

10 Steps to a Happier Life, Backed By Research

by [Eric Barker](#), Aug. 4, 2015 -- <http://time.com/3980705/happier-life-research/>

I went through a number of great books on happiness and pulled together ten research-based tips that can help build a happier life:

1) Cut the small talk. Discuss what matters.

Via [Pursuing the Good Life: 100 Reflections on Positive Psychology](#):

First, happier participants spent more time talking to others, unsurprising finding given the social basis of happiness. Second, the extent of small talk was negatively associated with happiness. And third, the extent of substantive talk was positively associated with happiness. So, happy people are socially engaged with others, and this engagement entails matters of substance.

(For more on how to be someone people love to talk to, click [here](#).)



2) Have at least 5 friends you can discuss your problems with.

Via [Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life](#):

“National surveys find that when someone claims to have five or more friends with whom they can discuss important problems, they are 60 percent more likely to say that they are ‘very happy.’”

(For more on how to make friends and strengthen friendships, click [here](#).)

3) Don't just cheer people up. Celebrate their good news.

Via [The Myths of Happiness: What Should Make You Happy, but Doesn't, What Shouldn't Make You Happy, but Does](#):

The surprising finding is that the closest, most intimate, and most trusting relationships appear to be distinguished not by how the partners respond to each other's disappointments, losses, and reversals but how they react to good news. Flourishing relationships have been revealed to be those in which the couple responds “actively and constructively”—that is, with interest and delight—to each other's windfalls and successes... people who strove to show genuine enthusiasm, support, and understanding of their partner's good news, however small—and did so three times a day over a week—became happier and less depressed.

(For more on how to avoid the four most common relationship problems, click [here](#).)

4) Write down your hopes and dreams.

Via [The Myths of Happiness: What Should Make You Happy, but Doesn't, What Shouldn't Make You Happy, but Does](#):

...keeping a journal regularly for ten to twenty minutes per day, in which we write down our hopes and dreams for the future (e.g., “In ten years, I will be married and a home owner”), visualize them coming true, and describe how we might get there and what that would feel like. This exercise— even when engaged in as briefly as two minutes— makes people happier and even healthier.

(For more on how writing can help you overcome anxiety, tragedy or heartache, click [here](#).)

5) Live a month like it's your last.

Via [The Myths of Happiness: What Should Make You Happy, but Doesn't, What Shouldn't Make You Happy, but Does](#):

I'm currently conducting a one-month-long “happiness intervention” in which participants are instructed to live the month as if it's their last month. Their instructions are not to pretend that they have a terminal disease but rather to imagine as fully and faithfully as possible that they are about to move a very long way from their jobs, schools, friends, and families for an indefinite period of time. Previous research hints that this exercise should prompt us to appreciate in a profound way what we are preparing to give up. When we believe that we are seeing (or hearing, doing, or experiencing) things for the last time, we will see (or hear, do, or experience) them as though it's the first time.

(For more on what you can learn about happiness from ancient wisdom, click [here](#).)

6) Know what makes everyone happy and everyone sad.

Via [Engineering Happiness: A New Approach for Building a Joyful Life](#):

Their findings confirm what had been found previously: happiness is high during sex, exercise, or socializing, or while the mind is focused on the here and now, and low during commuting or while the mind is wandering.

(For more on what the happiest people in the world do every day, click [here](#).)

7) Join a group.

Via [Engineering Happiness: A New Approach for Building a Joyful Life](#):

The sociologist Ruut Veenhoven and his team have collected happiness data from ninety-one countries, representing two-thirds of the world's population. He has concluded that Denmark is home to the happiest people in the world, with Switzerland close behind... Interestingly enough, one of the more detailed points of the research found that 92 percent of the people in Denmark are members of some sort of group, ranging from sports to cultural interests. To avoid loneliness, we must seek active social lives, maintain friendships, and enjoy stable relationships.

(For more on how to never be frustrated again, click [here](#).)

8) For a happier life, set goals.

Via [Engineering Happiness: A New Approach for Building a Joyful Life](#):

In his studies, the psychologist Jonathan Freedman claimed that people with the ability to set objectives for themselves—both short-term and long-term—are happier. The University of Wisconsin neuroscientist Richard Davidson has found that working hard toward a goal and making progress to the point of expecting a goal to be realized don't just activate positive feelings—they also suppress negative emotions such as fear and depression. According to Michael Argyle, simply having a long-term plan or goal gives people a sense of meaning in life. Progressing toward goals not only gives a purpose to life as a whole but also provides a structure and meaning to daily routines, strengthens social relationships, and helps us weather hard times.

(For more on what the most productive people do every day, click [here](#).)

9) Optimism can save your life.

Via [Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being](#):

Within eight and a half years, half the men had died of a second heart attack, and we opened the sealed envelope. Could we predict who would have a second heart attack? None of the usual risk factors predicted death: not blood pressure, not cholesterol, not even how extensive the damage from the first heart attack. Only optimism, eight and a half years earlier, predicted a second heart attack: of the sixteen most pessimistic men, fifteen died. Of the sixteen most optimistic men, only five died. This finding has been repeatedly confirmed in larger studies of cardiovascular disease, using varied measures of optimism...

Men with the most optimistic style (one standard deviation above average) had 25 percent less CVD than average, and men with the least optimism (one standard deviation below the mean) had 25 percent more CVD than average. This trend was strong and continuous, indicating that greater optimism protected the men, whereas less optimism weakened them.

(For more on how to be optimistic, click [here](#).)

10) Anticipating happiness will double your happiness.

Via [Stumbling on Happiness](#):

In one study, volunteers were told that they had won a free dinner at a fabulous French restaurant and were then asked when they would like to eat it. Now? Tonight? Tomorrow? Although the delights of the meal were obvious and tempting, most of the volunteers chose to put their restaurant visit off a bit, generally until the following week. Why the self-imposed delay? Because by waiting a week, these people not only got to spend several hours slurping oysters and sipping Château Cheval Blanc '47, but they also got to look forward to all that slurping and sipping for a full seven days beforehand. Forestalling pleasure is an inventive technique for getting double the juice from half the fruit.