

KEVIN LETZ

HAPPY & WELL

Evidence Based Practices for
Happiness & Well-Being

Happy & Well

Evidence Based Practices for
Happiness

Dr. Kevin Letz

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“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

United States Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

DEDICATION

Dedicated to all those who have suffered on behalf of COVID-19.

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Notes

1 PREFACE

I think I can properly assume the large majority of us aim toward finding greater joy in our lives. At the same time, I could make the assumption that most of us have gone about it wrong in our day to day attempting to get another promotion, make more money, or to buy some new thing. It is hard for us to not focus on the wrong things thinking that another ten thousand dollars a year, a bigger house or a new model car will bring us to greater happiness. Often times we hope that happiness just comes upon us rather than doing something to bring it about. The evidence however indicates for one thing that money only increases happiness to the point where our regular hierarchy of needs are met but little beyond that. Relationships for example are far more important. Acquiring possessions whether buying a purse or a big lottery win are only temporary happiness boosters it turns out yet we remain on the hamster wheel doing the things that don't necessarily bring us joy.

The topic of happiness has always received significant attention albeit there was an absence of good research on the topic or under the disguise of life meaning or other terms. Perhaps this relates to the challenge of describing or measuring happiness but how is that much different than measuring eye site, pain, or any other thing someone so calls "feels". In any case, happiness is now starting to get the attention of researchers and in a number of fields of study such as psychology, neuroscience, sociology and even economics. We have most definitely moved from philosophizing happiness to studying it. So, we now have existing and building evidence as to what can increase happiness and the next step is making it known and

integrating it into daily practice. This comes at a very important time as we see rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness and other challenges at all-time highs creating a serious public health concern. We have no specific causation to these alarming increases but can certainly form some theories. Some of the often-attributable changes we have seen over the last ~10 years include:

“Social support” is declining⁷.

Loneliness rate has steadily increased⁸.

Greater time spent on our phones and using technology⁷.

Obsession with work has increased⁹.

Americans work more hours, use half the amount of their vacation time on average, and get around 20 days less of vacation time compared to European countries.

I argue that we need to begin educating on happiness and well-being and make efforts to move away from measuring success by money. Such focus certainly has not achieved a happy society today. More than a third of undergraduate students for instance are suffering from moderate to severe depression¹⁰. While I am not pretending to say we have 100% control in what brings us joy (in fact up to 50% may be genetic²) but there is a good proportion of this within our control or malleable³. I believe this deserves greater focus. Happiness actually differs more from moment to moment more than it does from individual to individual¹⁴. I am hoping to provide some evidence-based

practices or prescriptions as I call them in the hope that you will incorporate them into your life and the life of your friends, family, patients, students, and acquaintances. I aim to do this succinctly in order to gather a larger target audience while embracing the idea of keeping it simple.

The prescriptions outlined in this book are quite simple and yet they are very challenging to stay consistent with much like an exercise program. Habitually working out and eating well most of the time works to improve our physical health. Just like there is no quick-fix diet plan there is no quick fix happiness plan. Anything quick fix is likely nothing more than a short dopamine surge activity or short term high. These prescriptions do work and don't even take that much time although they also don't give you immediate gratification like a scoop of ice cream does. The prescriptions also don't always ask for a change in mindset but I think what you will find is that by doing them regularly your mindset and mood will change for the better. Many people believe that success is a precedent to happiness but it actually works the other way around whereas those with a positive mind-set perform better in the face of challenges¹³. Happiness can really be increased with a number of small things done consistently on a daily or regular basis.

While happiness is enough in and of itself to seek out there are a number of corollary benefits as well including increased productivity, a reduction in errors, increased employee performance and satisfaction with their jobs, improved ability to resolve conflict, improved relationships, and health benefits such as a stronger immune system and longevity¹². Happy people tend toward seeing the bright side of things¹⁰ make progress toward valued goals, ruminate less, and have social confidants. Overall, they spend more time

with their friends and family, are in better physical shape, feel respected, have more free time, and have greater freedom to choose how they spend their time.

