

Seven ways to make yourself happier

We asked positive psychology experts to share their favourite insights into what makes us unhappy, and how we can bring more joy into our lives.

1 Be kind to yourself.

Self-criticism has its uses; on the whole, it's better to be a bit too self-critical rather than not self-critical enough! But when that voice in your head goes on and on about your failings, you do need to challenge it. Let's face it, if someone else were as constantly and savagely critical of our behaviour as we ourselves can be, we'd tell them to back off! Remind yourself that you're doing your best and you're only human. And tell that voice that you'd be able to take its criticisms more seriously if it had ever acknowledged some of your good qualities!

Be kinder to others, too. It's easier to forgive if you remember that generally people 'know not what they do'. We often judge people harshly to make ourselves feel better, but it actually sucks all the joy out of our relationships.

2 Don't compare your insides with other people's outsides.

This is often one of the main reasons we're so hard on ourselves; we think other people are managing their lives so much better than we are. But you never know what's really going on behind the persona that other people project, and you've probably seen the shock others often show if you reveal to them how you really feel inside. Appearances can be so deceptive!



You might think all those confident people in that meeting at work wouldn't be singing your praises now if they'd known how anxious you were feeling at the time, after a sleepless night worrying about it all. Well, what if those other people were feeling exactly the same – would you have known?!

3 Happy people don't have more. They just appreciate what they have.

Consumer capitalism encourages us to focus on what we don't have. It can be good to have our expectations raised, but there is a formula that states that happiness = reality minus expectations. If constant advertising makes us wish we had things that we have no realistic chance of getting, the end result is unhappiness.

They say you don't miss what you don't know. If only you hadn't seen that sold-out pasta dish on the restaurant's 'Specials' board! It wouldn't have occurred to you then to feel dissatisfied with the dish you ordered! Adverts like to tell us what we're missing and the satisfaction it would bring us if only we had it. It might, but then again, it might not. Remember, it's all imaginary; don't let it distract you from the pleasures of the real things you do have.



4 Stop procrastinating.

How many things are there in the back of your mind that you need to do, but haven't done? How long have you been meaning to fix that broken door, or reply to that email? Notice what a nagging burden these 'must-do's' are at some level. No time to do them? But how long would some of them really take?! Been too tired? Well, feel how tiring it is to have them hanging over you, and remember the energy lift you get when you finally cross something off your do-it list. Just do it!

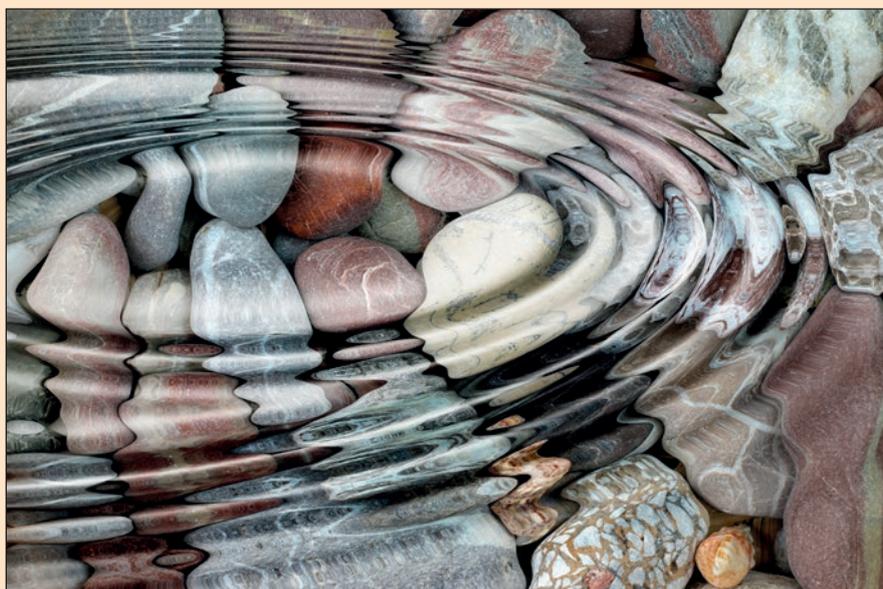


Are there big changes in life you've been putting off? Maybe you're afraid you'd regret them, but we regret failing to do things more than we regret having done them; at least we then learn from things going wrong, which is better than agonizing over what might have happened if we had done something. And anyway, our worries about negative outcomes are usually exaggerated. Let yourself be pessimistic, and imagine the worst that could happen. Wouldn't you get over it?

5 Where is your mind?

How much of the time is our mind focused on the past or future, rather than the here and now? Even looking forward to something a lot, which seems positive, can take us away from the potential happiness of the present moment. As the musician Hélène Grimaud puts it, 'Waiting for anything to happen, worrying that something may, or wishing that something had not happened, or will not happen, steals from every precious moment we are living in now ... and now ... and now ... forever.'

Try a simple mindfulness exercise for becoming present. Sit upright and relax your body, from your feet to your head. Then, listen to the sounds around you. You'll find yourself either listening to the constant chatter in your head instead, busy with the past and future, or really listening to the sounds and becoming still, and present.



6 Life isn't meant to be easy.

People often complain about their problems as if they shouldn't exist, as if having a problem is a reason to be unhappy. The Road Less Travelled, by M. Scott Peck, begins with the line, 'Life is difficult.' It sounds gloomy, but Peck explains that once we truly accept the fact that life is difficult, it stops being so, because we see problems as natural and actually as opportunities for growth. It's the people who won't accept this that make their lives miserable. As Peck says: 'Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead, they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties, as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy.'



7 P.S. If you get plenty of exercise, it'll make you feel great!

