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Happiness & All You Need To Know About The Science Behind It

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Happiness as a human pursuit is ingrained in our actions

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for as long as we can remember and positive psychology has taken this concept into the realm of scientific research in hopes of gaining a better understanding of global well-being and meaningful living.

Whether on a global or individual level the pursuit of happiness is one which is gaining traction and scientific recognition.

This article contains:

- ▶ **A Definition of Happiness**
- ▶ **Happiness Starts With You: A Study Showing How Acts of Kindness Make us Happier**
- ▶ **The Global Pursuit of Happiness**
- ▶ **Measures of Happiness**
- ▶ **Happiness Comes from Within: Train your Brain for Happiness**
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A Definition of Happiness

There are many definitions of happiness which can be cited here however in general, happiness is regarded as the positive emotions we have in regards to the pleasurable activities we take part in through our daily lives.

In scientific literature, happiness is referred to as hedonia (Ryan & Deci, 2001), the presence of positive emotions and the absence of negative emotions. Pleasure, comfort, gratitude, hope, and inspiration are examples of positive emotions which increase our happiness and move us to flourish.

In a more broad understanding, human well-being is made up of both **Hedonic** and **Eudaimonic principles**, the literature on which is vast and describes our personal meaning and purpose in life (Ryan et al, 2001).

Research on happiness over the years has found that there are some contributing correlational factors which affect our happiness. These include (Ryan, 2001):

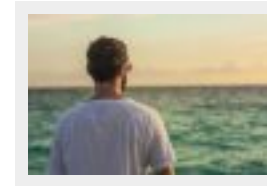
- 1) Personality Type
- 2) Positive Emotions versus Negative Emotions
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- 4) Social Class and Wealth
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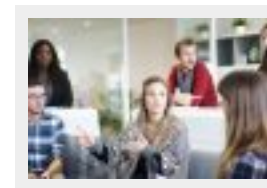
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There is also recent research by Assistant Professor of Swansea University **Katherine Nelson-Coffey** which has proven that performing acts of kindness can have powerful effects on our subjective well-being and overall happiness.

Happiness Starts With You: A Study Showing How Acts of Kindness Make us Happier

Feeling stressed after a long day of work? Treat yourself to a bubble bath. Feeling blue? Treat yourself to a decadent dessert. Feeling frustrated after an argument with a friend? Skip your workout and have an extra scoop of ice cream.

The message is clear: If you want to feel happy, you should focus on your own wishes and desires. Yet this is not the advice that many people grew up hearing. Indeed, most of the world's religions (and grandmothers everywhere) have long suggested that people should focus on others first and themselves second.

Psychologists refer to such behaviour as **prosocial behavior** and many recent studies have shown that when people have a prosocial focus, doing kind acts for others, their own happiness increases.

But how does prosocial behaviour compare to treating yourself in terms of your happiness? And does treating yourself really make you feel happy?

In a recent study published in the journal **Emotion**, Katherine Nelson-Coffey and her colleagues presented

their research answering these questions.

The Study

Participants were divided into four groups and given new instructions each week for four weeks.

One group was instructed to perform **random acts of kindness** for themselves (such as going shopping or enjoying a favorite hobby); the second group was instructed to perform acts of kindness for others (such as visiting an elderly relative or helping someone carry groceries); the third group was instructed to perform acts of kindness to improve the world (such as recycling or donating to charity); the fourth group was instructed to keep track of their daily activities. Each week, the participants reported their activities from the previous week, as well as their experience of positive and negative emotions.

At the beginning, the end, and again two weeks after the four-week period, participants completed a questionnaire to assess their psychological flourishing. As a measure of overall happiness- the questionnaire included questions asking about psychological, social, and **emotional well-being**.

The Results

The results of the study were striking. Only participants who engaged in prosocial behavior demonstrated improvements in **psychological flourishing**.

Participants who practiced prosocial behavior also demonstrated increases in positive emotions from one week to the next. In turn, these increases in feelings such

as happiness, joy, and enjoyment predicted increases in psychological flourishing at the end of the study. In other words, positive emotions appeared to have been a critical ingredient linking prosocial behavior to increases in flourishing.

But what about the people who treated themselves?

They did not show the same increases in positive emotions or psychological flourishing as those who engaged in acts of kindness. In fact, people who treated themselves did not differ in **positive emotions**, negative emotions, or psychological flourishing over the course of the study compared to those who merely kept track of their daily activities.

