Health and happiness

Promoting happiness in ourselves and others

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We all know that being happy makes us feel good but did you know that the social movement Action for Happiness has brought together compelling evidence that happier people tend to have better overall health and live longer than their less happy peers?

Being happy is also contagious - if we're happy, those around us will be happier, too - and we are more likely to be engaged and productive at work, to volunteer in the local community and be morally and financially responsible.

Yet before COVID-19 had even reached our shores, a number of recent reports were already suggesting that many of us living in the UK are not as happy as we once were or would like to be, and particularly in comparison to those living in Finland and other Nordic countries, which dominated the top five spots in the 2020 World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al, 2020).

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) has been measuring the UK’s wellbeing since 2011 and for the first time this February, reported a significant fall in both our life satisfaction and ‘feeling that things done in life are worthwhile’ (ONS, 2020). Average anxiety ratings also remained high, with around 10.6 million people reporting high anxiety. Suggested reasons for these statistics include economic and employment concerns surrounding Brexit, along with widespread media coverage of business failures, including Debenhams going into administration and Boots and Marks & Spencer among those announcing store closures (Booth, 2020; Elliott, 2020).

The Kindness Report published by Action for Happiness in December last year also revealed 60% of us feel that people in Britain have become less caring over the last 10 years, even though 79% of us believe that doing kind things for others makes us feel happier (Action for Happiness, 2019).

In some respects, the findings of these public opinion-based reports come as no big surprise, because according to Vanessa King, Action for Happiness’ positive psychology expert and author of 10 Keys to Happier Living, our brains have a natural tendency to notice and focus on the negative. ‘In psychology there’s a phrase that “bad is stronger than good”. From an evolutionary point of view, our brains are hardwired to notice what’s wrong and we tend to experience unpleasant emotions more readily and strongly than positive ones. This kept us safe when, as a species, we were hunter-gatherers, but it doesn’t help so much in our lives today.’

Of course, good things DO happen to us, on a daily basis – it’s simply that for many of us these things pass us by unnoticed, and our brains have a natural tendency to notice and focus on the negative. ‘At Action for Happiness, we have distilled thousands of research papers into our 10 Keys to Happier Living,’ says Vanessa. ‘Each of the 10 Keys are things that we can do that can have the most influence over how we feel. The first five focus on our outside world, while the remaining five focus on our inner world. But it’s a menu, not a prescription or list that has to be worked through in a certain order. What works for each of us will be different and we all need different things at different times.’

The majority of our members will already be doing a number of these things, but there may be other areas you and your clients might like to explore...

**In pursuit of happiness**

‘Many factors influence how happy we are,’ Vanessa told the FHT. ‘Some of these we simply can’t change, such as our genes and our upbringing. But providing we have enough to eat and somewhere safe to live, a significant proportion of our happiness comes down to our thoughts and actions. And this is a good thing, because these are things that we have some control over. Better still, a fundamental ingredient in human psychological wellbeing is a sense of agency – a sense of control. By taking any positive action, no matter how small, we can start to fuel and help sustain our happiness.’

So how do we go about improving the way we think and act in order to make us happier? And how does being happier make us healthier?

‘At Action for Happiness, we have identified 10 Keys to Happier Living’

**Giving – do things for others**

Giving to others doesn’t have to involve money. It can be as simple as a smile or giving someone a moment of your attention, or your time, care or skills. When we give to others, without expecting anything in return, not only is it nice for the person on the receiving end, it releases endorphins and activates the reward centres in our brain, as if we are getting a gift or reward of some kind. This makes us feel happier and even more inclined to give again. Whether it’s a random act of kindness or planned voluntary work, studies have shown that different forms of giving can help to increase our longevity.

**The GREAT DREAM - 10 Keys to Happier Living**

1. **Be kind to yourself**

2. **Be actively grateful**

3. **Be aware of your own emotions**

4. **Be active**

5. **Be in control of your time and money**

6. **Be connected**

7. **Be positive**

8. **Be a contributor**

9. **Be a role model**

10. **Be mentally healthy**
**Wellbeing**

**Exercising – look after your body**

Being active isn’t just good for our physical health; it makes us happier, too. Dr John Ratey, a Harvard University professor of psychiatry, has described aerobic exercise as ‘Miracle Gro for the brain’. This is because just 20 minutes of aerobic exercise induces beneficial responses in the brain, including an increase in brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein associated with cognitive improvement and the alleviation of depression and anxiety. Ratey’s research has shown that children who exercise before school have improved academic performance, while aerobic exercise helps adults to think more clearly and effectively (Ratey and Loehr, 2011).