One last thing before we get into the prescriptions is putting some context around happiness. When we think about happiness, we often consider it a feeling or an emotion and there are a number of emotions we might associate with happiness as well such as awe, love, joy, interest, hope, pride amusement, inspiration and gratitude. Because happiness like pain requires a self-reported or subjective ranking or expression researchers have developed various metrics to measure happiness and one of the most prominent researchers Martin Seligman broke it down into 3 components to measure including pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Well-being is another term often used to describe the state of being happy or sometimes the co-existence of happiness, health and occasionally the add-on of prosperity. For purposes of this book, we will stick with the term happiness to describe subjective well-being.

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2 MONEY

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Rx

Spend money on others and experiences rather
than things

I am including this topic in the first chapter not because it is most important but quite the opposite so we can get it out of the way and move to the more important. Money consistently hits amongst top the list of the “must haves” list for happiness in surveys¹ and yet even those amongst the wealthiest are only slightly happier than the average U.S. citizen. Just our mere thinking about having money can have negative consequences of decreasing our likelihood to help colleagues, donate, or spend time with others all of which have been shown to increase happiness¹³. So, let’s do a quick review of the evidence on money and happiness.

Evidence exists that improving income to at least a certain point does increase happiness albeit once that level is achieved not much improvement is seen thereafter. The level is typically consistent with having your basic needs met of a roof over your head, steady supply of food, and safety. Even looking beyond money at the circumstances of marital status, age, where you live, job type and what you drive is only a factor of about 10% of happiness at best^{4,5}. If you want an actual dollar figure go with achieving between \$60,000 to \$120,000 per year in America as a single person with not much difference between the two numbers in levels of happiness. I made some back of the napkin adjustments from a study done in 2018⁶.

The evidence also reveals that spending money on experiences versus things improves both short and long term happiness⁸ and those surveyed to rank higher in materialism tend to be less happy⁷. While purchasing some exciting new good may give us a short-term mood boost it is in fact short term and we adapt rather quickly to things more so than experiences. Spending money on experiences

particularly experiences shared with others produces positive emotions that are more lasting and more meaningful in nature⁹.

Further evidence shows that individuals who spend a greater percentage of their income on others (“prosocial spending”) are happier than those spending on themselves⁸,^{10,11} as do completing acts of kindness¹². Evidence suggests the happiness experienced from prosocial spending during an event prompts repetition of the behavior¹³. There is one good purchase I recommend and that is a good journal or notebook as nearly all of the upcoming prescriptions require a form of reflective writing. Some of you may be able to journal in digital format but I am a big believer in pen to paper, and whether it correlates or not, evidence demonstrates that we remember things better when we handwrite notes versus typing them¹⁴.

Prescription 1 Notes

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3 GRATITUDE

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Rx

Write down 5 things for which you are
grateful at least weekly

Individuals expressing gratitude in this manner were evaluated to be happier, exercised more frequently, were more optimistic, and even physically healthier. Keep in mind these can be simple things like a simple interaction or savoring a good moment with a cup of coffee or perhaps a good cocktail. An enhanced version of this prescription is sitting down and writing down letters expressing gratitude to others even if you don't send them. If one week you can't think of 5 things that is fine. Instead, then describe in writing one of the most wonderful experiences you have had in life, an exercise also shown to increase happiness². A second option also revealing an increase in happiness along with stress reduction is to spend 20 minutes writing about why a person you love means so much to you³. Yet a third option also linked to happiness is to write about your best possible future⁴. So, you have plenty of options for this prescription or why not embrace them all.

There are some additional benefits about gratitude beyond the happiness factor not to mention the little time or effort it takes. Gratitude can increase resilience⁵, enhance relationships, create optimism⁶, support coping⁷, is associated with less anxiety and depression and greater well-being⁸. Those with a grateful disposition tend to be more thankful for a larger spectrum of things in their lives such their health, friends, nature, and job. They also experience feelings of gratitude in a more intense way. Adolescents who rate higher in gratitude have a tendency toward greater happiness, are more engaged in academics, and experience fewer depressive symptoms and less anxiety¹⁰. They also give and receive more social support from both family and friends¹⁰. Grateful students are perceived by peers as being more friendly, thoughtful, and having a warmer personality¹⁰. Gratitude benefits extend to the work environment with evidence

suggesting increased team cohesiveness and a reduction in work related stress. Gratitude is a major part of most major religions and this can be leveraged to put into a habitual practice. Think of the regular practice of saying grace at the dinner table and expand on this by sharing what you are grateful with amongst your family or even internally to yourself.

