

The Happiness Factor—Scientists know that positive people are happier, period. Tapping into your bright side is easier than you'd guess.

By Nancy Kalish, Prevention



Joie de vivre. We all know people whose engagement with life can only be described as joyful. Fittingly, nature rewards these happy-go-lucky types: Being optimistic in middle age increases life span by at least 7.5 years—even after accounting for age, gender, socioeconomic status, and physical health, according to a large Yale University survey. What's behind their hardiness: They minimize the destructive effects of stress.

"Of course, optimists get stressed," says David Snowden, a professor of neurology at the University of Kentucky who studies aging. "But they automatically turn the response off much more quickly and return to a positive mental and physical state."

Here are four habits that longevity experts say are at the heart of a sunny disposition—and that you can adopt, too.

1. THEY WORK THEIR CELL PHONES

Perhaps your neighborhood gossip is on to something: All that chitchat keeps her plugged into a thriving social network—and people who socialize at least once a week are more likely to live longer, keep their brains sharp, and prevent heart attacks. One reason: "Just talking on the phone to a friend has the immediate effect of lowering your blood pressure and cortisol levels," says Teresa Seeman, PhD, a professor of medicine and epidemiology at UCLA.

"Our research shows that having good long-term relationships provides as many physical benefits as being active or a nonsmoker." Make the effort to connect with the friends you already have. Call now, and before you hang up, schedule a lunch date—personal contact is even better.

2. THEY EXPRESS GRATITUDE (WITHIN REASON)

Buoy your spirits by recording happy events on paper, your computer, or a PDA. People who write about all the things they are thankful for are optimistic about the upcoming week and more satisfied overall with their lives, according to a University of California, Davis, study. They also feel physically stronger.

"It's hard to be bitter and mad when you're feeling grateful," says Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, author of the upcoming book, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want.* But don't overdo it. Women who kept a gratitude journal only once a week got a bigger boost in happiness than those asked to record their good fortune three times a week. Find the frequency that works for you - giving thanks shouldn't feel like a chore.

3. THEY'RE RANDOMLY KIND

Do you perform five acts of kindness in any given day? That's the number of good deeds that boosts your sense of well-being and happiness, according to research by Lyubomirsky. Your karmic acts can be minor and unplanned - giving up your seat on the bus; buying an extra latte to give to a

coworker. You'll find that the payback greatly exceeds the effort. "You see how much you're appreciated and liked by others," she says. Be sure to keep up the good work: When Lyubomirsky asked her study subjects to space their five good deeds over the course of a week, the actions started to seem routine and lost some of their therapeutic effects. But don't fret if you can't make the quota daily. "Being spontaneously kind also delivers rewards," she says.

4. THEY REAPPRAISE THEIR LIVES

Yes, you can rewrite history—and feel better about yourself in the bargain. Set aside a little time each week to write about or record—or even just mentally revisit—an important event in your past. Reflecting on the experience can reshape your perception of it, as well as your expectations for the future, says Robert N. Butler, MD, president of the International Longevity Center-USA in New York City. When creating this "life review," you get to list all your accomplishments—an instant self-esteem booster. Organize your historical review by epochs: your postcollege years, early marriage, career, motherhood. Subdivide each section into triumphs, missteps, and lessons for the future.

It's helpful to look at the bad times as well as the good. Perhaps now that a few years have passed, you'll be able to see how that breakup or failed job opportunity opened other doors and finally forgive yourself—and your ex-boyfriend or would-be boss. "Even if a memory is painful, it's good to work through it," says Butler. "If you can come to terms with past events, you'll be better able to handle tough times down the road." So be honest, but also go easy on yourself. Remember: You are the heroine in this tale.

The Best Kind of Pessimist

If you're an irritable sort who thinks of your eternally cheery neighbor as a delusional Pollyanna, are you doomed to poor health? Not if you're an active pessimist, a feisty spirit who loves to complain, criticize, and generally mix it up with others—but then takes action. "Active pessimists do battle with life. Being that engaged is actually good for them and can provide some of the same benefits that optimists enjoy," says Toni Antonucci, PhD, director of the Life Course Development Program of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

Passive pessimists, on the other hand, feel paralyzed by gloom, have given up on themselves and life, and will likely live fewer years because of their bummed attitude.