

wellbeing





The road to TRUE HAPPINESS starts here

SET YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPASS IN
A POSITIVE DIRECTION AND DISCOVER
HOW TO FIND JOY IN THE JOURNEY,
NOT JUST THE DESTINATION

Dreams for the future can be fabulous: they can motivate you to be creative, take chances and keep going when times are tough. But if you've subconsciously pressed 'pause' on happiness until you've reached a certain goal or ticked off a list of achievements, your dreams could actually be holding you back from enjoying the here and now.

It's what psychologists call 'arrival fallacy', the belief that when you arrive at a certain destination, you'll be happy. 'It's a myth that happiness is out there, just beyond our reach. We could get there, but only if the right things happen – if we marry our true love, secure our dream job, purchase our elegant home,' says psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of *The How Of Happiness* (£7, Sphere). 'But the truth is, if you're not happy today, then you won't be happy tomorrow unless you take action.'

It's unrealistic to give up on goals altogether, says psychotherapist Linda Blair, author of *Birth Order* (£12.99,

Piatkus). 'Your brain loves plans – it's what most of the front cortex is designed to do – but we've become too goal-orientated.' The key is working towards the *right* goals, but at the same time not getting hung up on the end result, says Lyubomirsky. 'The process is as important to wellbeing as attainment.' But how do you start? Here, experts reveal how to get on the right track for happiness – and how to enjoy the journey.

HAPPINESS HIJACKER: WAITING FOR WEIGHT LOSS

Think you won't be happy until you've dropped a dress size? You're not alone. Only 3% of UK women are totally happy with their body, 73% think about their size every day, and one in five of us worries about it 10 times a day. 'Our self-perception significantly affects our thoughts, behaviour and quality of life. Up to 33% of our self-esteem is directly related to body image,' says psychologist Dr Linda Papadopoulos (drlinda.com). →

GET BACK ON TRACK: FOCUS ON FITNESS

Switch your focus to getting fit and you'll boost your happiness levels. New research from the University of Florida found any kind of regular exercise improves body image, even before any physical changes take place.

It's the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, says psychotherapist Rachel Shattock Dawson (therapyon.thames.co.uk). 'An intrinsic goal – like training for a charity bike ride – is one you pursue because it is meaningful to you. But an extrinsic goal – like fitting into a size 10 to attend a wedding – is about getting approval from others.' Research shows you'll not only get more satisfaction from working towards an intrinsic goal, you'll be more likely to achieve it.

HAPPINESS HIJACKER: THE MONEY TRAP

Let's get real – it's hard to be happy if you're struggling to pay the mortgage. But research shows that once you've got enough money to live a comfortable life, more money won't make you happier. Research found that although British families are wealthier than 20 years ago, they're no happier. And studies show even lottery winners return to their previous levels of happiness within a year of winning. It's because as a species we've evolved to adapt to new experiences, however hard-won, so the boost in happiness they bring us doesn't last.

GET BACK ON TRACK: PUT PLEASURE BEFORE PAY

'Choosing a job that stretches you, teaches you a new skill or expands your talents will bring longer-lasting happiness than a pay rise,' says Blair. Why? Jobs that do this produce a state of complete

absorption called 'flow', where time flies and you're immersed in the moment.

Whatever you're doing (working, relaxing, socialising), ask yourself: 'Does this make me feel more like me, or less?' You'll feel happier if 80% of what you do fits well with who you think you are. 'The more you can say, "I love my work," and mean it, the happier you will be,' says Blair.

HAPPINESS HIJACKER: THE SELF-HELP TREADMILL

We're all capable of change, but getting hooked on self-improvement can stop you from accepting yourself, and ultimately sabotage your happiness, says Oliver Burkeman, author of *The Antidote: Happiness For People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking* (£15, Canongate). 'In one survey, 36% said that the more goals they had for themselves, the more stressed they felt – even though 52% said that one of their goals was to reduce their stress!'

The most counter-productive goal? Trying to be positive all the time. 'Feeling under pressure to think positively can be a cause of anxiety – studies show that repeating positive affirmations to yourself can actually lower self-esteem if you find them hard to believe.'

GET BACK ON TRACK: SMILE, AND DANCE!

