



## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

# WHY BE HAPPY?

## SCIENCE WEIGHS IN

BY MOLLY ROSE TEUKE

**W**e think angels fly because they have wings. “Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly.”

— G.K. Chesterton, “Orthodoxy”

There’s so much in life that can make us happy ... a great job, a promotion, the right romance, hitting our ideal weight. Maybe so, but Shawn Achor has a pertinent “what if” question.

What if we have the equation backwards? What if being on the happy side of life precedes these outcomes, not the other way around?

In his 2010 book, “The Happiness Advantage,” Achor, a leading thinker (and doer) in the field of human potential, makes a compelling case that the causal direction does not run from success to happiness, but from happiness to success. “[We assume] that our external world is predictive of our happiness levels. In reality ... 90 percent of your long-term happiness is predicted not by the external world, but by the way your brain processes the world. It’s not necessarily the reality that shapes us, but the lens through which your brain views the world that shapes your reality. ...”

You know that feeling you get when your day starts off just right, everything is going your way and you feel like a million bucks? That feeling has spawned a new science called positive psychology (positivity, for short). Supported by neuroscience, positive psychology researchers are tracking what happens in (and to) our brains when we’re feeling happy.

### THE BENEFITS

The Mayo Clinic offers an impressive list of specific health benefits of being positive: increased life span, lower rates of depression, lower levels of distress, greater resistance to the common cold, better psychological and physical well-being, reduced risk of death from cardiovascular disease. They also mention better coping skills during hardships and times of stress.

Being positive has a big impact at work, too. When you’re happy, you engage more parts of your brain responsible for creative thinking. Your visual cortex takes in a wider field of vision; you literally see more. That makes you a better problem solver.

### THE HITCH

Yet, feeling happy doesn’t always come naturally. Neuroscience has demonstrated that we humans are hard-wired to pay five times more attention to negatives than to positives. The impact of a negative experience hits us faster and lingers for five times longer than a positive experience. That instinct served us well for survival, because it helped us learn to avoid negative or dangerous experiences. In today’s relatively safe world, giving more emotional weight to an insult than to a compliment releases unnecessary cortisol in the brain, which has all kinds of damaging effects on our brains and our bodies.

### POSITIVITY: WHAT IS IT AND WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

Being positive isn’t the same as being disengaged or mindlessly cheerful. Positivity is about transcending circumstances and events to engage in emotionally healthy responses to life’s little moments. It’s about making a choice in how we respond to experiences that might otherwise trigger negative emotions.

“Whether we seek it or not, negativity has a way of finding us,” writes positive psychologist Barbara Fredrickson in “Positivity.” But we have a choice in our personal outlook. “Positive emotions — like all emotions — arise from how [we] interpret events and ideas as they unfold,” she says. “Positivity ... literally gives you a new outlook on life.”

### HOW DO I GET THERE?

It’s possible to systematically develop the skill of tinting your personal lens a more generous shade of rose. It starts with making different choices. First, consider how you might avoid the usual negative influences in your life. You don’t need to be friends with a neighbor or colleague who’s a chronic naysayer. You don’t have to watch the nightly news, or follow every horrific story that makes the rounds on the internet. Instead, make it a point to purposely focus on kindness and uplifting experiences.

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Second, you can tell yourself a different personal story. When you do have to confront something that stirs negative emotions (and who doesn't?), it's not helpful to spin an elaborate yarn about all the possible (and often far-fetched) negative implications. When you disappoint yourself, instead of dwelling on it, take a moment to bring to mind the small accomplishments that might tip the balance toward feeling good, not bad, about yourself.

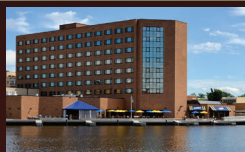
Third, pay attention to the things you enjoy in your day or your week, no matter how small, and make a point of consciously savoring them. It helps to start a simple journal to capture those things that go right in your day and those things that bring you little moments of happiness. It doesn't have to be complicated — a few bullet points jotted down daily can make all the difference. **WM**

## RESOURCES:

- “The Happiness Advantage” ©2010 Shawn Achor, and his amusing 12-minute TED talk, which makes me laugh no matter how often I see it: <http://bit.ly/WbBDuv>.
- “Positivity” ©2009 by Barbara L. Fredrickson.
- “Stumbling on Happiness” ©2006 Daniel Gilbert.
- “Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life” ©1990 Martin Seligman.

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Molly Rose Teuke isn't a neuroscientist, but she plays one in her dreams. She speaks frequently on *How to Get Your Brain on Your Side®*. She also coaches clients globally, using a brain-based approach taught by the NeuroLeadership Institute, a world leader in creating corporate coaching cultures. You can reach her at [mollyrose@mollyrosecoraching.com](mailto:mollyrose@mollyrosecoraching.com).