This research does not say that we shouldn't treat ourselves, **show ourselves self-love** when we need it or enjoy our relaxation when we have it. However, the results of this study strongly suggest that we are more likely to reach greater levels of happiness when we exhibit prosocial behaviour and show others kindness through our actions.

The Global Pursuit of Happiness

In world economic circles, Richard Easterlin investigated the relationship between money and well-being, the Easterlin paradox 'money does not buy happiness' (Mohun, 2012) sparked a new wave of thinking of wealth and well-being.

In 1972, Bhutan pursued a policy of happiness versus a focus on economic growth tracked via their gross domestic product (GDPP). Subsequently, this little nation has been among the happiest amongst nations with far

superior wealth (Kelly, 2012).

More global organizations and nations are becoming aware and supportive of the importance of happiness in today's world. This has led to The United Nations inviting nations to take part in a happiness survey, resulting in the '**World Happiness Report**', a basis from which to steer public policy. Learn about the **World Happiness Report for 2016**.

The United Nations also established **World Happiness Day**, 20th of March, which was the result of efforts of the Bhutan Kingdom and their **Gross National Happiness** initiative (Helliwell, Layard & Sachs, 2013).

Organizations such as **New Economic Foundation** are playing an influential role of an economic think tank which focuses on steering economic policy and development for the betterment of human well-being.

Ruut Veenhoven is a world authority on the scientific study of happiness and was one of the sources of inspiration for United Nations adopting happiness measures (Ki-Moon, n.d). Veenhoven is a founding member of the **World Database of Happiness**, which is a comprehensive scientific repository of happiness measures world -wide.

The objective of this organization is to provide a coordinated collection of data, with common interpretation according to scientifically validated happiness theory, model, and research.

Measures of Happiness

At this point, you might be wondering: Is it possible to measure happiness? Many psychologists have devoted

their careers to answering this question and in short, the answer is yes.

Happiness can be measured by these three factors: positive emotions, the absence of negative emotions, and **life satisfaction** (Ryan et al, 2001). It is a uniquely subjective experience, which means that nobody is better at reporting on someone's happiness than the individuals themselves. For this reason scales, self-report measures and questionnaires are the most common formats for measuring happiness. The most recognized examples are the following:

1)The PANAS (Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule),

2) **The SWLS (Satisfaction With Life Scale)** and

3) The SHS (Subjective Happiness Scale)

However, there are **many instruments available to measure happiness** which prove reliable and valid over time (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011).

Four Qualities of Life (Veenhoven, 2010): A South African Happiness Case Study

Another measurement of happiness was developed by Ruut Veenhoven. He constructed the model of **Four Qualities of Life** which positions and describes the construct of happiness in various dimensions (Veenhoven, 2010).

Of the four dimensions, satisfaction is the dimension which our personal subjective measure of happiness as we interpret life as a whole.Veenhoven's global research into happiness suggests that happiness is possible for

many (Veenhoven, 2010). This is an overview of his Four Qualities:

	Outer Qualities	Inner Qualities
Life Chances	Liveability of Environment	Life-ability of Individual
Life Results	Utility of Life	Satisfaction

Using Veenhoven’s Four Qualities it is possible to assess the Happiness of any country. In this case study, we will use the example of South Africa.

Liveability of Environment

This dimension includes factors such as law, freedom, schooling, employment etc. Similar to what Maslow proposed as basic needs (safety, security, shelter, food) (Maslow,1943).

In South Africa, there is still a chronic shortage of housing, water supply, and adequate schooling. For some time now, South Africa has been plagued by resultant ‘service delivery riots’.

Corruption shows as a strong negative correlation (-0.69) to happiness in Veenhoven’s (2010) research and sadly South Africa is plagued by a high-level of corruption and maladministration.

Life-ability of Individuals

The ability of individuals to deal with life is important; both **mental and physical health** are identified as important factors, together with social values of solidarity, tolerance, and love (Veenhoven, 2010).

In South Africa, the race divide is widening as this construct is used as a political motivator, to wield power to the detriment of the average individual. Violent crime, intolerance, and poverty also threaten **the presence of love and compassion** for each other.

Utility of Life

In this dimension, Veenhoven (2010) references a **higher order meaning**, for example, religious affiliations. The writer would further argue that national patriotism finds a place here.

