care](#) industry may be sending out the wrong message by telling people happiness is all about making yourself feel better. One of us, Bruce Hood, writes [in his new book](#), that becoming a happier person in the long term is less to do with focusing on ourselves, and much more to do with focusing on others.

Self-care may bring some short term benefits, but enriching the lives of others can offer well-being effects that are less susceptible to adaptation over time.

Ultimately, whatever methods or activities we choose to improve our well-being, we would do well to remember that [happiness](#) is always a work in progress.

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