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Happiness

Study After Study Reveals the Four Common Traits of Happy People

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I have always been, at least during my adult life, a generally happy and optimistic person. I have had periods of depression, as do all people, but I never allowed myself to dwell on misery. It came to me as a surprise, therefore, to find so many other transsexuals who were severely depressed, or even suicidal. It seems that in our community, depression is common. There are many problems to be overcome for sure, but suicide? To me, that is totally incomprehensible. I have often wondered why some people are happy, while others are not. Then I found *scientific American* article which set me to thinking ... In the May 1996 issue of *Scientific American* magazine, authors David G. Myers and Ed Diener presented research on happiness in an article titled "In Pursuit of Happiness". With the permission of Scientific American, I would like to present portions of their article here, followed by a description of my own pursuit of happiness as a transsexual woman.

I really do believe that we can teach ourselves to be confident ... and thus command respect ... and with confidence and respect, our self-esteem will rise, and so will our happiness.

How can social scientists measure something as hard to pin down as happiness? Most researchers simply ask people to report their feelings of happiness or unhappiness and to assess how satisfying their lives are. Such self-reported wellbeing is moderately consistent over years of retesting. Furthermore, those who say they are happy and satisfied seem happy to their close friends and family members and to a psychologist/interviewer. Their daily mood ratings reveal more positive emotions, and they smile, more than those who call themselves unhappy. Self-reported happiness also predicts other indicators of wellbeing. Compared with the depressed, happy people are less self-focused, less hostile and abusive, and less susceptible to disease.

The authors state the findings of what does not equate to happiness (condensed):

- Age: No time of life is notably happier or unhappier.
- Gender: Men and women are equally likely to declare themselves happy with life.
- Ethnicity: Blacks are only slightly less likely to declare themselves happy than are whites.
- Wealth: Even the very rich are only slightly happier Americans.

The Habits of Happy People

In study after study, four traits characterise happy people: First, especially in individualistic Western cultures, they like themselves. They have high self-esteem, and usually believe themselves to be more ethical, more intelligent, less prejudiced, better able to get along with others, and healthier than the average person.

Second, happy people typically feel personal control. Those with little or no control over their lives - such as prisoners, nursing home patients, severely impoverished groups or, individuals, and citizens of totalitarian regimes - suffer lower morale and worse health.

Third, happy people are usually optimistic.

Fourth, most happy people are extroverted. Although, one might expect that introverts would live more happily in the serenity of their less-stressed, contemplative lives, extroverts are happier, whether alone or with others.

The causal factors for these correlations are uncertain. Does happiness make people more outgoing, or are outgoing people more likely to be happy, perhaps explaining why they marry sooner, get better jobs and make more friends? If these traits indeed predispose their carriers to happiness, people might become happier by acting in certain ways. In experiments, people who feign high self-esteem report feeling more positively about themselves, for example.

Whatever the reason, the close personal relationships that characterise happy lives are also correlated with health. Compared with loners, those who can name several intimate friends are healthier and less likely to die prematurely. For more than nine out of ten people, the most significant alternative to aloneness is marriage. Although broken marital relationship can cause much misery, a good marriage apparently is a strong source of support. During the 1970s and '80s, 39 percent of married adults told the National Opinion

Research Centre they were "very happy". The happiness gap between the married and the never married was similar for women and men.

Religiously active people also report greater happiness. One Gallup survey found that highly religious people were twice as likely as those lowest in spiritual commitment to declare themselves happy. Other surveys, including a collaborative study of 166,000 people in fourteen nations, have found that reported happiness and life satisfaction rise with strength of religious affiliation and frequency of attendance at worship services. Some researchers believe that religious affiliation entails greater social support and hopefulness.

Students of happiness are now beginning to examine happy people's exercise patterns, world views and goals. It is possible that some of the patterns discovered in the research may offer clues for transforming circumstances and behaviours that work against wellbeing into ones that promote it. Ultimately, then, the scientific study of happiness could help us understand how to build a world that enhances human wellbeing and to aid people in getting the most satisfaction from their circumstances.

David G. Myers, Ed Diener, *Scientific American* magazine  May 1996 Edition

As you can see, the authors based their opinions upon a large statistical sample, and came to a few counter-intuitive conclusions. I find great encouragement in their findings regarding age, gender, ethnicity or wealth. I would hate to think that there are societal factors beyond our control that would contribute to unhappiness.