If we hold strong pride in our nation would that not constitute input to our life's meaning? If we felt proud of our nation, would that not play a significant part in our happiness?

Uchida et al. (2013) found that high levels of national disaster negatively impacted a nation's level of happiness. Recently South Africa has experienced national tragedies such as Marikana mine tragedy and the passing of Nelson Mandela.

South Africa has come through a very unsettled and violent history of imperialism and apartheid. In both accounts, a minority population was 'protected' and experienced a 'good life', whilst the majority fuelled that good life.

The year 1994 was a significant time in history for South Africa, marking the turn of a democracy to serve all

equally. There is no doubt that a significant stride has been made to correct past imbalances, however, happiness has not been a focal area for progress in this country.

Suggestions To Increase Happiness In South Africa

It is obvious that many of our challenges in South Africa are of a political and administrative nature.

Happiness is a complex construct which cannot be directly controlled, however through policy and individual and organizational action we can endeavor to influence and increase happiness (Veenhoven, 2010). Here are some examples of how happiness in South Africa could be improved:

1. Street Packs -The distribution of food packs inclusive of positive psychology literature for the homeless which motorists can purchase from major retail stores or garages.
2. Happy South Africa movies consisting of what is going well with South Africa as a nation. Insight into each of our South African cultures which could be shown before each main feature at cinemas, or on each DVD.
3. All major newspapers could give a Happy South Africa news story.
4. Positive Psychology consultants could give class or road show teachings of the principles such as gratitude, mindfulness, meaning and purpose.
5. 'If you're happy and you know it clap your hands'-an overarching organization which could provide a consolidated portal to all volunteer and community organizations which are working to make South Africa happier.

3. Create a South African Happiness Community which researches local happiness.
7. 'It's a Gooaalllll'. Help communities scope local projects, to both obtain resources and project manage the initiatives to successful completion.
3. South Africa could engage and actively take part in the world happiness initiatives which are taking off globally.

South Africa is just one example of the many countries in the world that require greater advocacy, and action on an individual, organizational and governmental level.

However, happiness is a subjective experience and only once we **change the way we perceive the world** can we really begin sharing and creating happiness for others.

But is it possible to train yourself to be happier?

The answer is yes!

Happiness Comes from Within: Train your Brain for Happiness

At birth, our genetics provide us with a happiness set point that accounts for about 40% of our happiness. Having enough food, shelter, and safety makes up 10%. Then we have 50% that is entirely up to us.

By training our brain through **awareness** and **exercises** to think in a happier, more optimistic, and more resilient way; we can effectively train our brains for happiness.

New discoveries in the field of positive psychology show that physical health, psychological well-being and physiological functioning are all improved by how we learn to "feel good". (Fredrickson B. L. 2000)

What Are The Patterns We Need To “Train Out” of Our Brains?

1. **Perfectionism**– Often confused with conscientiousness which involves appropriate and tangible expectations, **perfectionism** involves inappropriate levels of expectations and intangible goals. It often produces problems for adults, adolescents, and children.
2. **Social comparison**–When we compare ourselves to others we often find ourselves lacking. **Healthy social comparison** is about finding what you admire in others and learning to strive for those qualities. However the best comparisons we can make are with ourselves. How are you better than you were in the past?
3. **Materialism**– People who attach their happiness to external things and material wealth. This is dangerous as they can lose their happiness if their material circumstances change (Carter, T. J., & Gilovich, T. 2010.).
4. **Maximizing**– Maximizers search for better options even when they are satisfied. This leaves them little time to **be present for the good moments** in their lives and with very little gratitude. (Schwartz, B., Ward, A., Monterosso, J., Lyubomirsky, S., White, K., & Lehman, D. R. 2002.)

Misconceptions About Mind Training

Some of the simple misconceptions about retraining your brain are simply untrue. Here are a few myths that need debunking:

- We are products of our genetics so we cannot create change in our brains.
Our minds are malleable. Ten years ago we thought

brain pathways were set in early childhood, in fact, we now know that there is huge potential for large changes through to your twenties and neuroplasticity is still changing throughout one's life. The myelin sheath that covers your neural pathways gets thicker and stronger the more it is used (think of the plastic protective covering on wires). The more a pathway is used the stronger the myelin, the faster the neural pathway. Simply put, when you **practice feeling grateful**, you notice more things to be grateful for.