Prescription 2 Notes:

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4 ACTS OF KINDNESS

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Rx

Complete 5 deliberate acts of kindness
at least one day per week

Fairly robust evidence exists showing increased happiness or elevated mood following the deliberate completion of acts of kindness^{1,2,3}. Pick one day or more this week to do this and then follow it up by journaling what you did and how you felt about it the same evening. This in no way needs to be extravagant and could be as simple as a greeting or a smile. They should be purposeful acts. Consider some subtle reminder to yourself such as placing 5 pennies (if you can find them nowadays) in your left pocket and move 1 penny into the right pocket for each deliberate act of kindness you perform through the day.

Consider stepping it up a notch and volunteer regularly which along with naturally occurring altruism can have the benefit of reducing depression⁶, lowering blood pressure⁵ and increasing life satisfaction⁴. Increased frequency of formal volunteering increases levels of happiness and there is an interesting stronger link when the volunteer work is religious in nature versus secular⁷. Not surprisingly those on the receiving end of acts of kindness become happier as well and smile more. This will often lead to prosocial reciprocity or a “pay it forward” response⁸ from your benefactor which further enhances your act of kindness.

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5 CALM MOMENTS

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Rx

Take moments of calm at least 15 minutes
daily

Meditating on a regular basis can have long term positive effects on happiness and lower stress levels along with physical health benefits. Many of us find such practices as difficult as exercise to maintain on a regular basis yet acknowledge the benefits exist. There are quite a number of practices which exist to choose from that might be bucketed into meditation and I think rather than compare which is best it is more important to incorporate what works for you much like the type of exercise program you might adopt. Bottom line is that doing even something as simple as taking 10 slow breaths during various transitions throughout the day can reap benefits.

Mindfulness practice has gained increasing attention of late and takes the pressure off whether you are getting in the right “zone” or “state of mind” that we might often worry about when attempting to meditate. It is quite normal for our minds to wander when we are trying to take a few moments of calm. Don’t beat yourself up about this and just recognize it and attempt to come back to being present in the moment. Ultimately, we are seeking to relax the body and the mind and being present in the moment. You don’t have to shut the mind off completely but try to focus it on just being present in the moment and as it drifts recognize it and come back to trying to focus again. You can use techniques to help or even just focus on things in your environment particularly those in nature. Individuals who have scored high on mindfulness have scored high in the areas of self-compassion, openness, psychological well-being and conscientiousness while scoring lower on neuroticism²². Consider making use of any of the number of phone apps now available or visit happymedicine.org for some simple practices.

One tenant of mindfulness includes garnishing better control of our thoughts and emotions. We are a rumination nation where we are apt to ruminate or keep focus on the negatives in our lives even when we have no control over those negative situations or experiences. We can gain greater control over our thoughts and hence focus more on the positive by using mindfulness practice. The same holds true of constantly focusing on the future and worrying about what might happen versus taking comfort in the positive current moment. Another tenant of mindfulness is the ability to be non-judgmental of ourselves and the thoughts that may jump into our heads from time to time. Realizing that our thoughts do not have to take hold of who we are or how we act can be powerful. The practice of mindfulness is gathering research and has evidence toward:

Reducing negative moods²

Reducing burn out³

Reducing work-family conflict⁴

Reducing perceived stress⁵

Increasing well-being^{6,24}

Increasing resilience²

Increasing self-compassion⁵

Increasing marital satisfaction¹⁹

Decrease in psychological symptoms²⁰

Increase future positive emotions²¹

Improved sleep quality²²

Beyond meditation there are a few other practices similar yet different that can improve happiness. The first is the idea of achieving *flow* on a regular basis which is yet another intervention to happiness. I am not talking about the flow of water nor an industrial line. The flow we want to achieve is an experience you have likely felt before when you were so engrossed into an activity that you lost track of time perhaps several hours in fact. Achieving flow can increase positive affect while decreasing negative affect¹⁸. Typically, this is an activity you enjoy, excel at, is challenging, motivates you, and requires both skill and concentration. You more than anyone else will understand what has gotten you to achieve flow in the past that may help guide your ability to replicate it. My only recommendation is to choose something that you will ultimately find rewarding or give you a feeling of accomplishment. Studies have shown that the perceived challenge is a stronger correlator than the perceived skill¹⁷.

