

# Creating Happiness

## What you can and cannot control

There is a wealth of research over the last 30 years in the field of Positive Psychology. This branch of psychology uses scientific understanding and effective intervention to aid in the achievement of a satisfactory life, rather than treating mental illness. Positive Psychology research informs us that we can greatly shape how happy we feel day-to-day.

Of the total experience of happiness,

- ❖ Only **10%** of it is created by material circumstances, such as quality of housing and income level.
- ❖ **50%** of happiness is due to each individual's varying genetic predisposition toward happiness.
- ❖ It is the final **40%** of happiness where we have the greatest power to make change. This article will review the elements research has shown to create happiness.



## Nation-to-nation



International studies have revealed Japan to be the least happy nation in the world. Their culture has so overly emphasized efficiency and professional success that many people literally work themselves to death. The word "kirosi" refers to the sudden death occurred by exhausted people. This has become such a problem that support groups, hotlines, and public awareness campaigns have been launched to combat kiroshi.

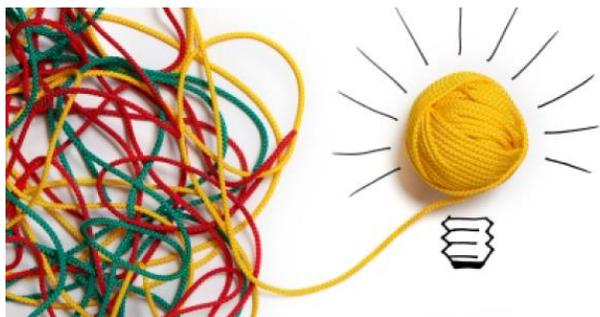
Conversely, Denmark has been shown to be the happiest nation in the world. Studied indicate Denmark's free educational and healthcare systems as elements that support happiness. Additionally, the cultural practice of multiple families living together provides social connectedness, which is key to happy, healthy functioning.

## Happiness is a skill

Happiness is more of a skill, like playing the violin or throwing a curve ball, than a state of being. Like all skills, it can be learned, refined, and mastered. This document is a resource for that mastery process. The elements that research has shown to foster happiness are as follows:

1. **Variability.** It is said that “variety is the spice of life,” and research indicates that purposeful change in one’s daily routine is helpful in fostering happiness. However, variability is a supplemental element to the core practices that follow.
2. **Exercise.** As often as we hear it, many people do not understand *how* and *why* exercise is important to healthy living. In relation to happiness, aerobic exercise produces an excess of the dopamine neurotransmitter in our brain’s neural synapses. Dopamine is the brain chemical that makes us feel happy.
3. **Flow.** Flow is the mental state in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. Whether it is in work or play, finding flow in your life is pivotal to creating happiness.
4. **Social Connection.** Research shows that the average person can cognitively manage about 150 personal relationships, known as Dunbar’s Number; meaning all of our relationships (i.e. confidants, family, friends, acquaintances, etc.). However, it is the primary network that has the greatest impact on us. Research shows having 3 to 5 very close loved ones is optimal for wellbeing.
5. **Social Cooperation.** Connection to something larger than oneself can be found through religious practices, community engagement, or other social avenues. This connection has been found to contribute to happiness, especially when individual and group effort is toward a compassionate endeavor, such as serving less fortunate members of society.
6. **Attitude of Gratitude.** Research shows that individuals who practice a cognitive exercise of thankfulness and/or compassion on a weekly schedule can increase the cortical size of parts of the brain associated with happiness. Literally, you can restructure and improve the physical elements of your brain to enhance happiness if you practice focusing on positive things outside yourself.

## What are you working toward?



Extrinsic goals, such as wealth, image, and status do not greatly influence happiness. The intrinsic goals of personal growth, relationships, and the desire to help are the factors that most significantly determine our level of happiness. The crux of the matter is that achievement of intrinsic goals – and in extension happiness – is often opposed to achievement of extrinsic goals. What are you spending your time and effort working toward?