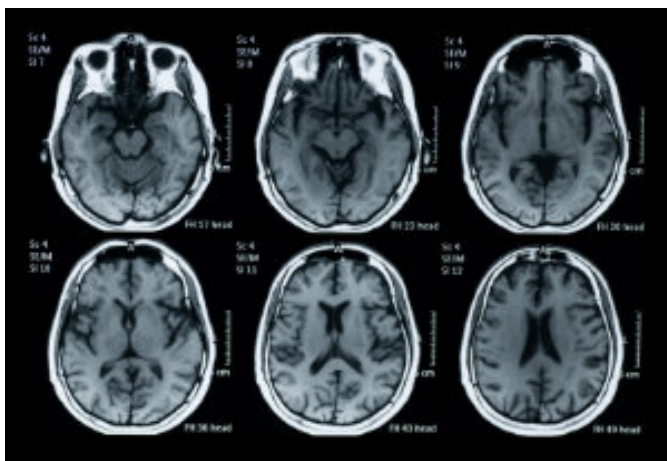
- Brain training is brainwashing.

Brainwashing is involuntary change. If we focus on training our mind to see the glass half full instead of half empty, that is a choice (And a healthy one!).

- If we are too happy we run the risk of becoming overly optimistic.

There is no such thing as overly-optimistic and science shows that brain training for positivity includes practices like **mindfulness** and gratitude. No one has ever overdosed on these habits.

How Is The Brain Wired For Happiness?



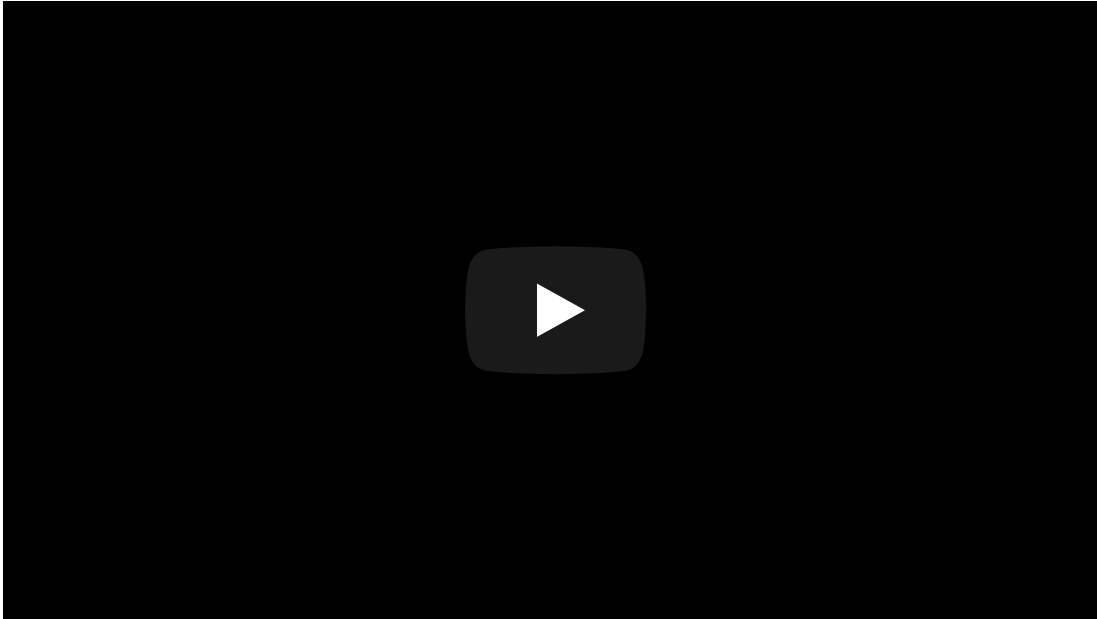
Our brains come already designed for happiness. We have caregiving systems in place for eye contact, touch and vocalizations to

let others know we are **trustworthy and secure**.

