



# The Road Map to Happiness

*Expert advice on how to find your way to the state of happiness*

By Kristin Vukovic

From Pharrell Williams' chart-topping song, "Happy," to Gretchen Rubin's best-selling book, *The Happiness Project* (Harper Paperbacks), it's no wonder that happiness is on America's mind. We struggle to define it and go to great lengths to achieve it. But in today's world, happiness often seems elusive.

It can be challenging and, like most things, requires work. Researchers say our genes determine approximately 50 percent of our difference in happiness levels. Circumstances, including income, social status, location and age account for an astonishingly low 10 percent. That

leaves 40 percent, which is comprised of intentional activity—actions that you choose to do.

Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D., and author of *A Happy You* (Morgan James Publishing), offers an A (appreciation) through Z (ZZZ: get your sleep) guide on ways to make your life happier and healthier. "Happiness, in my definition, is a state of mind," Dr. Lombardo told me. "It's finding more positives than negatives. It's living a life of purpose, meaning and connection. Gratitude has become a really big thing for me—it's so powerful. Research shows gratitude decreases the activity of stress in your brain."

I had previously kept a gratitude journal, but over the years, I'd let it slip. Inspired by Dr. Lombardo's "Appreciation" chapter, which emphasizes being grateful for what we have, and appreciating the small things, I decided to revisit the concept by sending my husband a short "gratitude email" every day. "I'm grateful for our furry child, who despite keeping us up all night with his coughing, makes our lives richer," I wrote on Day Three, referencing our sick dog. "And I'm grateful for our nice bed, which I might return to later today." My husband responded, "I'm liking these notes!" He also mentioned that I'd been noticeably happier over the past few days. It made sense: I'd been focusing on happiness; therefore, I became happier.

As Buddha said, "What we think, we become."

Meditation, a conscious effort to change the way the mind works, is a powerful tool that can help cultivate genuine happiness. Sharon Salzberg, author of *Real Happiness at Work* (Workman Publishing Company), has taught meditation to thousands of people around the world for nearly 40 years. For the majority of Americans, work occupies a large portion of our day and it is a significant source of stress—so it is a prime place to practice mindfulness. Salzberg stresses the importance of breathing, even if it means putting a few minutes on the calendar before every meeting for a short follow-the-breath break. One of her Tibetan meditation counselors advised, "Short moments many times," as a way to make progress in meditation. Returning to the awareness of our breath can help us achieve peace in the present moment.

While many Americans lead complicated, hectic lives, sometimes we need a reality check to remove what Dr. Lombardo calls our "negativity blinders." She uses the example of an impoverished man from a third-world country accompanying us for a day, and what he would appreciate that we take for granted (clean drinking water, a closet full of clothes, the freedom to choose our own friends and follow our dreams). In the documentary *Happy*, director Roko Belic visits India and interviews people who live in shantytowns. "Sometimes we eat only rice with salt but we are still happy," says Manoj Singh, a rickshaw driver in Kolkata. "My neighbors are good. We stay together and that makes us happy." Research shows that close interpersonal ties and strong social support are crucial components for happiness.

My husband was born and raised in India, and we go there during the holidays to visit his family. Every year, I am astonished by how happy people are, those who seemingly have "nothing" by Western standards. I am humbled by their gratitude. People living on medians between two busy roads in New Delhi smile at each other and cook meals together over an open fire. They are grateful for their friends, family and any food they can find. They are probably even grateful for the tiny sliver of land they call home.

Pharrell Williams sings, "Clap along if you know what happiness is to you." Once the core elements that make for a happy life are achieved, it is a journey to find our own rhythm and discover what makes each of us truly content.



## Top Five Rituals for Happiness

Janet Bray Attwood and Chris Attwood, authors of *Your Hidden Riches* (Harmony), offered these tips to help make "happy" a daily experience.

- 1. GET OUTSIDE** Producer and reality TV star Simon Cowell climbs a tree every day. Find something that is fun, gets you out in the fresh air and connects you with nature.
- 2. REINFORCE YOUR OWN SELF-WORTH** Lady Gaga struggled with self-esteem issues, so now she starts her day with five minutes of compassionate self-love and gratitude. Use that time in the morning to rediscover and remember what's wonderful and lovable about YOU.
- 3. SET A MORNING INTENTION AND AN EVENING REVIEW** You're more powerful than you believe. Ben Franklin awoke each morning and asked himself, "What good will I do today?" Before retiring at night he'd ask, "What good did I do today?"
- 4. PRACTICE DAILY MEDITATION OR QUIET TIME** When Oprah learned Transcendental Meditation, she was so impressed with the power of this simple 20-minute, twice-daily ritual that she paid for the entire staff at Harpo Studios to learn it. Try giving yourself 20 minutes of meditation or quiet time without any phone calls, text messages or emails.
- 5. CREATE YOUR HAPPINESS CIRCLE** Researchers from the Framingham Heart Study discovered that there's a direct correlation between a person's happiness level and that of the people they spend the most time around. So why not create a weekly ritual of getting together with the happiest people you know?