



**Talk About Living!**  
Suzanne Zoglio, PhD

## At The Heart of Happiness

We've all heard how uplifting it can be to forget your self and do something for someone else. From Oprah's Angel Network to bumper stickers espousing Random Acts of Kindness, the message is the same: be part of a positive human chain that pays it forward. Those who do, regularly claim, "I took away far more than I gave."

If such anecdotal reports don't convince you, perhaps recent research will. Dr. Martin Seligman, professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Authentic Happiness* has been studying factors connected with happiness for many years. He describes three major components of happiness: meaning (using your strengths and virtues to serve some good), engagement (being deeply involved in relationships, work, passions), and pleasure (sensory enjoyment). Meaning and engagement have a greater impact on our happiness than pleasure. Apparently when we commit acts of kindness for others, our lives feel more meaningful and we take away a big bump in happiness for ourselves.

Also, while some life factors might appear at first glance to ensure more happiness, Dr. Seligman and his colleagues point out what factors do NOT lead to more happiness. It might surprise you that money (beyond basic needs), education, high IQ, youth, and sunny weather – all commonly believed to lead to a happier state- really don't lift us up much. And while married people are slightly happier than singles, the research casts doubt on whether being married makes you happier or being a happier person makes it more likely you'll get married.

So, what can you do to live a happier life? First, we need to be realistic. About 50% of a sunny disposition comes from genetic programming, according to Dr. David Lykken's study of 4000 sets of twins (University of Minnesota, 1996). The *range* of happiness we'll experience is pretty much set at birth. So a glass half-full person is unlikely to ever morph into a bubbly, bounce-out-of-bed-chirping person. However, we can each increase our own level of happiness considerably within an inherited range. What can we *do* to lift our happiness level? Enjoy simple pleasures like movies, good food, chocolate, pampering, or favorite treats. No doubt, life's pleasures make us happier. But not *as* happy as a few more powerful actions. For instance, feeling and

expressing gratitude - especially to another person - is a powerful and long-lasting mood booster. Seligman's research showed people who wrote and then delivered only one letter of gratitude to a teacher, friend, grandparent, pastor, etc. were still at elevated happiness levels two months later. Even more long-lasting happiness occurred if subjects wrote down three things that went well and why every day. Other researchers have found that writing once a week in a gratitude journal boosts happiness levels as does taking a daily gratitude walk - listing with each step something small (the forsythia in bloom) or large (escaping injury from a fender bender) for which you are grateful. A surefire way to lift your spirit (and your health, other research shows) is to focus on what is *right* with your life.

Practicing a religious faith and making time for family and friends have both been shown to boost happiness big time. A sense of community, connecting to the human race – no matter how busy we are – is critical to living a satisfied life.

Doing what's meaningful to you, instead of what you think you *should* do or what you're in the habit of doing is a major happiness booster. Using your strengths, talents, and personal virtues (generosity, humor, enthusiasm, creativity, responsibility, etc.) in new ways and in the service of something larger than yourself means you are engaged (not sleep walking through life) and making a difference or perhaps leaving a legacy. If you're funny, you could entertain our troops, hospital patients, senior citizens, or disaster victims. Or hold a comedy night and raise money for the cause. Or write for a support group newsletter, local paper, or online chat room. Whatever you do, find ways to use your strengths in unique ways to serve the greater good.

When you appreciate what you've been given, share your gifts with others, and use each day in meaningful ways, it affects how you feel about yourself. Increase these activities and you are likely to feel more powerful, connected, appreciated, and strong. In other words, you'll feel happier. Talk about living!

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