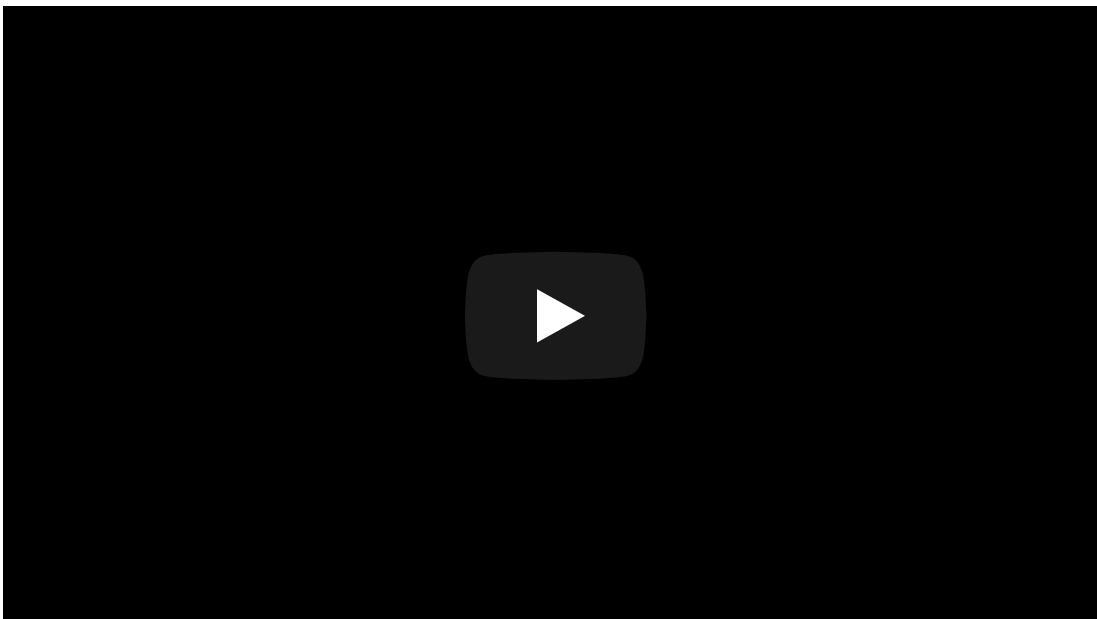
Our brains also regulate chemicals like oxytocin. People who have more oxytocin trust more readily, have increased tendencies to monogamy, and more caregiving behavior. These behaviors reduce stress which lowers

production of hormones like cortisol and inhibits the cardiovascular response to stress (Kosfeld, M., Heinrichs, M., Zak, P. J., Fischbacher, U., & Fehr, E. 2005).

Watch the following TED talk provides an insight into how we can overcome our negative mental patterns:



While this TEDtalk, gives a better understanding of how to wire your brain to accept the positivity and happiness in your life.



A Take Home Message

Happiness is the overall subjective experience of our positive emotions. There are many factors which influence our happiness and ongoing research continues to uncover what makes us our happiest.

This global pursuit of happiness has resulted in measures such as the World Happiness Report while the World Happiness Database is working to collaborate and consolidate the existing happiness pursuits of different nations.

We are living in a time when the conditions for happiness are known. This can be disheartening at times when we consider examples such as South Africa where political strife prevent much of the population from experiencing the Four Qualities of Life as presented by Veenhoven.

There is, however, good news in this situation; neuroplasticity.

The human brain is wired for happiness and positive connections with others. It is actually possible to experience and learn happiness despite what has been genetically hardwired.

In a world where the focus on happiness is growing and the mirror is turning back towards ourselves. The happiness of the world relies on the happiness within each one of us and how we act, share and voice the importance of happiness for everyone. What are the steps you are taking to make yourself and others happier?

About The Authors



Gary is a positive psychology enthusiast and a member of the British Psychological society. He has worked extensively in the technology business arena, but his passion and interest is in the field of human sciences.

Katherine Nelson-Coffey is an assistant professor of Psychology at Sewanee: The University of the South. She



earned her bachelor's of science in Psychology in 2008 and her Ph.D. in 2015, where she studied personality and social psychology with **Sonja Lyubomirsky**. You can read

about her research interests [here](#).

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17 Comments



Roge Sharp *December 28, 2016 at 6:15 pm* [Reply](#)

Random acts of anonymous kindness are toxic?

Good article, thanks. I thought I'd add this reminder about random acts of anonymous kindness. They may make the giver feel happier – it is not true for the recipient. At

best, it's a zero sum gain. No additional happiness created.

