

# Happiness Exercises

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What will literally raise our happiness levels? If you want to grow the happiness circuits in your brain, you do have to work. Just as if we were to exercise our physical muscles we would grow stronger, so mental exercises grow brain tissue.

When we raise our happiness level, we are increasing the energy level in the left prefrontal lobe of the brain. The more we do that, the more that area grows and develops. Three activities listed below will reliably raise your happiness levels:

(1) One study found that the “good deed diary” is quite successful. With this exercise, you will do anonymous good deeds and write about them. Both doing the deed and writing it down are vital to this. When you write about it, the good deed is replayed in the brain, a vital “mental training” technique.

Good deeds can be small or moderate in size. Don’t overdo it. Modesty and humility should allow you to do something small. You should be secretive and if you are “caught” by someone who knows you, just change the topic or avoid talking about it. Put a coin in a parking meter, for example. In the winter, sometimes you can clean the snow off a neighbor’s windshield. Weed a neighbor’s flower patch. Send an anonymous donation to a school in a poor neighborhood.

Some people in a line of cars at fast food restaurants have paid for the meal for the next car in line, or have left a bag of groceries at the front door of a needy family. One young man collected pencils and paper and notebooks for needy students.

(2) The “gratitude diary” has been quite helpful. Simply write down 3 - 5 things each day that you personally feel grateful for. Watch for things you that make you feel gratitude. Notice that gratitude can come in several flavors, such as gratitude for things *you* do, as well as things that happen to you. Gratitude toward yourself is important.

The “Gratitude Letter” is also very powerful. Write a letter of gratitude to someone you have not thanked for something significant; keep a copy in your diary, but give the original to the person. Laminate the letter or put it into a plastic sleeve for safekeeping. Read it to that person and leave it.

(3) Discover your key strengths and put energy into increasing those strengths. Chris Peterson and Marty Seligman have identified six areas of universal virtues. You can read about them at this website:

<http://www.psych.upenn.edu/seligman/taxonomy.htm> Seligman has developed a free assessment that tells you what are your personal areas of virtue. Look at this website for the VIA (Values in Action) assessment: <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/>. People who know what their strengths and virtues are, and who strive each day to exercise those, clearly raise their happiness level.

Again, it appears that those who *diary* their daily exercise of virtues increase their happiness the most. It appears that the use of diaries is one key to maximum mental growth.

(4) Connection with others is vital. How do you respond to those who are close to you? People can either respond positively or negatively. For example, if someone tells you some good news, you can be high or low in energy, and positive or negative. The high energy positive response would be to say how great that news is, doing it with enthusiasm. And the high energy negative response would be to be worried and concerned, pointing out the problems with the so-called good news. It is certainly no surprise that people with a high energy positive response are in the very happiest relationships. Simply training people to respond positively and with enthusiasm to other people has been shown to increase the happiness levels in them. In other words, when we practice being happy for others, it comes back to us, reflected. When we make them happy, we make ourselves happy.

What doesn’t work? Winning a contest, doing exciting and pleasurable things, making more money, buying new things make you temporarily happy, but then you rapidly drift back to your typical level. Instead, we want to develop exercises that permanently raise happiness. Generally you want to exercise any method you find works well to increase your happiness. These are simply three; there are many more. Seligman’s book, *Authentic Happiness*, has many wonderful resources.