A perhaps more advanced practice is that of *savoring*. Savoring in a way is a combination of practices including mindfulness, optimism, and gratefulness all at the same time. Savoring is sort of amplifying a positive experience and really taking it in while expressing (internally or externally) how grateful you are of the experience. I think it is most natural when you are basking in the awe of the ocean or tranquility of the mountains or something similar. It can also include savoring in the moment of accomplishment as you accept an award or diploma. Whatever it might be give yourself the opportunity to accentuate the positive and soak up or luxuriate in the pleasure for as long as you can. We can enhance our relationship in the way of building trust with others by allowing them the opportunity to savor and helping them celebrate and reflect on their experience¹⁴.

Savoring has been shown to help with coping whether it relates to loneliness⁸, work stress⁹, substance abuse¹⁰, physical illness¹¹, mental illness¹² or disability¹³.

Like the majority of the prescriptions or practices in this book savoring is best to be practiced on a regular basis. Consider a few rituals to emphasize the opportunities to savor experiences. One option is to journal about past moments where you felt as though you were at your happiest. Try to recall the specific details of the experience such as the environment, who you were with, and what you were doing and all of the things you think contributed to your happiness. Do this monthly on a particular day and alternate it with the practice of planning out experiences (and journal them) that may bring about the same feeling of happiness. Another practice is putting yourself in situations where you are more apt to savor the moment. For instance, the practice known as *shinrin-yoku* (taking in the forest or nature bathing) is one option. Just as it sounds it consists of putting yourself in a forest or natural environment as you walk or hike or sit and have opportunity to absorb what nature has to offer. While this may increase the opportunity to savor it has its own physical benefits of lowering cortisol levels, lowering pulse, lowering blood pressure, and lowering sympathetic nerve activity¹⁵. The simple act of spending 20 minutes outside in good weather just by itself elevates mood in addition to broadening thinking and improving working memory¹⁶.

Prescription 4 Notes:

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6 EXERCISE

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Rx

Exercise at a minimum 30 minutes, 3 times
per week

Of no surprise likely to anyone regular exercise has many benefits not only in the physical realm. Physical activity can reduce stress and anxiety, boost our mood, and enhance our work. Physical activity can play a big role in depression treatment as well.¹ The benefit can be as profound as medications and counseling.¹ While it should not take the place of medications nor counseling it can enhance both when used in conjunction and potentially help with depression relapse.² Beginning and continuing an exercise program can also prove to be a spark for other positive changes in life. It is not too hard to find a case study in your group of friends and family or just by turning on the television.

The interesting thing about exercise is that it can give you some immediate feelings of gratification (much like “retail therapy”) albeit with long term benefits on top. Exercise triggers some of the same neurotransmitters including dopamine enhanced with experiences giving us immediate gratification for instance a tasty meal, sex, or even a drug high for that matter while also triggering other neurochemical changes. These other changes can have a positive impact on pain, neurodegenerative disease, and psychiatric diseases.^{3,4,5}

Consider enhancing your exercise benefit by having an accountability partner who can be a friend or significant other just as well. Those working out with a friend are more likely to complete a training program,⁶ and couples report being more satisfied with their relationships and more in love.⁷ Lastly, working out with someone who is in better shape can improve your results,⁸ and we just know having a partner keeps us showing up more often than going it alone.

Those not apt to exercise much might ask how much exercise is enough? We know the physical benefits of exercise are seen with even small efforts and there is some evidence this is the same with regard to non-physical benefits. Replacing just 15 minutes of sitting with an hour of brisk walking for instance was shown to reduce the risk of major depression by over 25% in one study⁹. Of course, be mindful of your limits and try choosing something that is more enjoyable to you or had been at one time whether it's brisk walks with your significant other or competitive tennis with a friend.