Among the traits of happy people mentioned by the authors is that happy people like themselves and have high self-esteem. What could be more depressing than not liking yourself or having low self-esteem? To me; this seems like the primary key to happiness. Hand in hand with high self-esteem is having control of your own life, which is the second trait mentioned by the authors.

As transsexuals, we have all had feelings of guilt and shame placed upon us by a culture that does not understand us, does not want to understand us, and generally regards us as weirdoes and freaks. This attitude does nothing to help our self-esteem. What can we do to improve our feelings of self-worth? Plenty, that's what!

During the early months of my transition, I spent many tearful hours in therapy, worrying about family and friends whom I might lose, and relationships that might never be. I wouldn't look anyone in the eye, and I was afraid to open my mouth for fear of my voice giving me away. When anyone was mean enough to make an unflattering remark, I would cringe. This was not a happy situation, and I decided to do something about it!

When I was a child, I was very shy. In school, I wouldn't volunteer any information, and I wouldn't ask a question in class, no matter how badly I wanted the answer. My true nature was to be quite introverted. All the way through high school, I felt that the other kids were smarter, more athletic, more popular, and so on. I was alone, and I was not happy. And you know what? My feelings of inferiority were self-fulfilling. Although I was intelligent, my grades were mediocre, I was unpopular, and I did poorly in sports.

When I entered community college, my life improved. I took a public speaking class. I got involved in class activities. I made many new friends. I gained the respect of my peers. And I was happy. Not only was I happy, I carried that generally happy and self-confident attitude on into my adult life.

I thought back on those early years and how I had changed my life, and I wondered what had gone so wrong now; Why was I having all this emotional turmoil at the very time that I was finally accomplishing that which I had wanted all my life? Why had I allowed others to take away my self-esteem? I would sometimes go to the San Francisco financial district and watch the professional women in their power suits, walking to and from their offices. They all had an air of confidence about them. They all had a take-charge attitude. Attitude!

That's what I did long ago in the community college. I changed my attitude. I forced myself to have a confident attitude even though it was just a performance. Eventually, the performance had become a reality, and the reality had changed my life.

I practised taking in a confident air, as I walked down the street. I would look at people and hold my head high. If someone made a rude comment, I would just look at them as if to say, "Really! I don't care what you say. I know where I am headed, and I am doing well." I took charge of my life once again.

You know what? As my attitude changed, people made fewer rude comments, I was happier, and I was being accepted as Heather! I really do believe that we can teach ourselves to be confident in our relationships with others, and thus command respect from our peers. With confidence and respect, our self-esteem will rise, and so will our happiness.

The article states that happy people are optimistic. I see no reason not to be optimistic. Why should I make myself miserable by thinking of all the bad things that might happen? Pessimism is self-inflicted pain, and I don't like pain. It is just as easy to look at the bright side of life as it is the dark side. When I look at the dark possibilities of life, as sometimes I must, I try to keep myself in a strictly analytical frame of mind. I refuse to let emotions intrude upon my happiness.

The last point made by the authors is that happy people are extroverted. As I said before, I forced myself to be an extrovert. I began with the public speaking class in college. I engaged in school activities and spoke before groups. I gained confidence in my own abilities, and expressed my opinions to others. I found that having others listen to my ideas and perhaps act on them gave me a feeling of exhilaration. Finally, while working for the Navy as an Industrial Engineering Technician, I found myself conducting engineering classes with as many as thirty students. I had to stay alert and work hard to keep ahead of the class, but I was not afraid and I was happy. I was a self-taught extrovert, which I believe is a feat that anyone can accomplish.

The *Scientific American* article discussed marriage and religion contributing to happiness. I see marriage and religion as being very similar. Both are expressions of bonding with other people. This goes back to the idea of the unhappy loner. I don't think that marriage and religion are the only means of bonding with others, but they are good ways. The problem for transsexuals is that many churches do not accept transsexualism (the Unitarian Church is one of the exceptions), and meeting marriage minded people who are accepting of us is very difficult. If marriage and religion are out of the question, at least for the time being, then other means of bonding should be possible. I met my closest friend at a transgender support group. It is good for both of us just to know that the other is there - someone with whom we can share tears, laughter, and joy. Be happy, and enjoy life.

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