People on the receiving end do not think: "How very kind!". Instead, they want to know why and who because they are deeply suspicious of an ulterior motive. And frankly, it's a bit creepy.

So, if you do this yourself, you'll feel better (maybe) but don't think the the recipient will.



Seph Fontane Pennock *December 29, 2016 at 9:57 am* [Reply](#)

Hey Roge. Thanks for sharing your perspective on this matter. Can I ask you what you are basing this statement on? Is this your own experience, or did you come across it in a research paper? I'd be curious to find out more about this, especially because from what I've read and experienced random acts of kindness are the exact opposite of a zero sum game.

Let me know!



Caio Felix *October 19, 2016 at 11:16 pm* [Reply](#)

Katherine, your article leads us to realize our knowledge of how people can have true satisfaction in their lives. Thank you for providing your article.

George Shining Lyngkhai *September 7, 2016 at 4:00*



am [Reply](#)

This is a very enriching article indeed! I've always believed that prosocial behaviour is heavily rewarded with a sense of happiness, joy, satisfaction, personal growth, etc. Now it's no longer a speculation as Catherine has proved it through a research.

Thanks Catherine. Keep it up!



Catarina Lino *September 12, 2016 at 1:37 pm*

[Reply](#)

Appreciate your comment George, Katherine did a fantastic job with this article!



Dr. Mouna Abou Assali *September 6, 2016 at 5:31 pm*

[Reply](#)

Thank you so much for sharing the results of this interesting study. I felt really happy reading your findings as they confirm what the prophet of Islam Muhammad (PBUH) 1400 years ago said: (None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself). So being a prosocial or trying to drift the brain from being stressed out or depressed by helping others would trigger amazing positivity specially if not only related to our social environment, but also to our daily religious practices. I guess one reason of what's happening nowadays in this messy world is that we forgot about the (OTHER) and we allowed our (Egos) to manipulate our human senses!

Thanks again for the brilliant work shared. All the best



Catarina Lino *September 12, 2016 at 1:40 pm*

[Reply](#)

Thank you for your comment Dr. Mouna,

Glad to know you enjoyed Katherine's work, I think we all benefit from keeping this in mind.



Dr. Mouna A.A *September 12, 2016 at 8:07 pm*

[Reply](#)

Thank you Catrina. We only pray that the rest of the world would open their arms, inhale more positivity & exhale big doses of kindness 😊

Pingback: [Gratitude Journals: A Closer Look](#) -

Pingback: [What Is The "Good Life"? -](#)



Leonardo Mata *June 18, 2015 at 9:19 pm* [Reply](#)

Even those 40% in the genes are not necessarily hard wire. It is becoming more accepted that our environment and behavior can change gene expression through our Epigenetic processes.



Reham Al Taher *September 11, 2015 at 9:22 pm*

[Reply](#)

You're absolutely right. Any external event can forever change your reactions, such

as developing or extinguishing fears and behaviors. For example, the long-term effects of meditation can result in the increase of gray matter, which improves your memory, sense of self, stress levels, and more.



rajendra *June 6, 2015 at 10:19 am* [Reply](#)

40% is genetic? Then it is hard to change.



Seph Fontane Pennock *June 6, 2015 at 11:45 am* [Reply](#)

How's that Rajendra? Is it not enough to be able to exert influence over the 60%? If so, why not?



Tamara Lechner *June 7, 2015 at 6:41 pm* [Reply](#)

It is only as hard or as easy as you choose to believe. That's what positivity is all about. We get to decide in every moment if we are seeing half empty or half full. And the more you train your brain to see half full the better you become at finding the good things in life. There are some fabulous books about this like Positivity by Barbara Frederickson and The Happiness Advantage by Shaun Anchor.



Reham Al Taher *September 11, 2015 at 9:26 pm* [Reply](#)

Dear Tamara,

You're right, although it's easier said than done. I believe the toughest thing is training yourself for the mental shift that your mind is stubborn on changing. I wish there were more articles actually on long-term motivation or inspiration that keeps people persevering. Most of the time people get this type of fiery motivation where they want to change and become better, but then the fire dies out or in the first instance that occurs where they should apply their new positive techniques they instead go back to their old habits.



JP *April 8, 2016 at 10:14 am* [Reply](#)

James Clear has a free ebook that makes it clear – funnily enough -that u need to start really small and tether it to an existing habit...<http://jamesclear.com/habit>

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