Prescription 5 Notes:

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4. Smith, S.D. and Zigmond, M.J. Can the brain be protected through exercise? Lessons from an animal model of parkinsonism. *Experimental neurology*. 2003. 184(1): p. 31-39.
5. Archer, T., Influence of physical exercise on traumatic brain injury deficits: scaffolding effect. *Neurotoxicity research*, 2012. 21(4): p. 46-68.
6. Wing, R.R. and Jeffery, R.W. Benefits of recruiting participants with friends and increasing social support for weight loss and maintenance. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 1999. 67(1): p. 132.
7. Aron, A. et al., Couples' shared participation in novel and arousing activities and experienced relationship quality. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 2000. 78(2): p. 273.
8. Feltz, D.L. Kerr, N.L. and Irwin, B.C. Buddy up: the Kohler effect applied to health games. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 2011. 3(4): p. 506-526.
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7 SMILE

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Rx

Smile and act happy daily

The simple act of forming a smile and holding it can alter your mood, along with sitting more upright² and perhaps acting and moving like a happy person³. What might this look like you might ask. I would say a more relaxed way of walking with a “bounce in your step”, using expressive words and hand/arm motions, and even the way you dress. Don’t you feel more confident in a formal suit or dress versus old sweatpants and don’t you find by smiling at someone you get one in return whether or not you know them. While it may be slight, facial expressions do have an impact on feelings and the simple act of smiling does make people feel happier while frowning makes them feel sadder⁴. So, turn that frown upside down.

Prescription 6 Notes:

1. Those asked to form a slight grin compared with those with a frown felt happier.
Laird, J.D. *Feelings: The perception of self*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
2. Sitting up straight versus slumping were less self-conscious
Lepore, S.J. & Smith, J.M. *The writing cure: How expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being*. Washington, DC, American Psychological Association. 2002.
3. Gosling, S. *Snoop: What your stuff says about you*. New York, Basic Books. 2008.
4. Nicholas A. Coles, Jeff T. Larsen, Heather C. Lench. **A meta-analysis of the facial feedback literature: Effects of facial feedback on emotional experience are small and variable.** *Psychological Bulletin*, 2019

8 CHANGE

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Rx

Seek intentional changes

Make efforts toward intentional versus circumstantial changes. Circumstantial changes consist of things such as getting a wage increase or bonus, buying a new car, or moving while intentional changes include things such as starting a new learning program, joining a group or club, or perhaps starting a new hobby. Certainly, you want to make intentional change you see favorable such as picking a new hobby which aligns with similar hobby you have enjoyed^{1,2}. It would hold to common sense to also choose intentional change that serves to better ourselves and/or our relationships.

Prescription 7 Notes:

1. Sheldon, K.M. & Lyubomirsky, S. Is it possible to become happier? (And if so, how?) *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 1: p. 129-145, 2007
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9 RELATIONSHIPS

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Rx

Spend time daily on enhancing
relationships

This prescription should garnish the most adherence for a happiness regimen in my view. If I were to look at just one thing in your life to guess your level of happiness it would be to look at your social network. This would not be a measure of how many social media friends you have but the quality of your relationships. A strong correlation exists between happiness and having quality relationships not measured by the volume of relationships.¹ Lacking sufficient social relationships in fact has an impact on increasing mortality.² People often report their level of happiness at its highest when connecting with others and the lowest when alone which should not be too astonishing.³ I am leaving the robust work of developing relationships to the work of others although can't help myself in listing a few recommendations.

Set up regular touch points along with regular things to do with those you have relationships with.

Listen more.

Be your authentic self.

Don't be afraid to express gratitude and affection.

Avoid gossip and talking negatively about people not present.

Give more hugs.

Find common ground with those you don't know well.

Always work toward coming from a place of respect.⁵

Avoid being critical, defensive, contempt, and stonewalling.

Lastly, stop phubbing. Phubbing is the act of snubbing someone in favor of your smartphone or whatever device is in your hand. A bit of a funny word to say but this can have some serious consequences in your relationships. It immediately creates distance between whomever you are with at the time. Recall when sitting with someone just the two of you and the other person gets on their phone. What is your immediate reaction? For many of us it is to get on our own phone and there you go what kind of communication is really happening now. Here are a few considerations to stop the phubbing⁷⁸.

Keep phones out of the bedroom or at least out of reach.

Don't use your phone at mealtimes.

Plan some time to be unplugged while sharing time with someone.

Designate device-free time at home.

Put your phone out of sight during important conversations.

Set device limits for use.

