

# The Science of...

# HAPPINESS



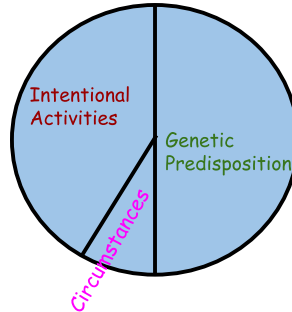
## Great Valley Academy Superintendent's Campaign 2022-23

The 'pursuit of happiness' was proclaimed as a divinely ordained human right over 200 years ago. That said, the mode of pursuit and method of attainment have been debated for just as long. Even so, there are indisputable facts regarding happiness that have been researched, are evidence-based and have been documented in academia and beyond. What follows is a very brief and nowhere near exhaustive list of what we know about achieving and maintaining an enduring sense of personal well-being.

In 2014, a couple of UC Berkeley psychologists developed a course aimed at teaching students to be happy in just 8 weeks. Thousands have taken the course (which is still available to audit on edX) providing some solid data on healthy exercises that promote a sense of happiness. Those that participated in these 5 activities saw their positive feelings increase each week. They reported feeling less sadness, stress, loneliness, anger and fear, while at the same time experiencing more amusement, enthusiasm and affection, as well as a greater sense of community. During the course, students' happiness and life satisfaction increased by about 5%. And that boost remained even four months after the course ended. These practices include the following:

1. Enhancing social connectedness
2. Performing random acts of kindness
3. Expressing gratitude
4. Practicing mindfulness
5. Embracing self-compassion

To explore why these are important and dispel some common misconceptions about happiness, we once again need to turn to the data. One of these is that happiness is predetermined or unalterable. *"There's a misconception that happiness is built-in and that we can't change it,"* says Laurie Santos, a professor of psychology at Yale University who teaches a free Coursera class called The Science of Well-Being. This appears to be a fallacy to at least some degree. In a 2005 paper published in the Review of General Psychology, researchers suggested that while 50% of your happiness is determined by your genes and 10% by your life circumstances, **40% is determined by your daily activities.** Known as the Happiness Pie Chart in research circles, this graphic illustrates that at least some of your happiness is within your control.



Another misconception is that happiness is the same as a *consistently positive emotional state*. *"Being happy doesn't mean you feel pure joy and cheerfulness every hour of every day."* Emiliana Simon-Thomas, Director, Berkeley Greater Good Science Center is also the co-creator/instructor of the previously mentioned U.C. Berkeley class tracking intentional activities aimed at impacting happiness. She says that humans aren't designed that way. *"We think happiness is like a Facebook (IG for the millennials) reel of vacations and achievements and checkboxes for life goals,"* Simon-Thomas says. Essential elements of emotional life include: setbacks, problems, loss of loved ones, etc. Happiness as a more overarching quality of life.

Here's a sad statistic: **45%** of people say they *haven't felt true happiness for more than two years*, according to a recent Oracle report that surveyed more than 12,000 people. Perhaps worse, **25%** say *don't know*, or *have forgotten*, what it means to feel truly happy. There are, in fact, several science-backed methods that can help you boost your own feelings of contentment.

## 5 Healthy Exercises

### 1. Enhance Social Connections

- Biggest factor affecting happiness
- Harvard Study of over 80 years
- Quality over quantity (relationships)
- *“Good relationships actually keep our bodies healthier and help us live longer.”*  
(Robert Waldinger, Director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development)
- It takes work, intentionality

### 2. Perform Random Acts of Kindness

- Deliberately do small things for others
- *“Varying those acts you do for others has a longer-term effect on your own happiness.”* (Professor Sonja Lyubomirsky at UC Riverside)
- Natural prosocial behavior elicits the basic human impulse to help others
- You feel good that you made another person feel good

### 3. Express Gratitude

- Write down three things you're grateful for each day
- Large or small, notebook or app
- Retrain your mind to focus on the good, the positive(s)
- Count small blessings

### 4. Practice Mindfulness

- Not necessarily the app
- *“Don't judge your emotions, but recognize them.”* (Elizabeth Dunn, psychology professor at the University of British Columbia)
- Be present

### 5. Embrace Self-Compassion

- Can be challenging, especially because western culture has adopted self-criticism as a valued practice
- Don't future-trip, nor get stuck in the past
- Inner voice should be warm and supportive, not hostile or overly critical
- Treat yourself as you would a friend or family member

## Caveats

### 1. Race in Research

- Diversifying research populations gives us a more accurate understanding of humanity as a whole, which could help us learn more about the foundations of happiness for everyone. One of the basic tenets of biological science is that race doesn't play a role in how the brain responds to certain stimuli. However, researchers are also only beginning to learn more about epigenetics – an emerging field of science that studies how trauma may activate certain genes, and how people potentially pass those genes down to their children. Regular microaggressions and other challenges that people of color face could change the conditions of happiness for those groups (Waldinger). *"The social experiences associated with racial identity can give rise to differences in our psychological experiences,"* says Steven Roberts, author of the study published this June and an assistant professor of psychology at Stanford.

### 2. Professional Support

- Remember, these exercises are not replacements for professional help, when appropriate, but can be beneficial supplements. If you have been diagnosed with a clinical mental health concern, check with your physician, therapist or counselor before delving too deep into these practices. If you have PTSD, proceed with caution or check with your doctor first, as mindfulness exercises may be triggering, experts say.

## Superintendent's Happiness Campaign



1. Superintendent Anderson will recognize and acknowledge integration of healthy exercises embedded within GVA curriculum and instruction.
2. He will provide regular updates on the GVA website's scrolling visual banner, the Superintendent's page under the **About** header on GVA's website and via ParentSquare.
3. He will maintain a staff and parent pages of strategic/success stories - opportunities to see this work in action at school, at home and in the community.
4. He will conserve a hyper-linked bank of *Tips, Tools and Ideas* that others may contribute to or borrow from.
5. He will teach and/or co-teach lessons throughout the year in GVA classrooms.
6. He will collect data through surveys, submitted stories and conversations.

[More on this research](#)