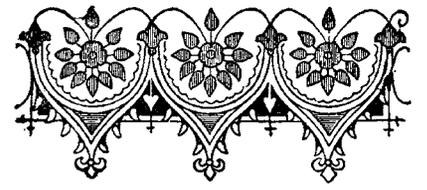


# Health & Wellness



## Creating Happiness



Dr. Kate Thomsen and Silky

Many of my friends, colleagues and patients have expressed unhappiness in the recent months. External events, specifically political events, have created fear, anxiety and a general dis-ease. Media is either focused on stories of international despair and devastation or on our country's fractured tribes of people who can't get along anymore. The relentless focus on all things negative is not serving us. Where is our happiness?

In 1776 Thomas Jefferson wrote that we are endowed by our creator with certain "unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." If it is our birthright, why does it seem so elusive at times?

Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, psychologist at University of California Riverside, posits that happiness levels are determined by genetics (50%), life circumstances (10%), and 40% is under our own self-control.

"Folks are usually about as happy as they make their minds up to be." —Abraham Lincoln.

Apparently it has been known for a while that we can change our perception of reality with our thoughts. I suppose we have to WANT to be happy as a first step. For some people that wanting may bring them into the doctor's office for an anti-depressant. These medications have their place but are way overprescribed as our current medical system thrives on quick fixes. In many people, these medications soothe an otherwise unbalanced life — enabling us to slack in our goals and respon-

sibilities for a healthy lifestyle. So what is a lifestyle that promotes happiness?

1. Getting adequate sleep — preferably eight hours, mostly uninterrupted: Sleep deprivation is associated with depression, higher perceived stress, weight gain, and increased risks for diabetes and stroke.

2. Eating fruits and vegetables: Research studies done all over the world have shown that eating fruits and vegetables daily is associated with the likelihood of being "very happy" regardless of other risk factors like smoking, exercise, body mass index and socioeconomic factors.

3. Adequate dietary protein: Since the brain chemicals responsible for mood and behaviors (neurotransmitters) are made of protein, it seems reasonable that having adequate protein intake would be important for one's emotional state. Additionally, digestive enzymes that allow nutrients to be absorbed from foods are also made from proteins. One can have a feed forward cycle of nutrient depletion in the absence of adequate dietary protein leading to imbalanced brain chemistry.

4. "They say a person needs just three things to be truly happy in this world: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for." — Tom Bodett. Supporting, loving relationships and a sense of purpose in our lives helps to distract us from ourselves and our preoccupations with unhappy thoughts. These 2 factors are also associated with longevity. Try volunteering for a non-profit organization.

5. Connect with nature: Taking time to "be" in the natural world, absorbing its sights and sounds, reflecting on its magnificence is a sure fire way to bring a smile to my face. Researchers have found that "nature relatedness" has a strong association with happiness, beyond what we get from human connections.

6. Be Here Now: "I, not events, have the power to make me happy or unhappy today. I can choose which it shall be. Yesterday is dead, tomorrow hasn't arrived yet. I have just one day, today, and I'm going to be happy in it." — Groucho Marx (He said it before Eckhart Tolle!!) Meditation, including mindfulness meditation, increases grey matter volume in the brain's right precuneus. Higher volume in this area has been associated with higher happiness scores. The left prefrontal cortex of the brain is another area associated with happiness. There is more activity detected in this region during meditation as well.

7. "Happiness is a warm puppy." — Charles M. Schulz. Loving and caring for a pet brings the owner many intangible rewards. Even a brief interaction with a pet prior to surgery lowered anxiety levels by 37%. Petting a dog has been shown to reduce blood pressure, lower the risk of allergies and asthma in children, decrease feelings of homesickness, stress and depression and increase feelings of connection to others and satisfaction with life. Pure unconditional love.....

8. Listen to music: Upbeat fast tempo music in a major key has been associated with higher happiness scores. Emotional reactions to music start as early as 5 months old and intensify as we grow older.

9. "Laughter is an instant vacation." — Milton Berle. Laughter stimulates endorphins, the brain's natural painkillers. A bout of hearty laughter puts us in a very relaxed state with lowered blood pressure and heart rate. And people with a strong sense of humor are more resilient in the face of stressors and are more likely to be in a positive mood.

10. Psychologist Martin Seligman summarizes the new field of Positive Psychology: People seem happiest when they have *Pleasure, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments.*

### Kate Thomsen MD, MPH

INTEGRATIVE AND HOLISTIC HEALTH AND WELLNESS

- "Children are happy because they don't have a file in their minds called "All the Things That Could Go Wrong." — Marianne Williamson
- "For every minute you are angry you lose sixty seconds of happiness." — Ralph Waldo Emerson
- "No medicine cures what happiness cannot." — Gabriel García Márquez
- "Learn to value yourself, which means: fight for your happiness." — Ayn Rand
- "With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy." — Max Ehrmann, *Desiderata: A Poem for a Way of Life*
- Happiness Day is March 20 every year
- Watch "SMILE – Happiness Day" (on You Tube)



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Additional articles on holistic health topics can be found on the website

In 2016 The World Happiness Report, published by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, ranked the United States as number 13 behind the Nordic countries, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Some of my friends may end up moving to a happier place. That might be Bhutan, where in 1972, the king stopped measuring the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and began measuring the Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI). Originally four pillars of GNH philosophy, Bhutan is now looking more specifically at eight general contributors to happiness—physical, mental and spiritual health; time-balance; social and community vitality; cultural vitality; education; living standards; good governance; and ecological vitality. Various countries and cities around the world have adopted some

of these ideas to help guide policy.

But happiness is still an inside job. By finding ways to bring out the happiness within, this positive energy becomes a force in the world — people notice. They smile back. One at a time, small things change. "Whoever is happy will make others happy." — Anne Frank.

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