Prescription 8 Notes:

1. Vandervoot, D., Quality of social support in mental and physical health. *Current Psychology*, 1999. 18(2): p. 205-221
2. Holst-Lunstad, J., Smith, T.B., and Layton, J.B, Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS medicine*, 2010. 7(7): p. e1000316
3. Kahneman, D., et al., A survey method for characterizing daily life experience: The day reconstruction method. *Science*, 2004. 306(5702): p. 1776-1780
4. Hugs relieve stress, reduce pain, and increase happiness.
Clipman, J. A hug a day keeps the blues away: The effect of daily hugs on subjective wellbeing in college students. Seventieth Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Boston. 1999
5. Happy couple married over 40 years report as the #1 value and strength
Boggs, M., Miller, J. 2006
6. Four behaviors linked to divorces.
Gottman, J. Silver, N. (1995, 2015)
7. David, M. E. & Roberts, J. A. (2017). Phubbed and alone: Phone snubbing, social exclusion, and attachment to social media. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 2(2), 155-163.
8. Roberts, J. A. & David, M. E. (2016). My life has become a major distraction from my cell phone: Partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction among romantic partners. *Computers in human behavior*, 54, 134-141.

10 LAUGH DAILY

Happy Medicine, Inc.
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Rx

Laugh daily

The simple act of writing down three funny things that occurred during the day can help aid in the aging process by increasing happiness and decreasing depressive type symptoms. Humor induces amusement which helps create social bonds and helps hold off negative states. Evidence reveals that happier people regularly engage in positive uses of humor (while avoiding negative uses of humor) in daily life. Additionally, those with happy personality traits are believed to be happier because they engage in self-enhancing humor, affiliative humor (things most find funny), maintain a humorous outlook in life, view adversity from a humorous perspective, and use humor regularly in interactions.

Psychologists have worked to describe 4 dimensions of humor which related to differences in humor use. The first affiliative humor described above can be described as witty banter used to amuse others, saying funny things about yourself (self-deprecating), and essentially a non-hostile use of humor. This is likely the category where DAD jokes would fall under. This style of humor would be expectedly associated with a good mood and emotion and to help reduce interpersonal tensions. The second humor dimension is labeled as self-enhancing (also noted above) which is a tendency to be amused by what is described as the incongruities of life. It can be described as using humor in the face of adversity or stress and may help with putting off negative emotions. Both affiliative humor and self-enhancing can have positive effect.

The third dimension of humor is labeled as aggressive humor and engulfs the use of sarcasm, ridicule, teasing, and “putting-down” others. It can be used to manipulate others and is often done without regard for others. This is the

category where racist and sexist humor would fall under and we know some of the negative results. It is expected that this humor type by associated with neuroticism, hostility and anger and associated in a negative way with relationship satisfaction. The last and fourth dimension is that of self-defeating humor which involves self-disparaging (putting down yourself) humor that is excessive in nature. Allowing yourself to be the target of other's jokes would fall into this dimension and it can be used as an avoidance technique. Those using this dimension of humor while often considered the "class clown" may have an underlying low self-esteem and emotional neediness. Similarly, to type three it can be associated with neuroticism and negative emotions inclusive of anxiety and depression and not supportive of psychological well-being nor satisfaction with relationships.

It stands to reason that we should focus on the first two dimensions of humor described and integrate them into our lives on a daily basis.

Prescription 9 Notes:

1. Proyer, R.T., et al., Strengths-based positive psychology interventions: A randomized placebo-controlled online trial on long-term effect for signature strengths vs. a lesser strengths intervention. *Frontiers in psychology*, 2015. 6: p. 456.
2. Ruch, W., Sander, D. Scherer, K. Amusement. *Series in affective science*, 2009: p. 27-28.
3. Ford, T., Lappi, S., Holden, C. Personality, Humor Styles and Happiness: Happy People Have Positive Humor Styles. *European Journal Psychology*. 12(3): 320-337.
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12 FORGIVENESS

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Rx

Forgive them

Many people have a real challenge with forgiveness. If you can't help but ruminate over past transgressions of others or harboring negative feelings toward someone who has harmed you then you have not likely forgiven them. We often have a self-serving bias where we like to hold others responsible for our bad feeling or even our failures in life and yet take personal responsibility of our success and good attitudes. I see very little value in this tendency and evidence reveals that forgiveness and letting go of these can have both mental health and physical benefits along with enhancing relationships.^{1,2}