**Awareness – live mindfully**

Mindfulness has been shown to help people manage pain and reduce blood pressure, anxiety and depression. In some situations it can also benefit the immune system and improve certain skin conditions. Recent research has shown that regular mindfulness meditation class can lead to structural brain changes including increased grey-matter density in the hippocampus, known to be important for learning and memory, and in structures associated with self-awareness, compassion and introspection (Action for Happiness, 2020).

**Trying out – keep learning new things**

‘As well as exercise helping our brains, it’s good to exercise our brains, too,’ says Vanessa. ‘Getting curious about new things can be a rich source of enjoyment and fulfilment throughout our lives. Learning as we get older is also a great way of keeping our brains functioning as we age. Trying new experiences can expand our sense of time and it can also feed our creativity. New ideas come from connecting seemingly disparate things in our minds, so the more diverse information we feed our brain, the more we can make different connections, which fuels our creative thinking.’

**Direction – have goals for the future**

Feeling good about the future is important for our happiness and setting goals is a way of turning our values and dreams into reality. ‘It’s not just achieving our goals that influences our happiness,’ Vanessa advises. ‘Planning and working towards our goals can also bring a sense of fulfilment. And it’s not just about big life goals – micro goals matter too, because being able to identify that you have made progress is an important psychological need. If the micro goal links back to our bigger aims and priorities, then all the better.’ What’s important is to choose goals that relate to something you want to achieve and having the ability to pre-empt and resolve any problems that arise.

**Resilience – find ways to bounce back**

Life is full of ups and downs. We all experience stress, loss, failure or trauma. But how we respond to these events has a big impact on our health and wellbeing. ‘There will always be times when we can’t choose what happens to us but, in principle, we can choose how we respond to any given situation. Recent research has found that we can learn how to be more resilient (Rivchik V and Shatte A, 2003) and the real plus is that all of the other nine keys to living a happier life contribute to our resilience.’

**Emotions – look for what’s good**

Research shows that regularly experiencing positive emotions – like joy, gratitude, contentment, inspiration and pride – creates an ‘upward spiral’ helping us to build our resources and become more resilient (Action for Happiness, 2020b). While we need to be realistic about life’s ups and downs, it’s helpful to focus on the good aspects of any situation. Drip feeding ourselves positive emotions can help us buffer against stress and if we experience more positive emotions than negative ones, the scales will tip in our favour and we will feel happier – something known as the ‘positive emotion feedback loop’. Positive emotions don’t need to be huge sources of joy. Sporting a robin in your garden or noticing a pleasant smell all count.

**Acceptance – be comfortable with who you are**

‘No-one is perfect. It’s important to accept who you are, warts and all, and not least because many experts believe that you cannot be truly compassionate to others until you are compassionate to yourself.’ We all have strengths and weaknesses,’ Vanessa explains. ‘Studies show that if you can identify your strengths and use those in new ways, this will make you happier, it can make you healthier and more effective at work. Using our strengths is the biggest potential we have to counteracting and achieving a sense of meaning. Notice your self-talk too. If you have a harsh inner critic, can you change it into a wise coach?’

**Meaning – be a part of something bigger**

‘Feeling that what we do contributes to something bigger helps to improve our health and wellbeing and builds our resilience,’ says Vanessa. ‘But finding meaning isn’t always easy. For some, it’s about finding a job or activity that you are passionate about or having a deep connection to the natural world. Our friends, family and community are also sources of meaning. But giving to others – the first of our 10 Keys to Happier Living – is a great place to start if you are struggling’

**Empowering clients**

‘Having a sense of control over our own health – acting coping – is very empowering. If your client is already doing things to help improve their health and wellbeing, be sure to praise and encourage this. Sharing self-help tips and techniques will also help to create a sense of self-efficacy in your client.’

**References**

For full references, go to fh.org.uk/IT-132-happiness

For more information... Visit actionforhappiness.org where there is a wealth of different resources, courses and events that focus on improving the nation’s happiness. There is also more information about Vanessa and her book, 10 Keys to Happier Living, which is a practical guide to the science of happiness and full of activities to try (available from Amazon).