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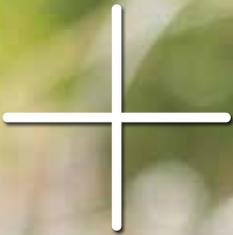
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Issue 132

## *Health and happiness*

Promoting happiness  
in ourselves  
and others



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# Health and happiness

We take a look at what makes us happy and how we can promote happiness in ourselves and others, with top tips from leading positive psychology expert, Vanessa King.

**W**e 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, overshadowed by the seemingly 'bad stuff'. Yet when we notice the good things, even if these are tiny, it can have psychological benefits. The good news is that if we are struggling to tune into our more smiley side, research now shows that happiness, compassion and kindness are skills that can be learned and enhanced, thanks to the neuroplasticity of our brains.

But what determines how happy we feel in the first place?

## 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 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...

## The GREAT DREAM - 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 →

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**TED TALK – ROBERT WALDINGER**

*'What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness'*

*Robert is the fourth director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which has tracked the lives of 724 adult men for more than 75 years, from two very different socioeconomic backgrounds. In this 12-minute talk he reveals that the key to health and happiness is not money, fame or success, as many people think. It's forming strong, meaningful relationships. Visit [ted.com](http://ted.com) and search for Robert Waldinger*

(Brown et al, 2003); reduce cognitive decline (Dunn et al, 2011), blood pressure (Whillians et al, 2016), and symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression (Lyubomirsky, 2008); and improve emotional wellbeing and sense of self-worth (Luks, 1988).



**Relating – together we're stronger**

'As human beings we are social creatures and have evolved to live in social groups,' says Vanessa. 'Whether we are introvert or extrovert, we all need to feel connected to people. If we don't feel connected to others – if we feel lonely for prolonged periods of time - that can actually increase our chances of depression and be as bad for our physical health as smoking or obesity.'

Research has shown that having strong connections with family, friends, colleagues and the community increases our immunity to infection, lowers our risk of heart disease and reduces mental decline as we get older (Dickerson and Zoccola, 2009). Research also shows that it's

the quality of our relationships that matter most (Uchino, 1996).

**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 an eight-week 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. 'Being 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 (Reivich K and Shatté A, 2003) and the real plus is that all of the other nine keys to living a happier life outlined by Vanessa and Action for Happiness 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 ratio.' And positive emotions don't need to be huge sources of joy. Spotting 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, not only will this make you happier, it can make you healthier and more effective at work. Using our strengths is the biggest potential we have to contributing to the world 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 and beyond ourselves is an important ingredient in happiness, as it improves wellbeing and happiness 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.'

**Bringing happiness into the treatment room**

We asked Vanessa to share with us some tips on how FHT members could help to improve their clients' happiness, as well as their own...

**Helping clients identify 'what's right'**

'If a client has a long-term condition, and particularly if pain is involved, this is likely to be at the forefront of their mind. As I mentioned earlier, that's because our brains are hardwired to focus on what's wrong, so a great way to help your client is to try and encourage them to also focus on something that's right. You could ask them about any positive changes they have noticed since their last treatment (or highlight this to your client, if you use MYMOP or another patient-reported outcome measure). As human beings, we like to see progress.

'You could also encourage them to keep a journal, where each day they jot down three things that have brought them pleasure or enjoyment, or they are grateful for. This isn't to diminish the seriousness of their condition, but just to help them identify those things that are OK or going well. Research shows that noticing what is good in life – no matter how small – can have a positive impact on our wellbeing and reduces our propensity to feel down.'

**Empowering clients**

'Having a sense of control over our own health – active 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.'

**Anchoring client goals**

'If you are setting your client a goal, such as doing a set of exercises at home between treatments, get them to visualise when and where they will do these exercises – it could increase their chances of doing it by up to 50%. Ask them what might get in the way of doing their exercises (getting up late) and how will they will overcome this (writing



themselves a note to do the exercises when they get home). But make sure they aren't too harsh on themselves if they don't manage to achieve their goal. We're only human and our 'inner critic' can trigger our brain to go into 'fight or flight' mode, in the same way as an external threat. Help them to think about turning their inner critic into a wise, kind coach.'

**Be compassionate to yourself**

'Compassion is not just about being empathetic. It's noticing when someone is suffering and having the courage to alleviate that. We're often good at doing it for others, but not for ourselves. If there is something on your to-do-list that will improve your health and happiness, don't put it off because there are 'more important things' on the list. Treat yourself as you would treat others.'

**Micro breaks**

'Remember, even the smallest thoughts and actions can make a big difference. Try to take micro breaks throughout the day. Just a minute or two of mindful practice or mind wondering has been shown to improve wellbeing, and particularly when you are really struggling – it will help to improve your performance and concentration levels.'

**References**

For full references, go to [fht.org.uk/IT-132-happiness](http://fht.org.uk/IT-132-happiness)



**For more information...**

Visit [actionforhappiness.org](http://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).