I acknowledge that forgiveness is no easy task especially in the very beginning where you may still be feeling quite a bit of anger and hurt. I also understand some things can be unforgiveable to some but that does not speak to the more common. I can't help but think about the quick turnaround one often sees when a couple decide to divorce. Not uncommonly the focus becomes making things as difficult as possible and even to cause harm to their previous spouse when often weeks, months or perhaps years earlier it was a focus on loving the same person. Friends and lawyers can take advantage of the situation by feeding negative feelings and rumination which may end up causing just as much harm in the one not letting go. The lack of forgiveness certainly plays a role in long drawn-out divorces.

One thing we can do to help forgive is trying to identify with the other person, attempting to understand the situation from their perspective, and having empathy. In other words, we are "putting ourselves in their shoes". This does not mean that you become them, nor does it mean that you try to forget what has happened or any transgressions you have felt occurred. In fact, it stands to reason that you

might have to review just what you are forgiving so you know exactly what you are letting go. Taking it another step further you can try to identify the role you played into the souring of the relationship. Keep in mind you don't necessarily need to mend every relationship in order for forgiveness to take place and there may be good reason not to but harboring those negative feelings do not help your road to happiness.

Let's discuss empathy a bit more while we are on the topic because empathy itself can have some other benefits as well. Unfortunately, some evidence suggests empathy is on the decline, which may play into one reason for much of our discord in the U.S. If empathy requires us to put ourselves in another person's shoes then doing so with someone with completely different views and perspectives adds to the difficulty. On top of that there seems to be a greater tendency in dehumanizing people or groups of people. Think of just some of the terms we use today to describe people or groups of people which puts a wall up in us trying to find our similarities or common ground.

Prescription 10 Notes:

1. Luskin, F.M., Ginzburg, K. Thoresen, C.E. The efficacy of forgiveness intervention in college age adults: Randomized controlled study. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 2005: p. 163-184.
2. Worthington, E.L. et al. Forgiveness, health, and well-being: A review of evidence for emotional versus decisional forgiveness, dispositional forgiveness, and reduced unforgiveness. *Journal of behavioral medicine*, 20017. 30 (4): p 291-302.
3. O'brien, E., Hsing, C. Konrath, S. Changes in dispositional empathy over time in American college students: A meta-analysis. *Association for Psychological Science Annual convention*. 2010.

13 AFTERWARD

We have done a poor job in managing the physical health of our society for many reasons. We have focused on treating or making unhealthy people healthier or achieving a baseline of less risky. A larger focus on prevention is an obvious need. Even worse is our mostly avoidance of a focus on mental health and well-being which often feeds physical health. While we also dedicate little work toward preventing mental health illness, we also lack the resources to even bring people to baseline. Much like eating healthy this is costlier at the onset but well worth the returns in the long run. We can do better.

A number of countries are now beginning to value a focus on happiness and well-being versus or in addition to the traditional gross domestic product (GDP) in measuring national success. You don't have to look at GDP very long to discover how flawed it is at measuring the success of a nation. Robert F. Kennedy recognized this back during his campaign referring to GNP which preceded GDP. "It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts for the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl.... Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play." Attention should be made toward developing a measure of national success not only financial in nature but also focused at the quality of life of its citizens. We can do better.

It has been estimated that the physical and psychological costs of employee burnout are in the range of \$125M to \$190B per year. Happy employees are more

productive than unhappy employees over the long haul and are less likely to quit and attract people who are more committed to their work. Yet many workplaces put little attention toward employee well-being and the focus on profit causes great harm to society. Creating a culture of well-being along with offering resources should become a focus in addition to the trend of healthy habits. Individuals are happiest when they're appropriately challenged, so it takes nothing away from productivity, although a different culture is necessary. We can do better.

Afterward Notes

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2. Spreitzer, G., Porath, C. Creating Sustainable Performance. *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb 2012. p. 93-99.
3. Gilbert, D. The Science Behind The Smile. *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb 2012, p. 85.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Kevin Letz is Chief Wellness Officer at Happy Medicine, Inc. a non-profit he founded to focus on well-being and happiness advocacy and education. He is a doctor of nursing and board certified family, adult, and pediatric nurse practitioner.

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