It sounds simple, but just swapping positive thinking for smiling really works, says psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman, author of *Rip It Up: The Simple Idea That Changes Everything* (£12.99, Macmillan). His study asked 26,000 people to try things to make them happier. Some relived happy memories, others simply

smiled for a few seconds each day. A week later they rated their happiness – and those who smiled came top. 'Rather than trying to cheer yourself up by thinking happy thoughts, it is far quicker and more effective to simply behave as if you are having a good time,' he concluded.

HAPPINESS HIJACKER: THE IDEAL OTHER HALF

It's natural to want love in your life, and research shows married people are happier than single ones. But the effect of marriage on happiness is actually quite small, and a German study found that while couples experienced a happiness boost after the wedding, they returned to previous happiness levels

within two years. So if you're single, don't be fooled into thinking your state of mind would be transformed by finding 'the one'.

Getting caught up in the hunt for a partner can also damage your immediate happiness, says Shattock Dawson: 'A desperate search for Mr Right is not the answer because too often we settle on Mr Not-Quite-Right in the quest for love.'

GET BACK ON TRACK: EMBRACE YOUR VALUES

Switch your focus from the happy ever after to your values instead, says Dr Russ Harris, author of *The Reality Slap* (£9.99, Robinson). 'Values are your deepest desires for how you want to behave – the qualities you want to bring to your ongoing actions. You want to get married or have kids – these are goals. Values, in contrast, are how you want to behave as you move towards your goals; how you want to behave when you achieve them; and how

“
FOR A HAPPINESS
BOOST, FOCUS ON
LIFE EXPERIENCES
RATHER THAN
POSSESSIONS
”

5 WAYS TO BOOST YOUR HAPPINESS

Want to feel happier in the next five minutes? Here's how:

1 MOVE A MUSCLE, CHANGE A THOUGHT Studies prove that simply going for a walk improves mood – especially if you opt for somewhere green.

2 DO THE 3 Ws Psychologist Miriam Akhtar says, 'Ask yourself: "What's

going right in my life right now? What is there to be pleased with? What is there to be grateful for?"'

3 FLICK THROUGH OLD PHOTOS Simply going down memory lane with an old photo album boosts happiness by 10% more than eating and drinking, according to an Open University study.

4 ENJOY A SINGALONG Singing makes you feel happier than simply listening to music, according to research at the University of London.

5 FANTASISE Psychologist Laura King found taking five minutes to scribble down a description of your 'best possible future self' boosts positive emotions.

you want to behave when you don't,' says Dr Harris. 'If your values are to be loving, kind and caring, then you can behave in these ways right now and forever – even if you never achieve the goal of finding a partner or having kids. And it's our values that infuse our life with purpose.'

While a special person makes most of us feel happier, it's feeling connected to a wider community that will sustain your happiness in the long-term. 'Nurturing your wider network of family, friends and neighbours pays huge happiness dividends,' says Shattock Dawson.

HAPPINESS HIJACKER: THE IDEAL HOME

The drive for 'more' is hard-wired as a survival instinct – when we lived in caves, it helped us find the better food and living conditions that ultimately ensured our survival. We also receive more information now than ever before, so we're constantly exposed to images of what a 'perfect' lifestyle should look like. 'There's nothing wrong with being determined to get that dream house. Just don't expect to feel happier when you get there!' says Blair.

And while escaping into fantasies about your dream home may seem harmless, it can create a 'reality gap', says Dr Harris. 'On one side is the reality we have, and on the other is the reality we want. And the bigger the gap between the two realities, the more painful the feelings that will arise: envy, jealousy, disappointment, sadness, anger, guilt, resentment.'

GET BACK ON TRACK: ENJOY LIFE EXPERIENCES

'External fulfilment is important,' says Dr Harris. 'We all like to achieve goals. But it isn't always possible, which is why inner fulfilment – a deep sense of peacefulness, wellbeing and vitality – is crucial. It sustains you even when your goals aren't achieved.'

Spending money on life experiences, such as weekends away, will bring about longer lasting contentment than buying material possessions, according to a University of Colorado study. Those experiences are stored as happy memories, and we don't get as bored of memories as we do with material objects. But you don't have to give up shopping altogether, say researchers – just tweaking the balance of your spending so you invest just as much in experiences as home improvements, could bring greater life satisfaction and wellbeing. ♦

