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How to Be Happy

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Behavioral scientists have spent a lot of time studying what makes us happy (and what doesn't). We know happiness can predict health and longevity, and happiness scales can be used to measure social progress and the success of public policies. But happiness isn't something that just happens to you. Everyone has the power to make small changes in our behavior, our surroundings and our relationships that can help set us on course for a happier life.

[Mind](#) [Home](#) [Relationships](#) [Work and Money](#) [Happy Life](#)

Mind

Happiness often comes from within. Learn how to tame negative thoughts and approach every day with optimism.



Conquer Negative Thinking

All humans have a tendency to be a bit more like Eeyore than Tigger, to ruminate more on bad experiences than positive ones. It's an evolutionary adaptation — over-learning from the dangerous or hurtful situations we encounter through life (bullying, trauma, betrayal) helps us avoid them in the future and react quickly in a crisis.

But that means you have to work a little harder to train your brain to conquer negative thoughts. Here's how:

Don't try to stop negative thoughts. Telling yourself "I have to stop thinking about this," only makes you think about it more. Instead, own your worries. When you are in a negative cycle, acknowledge it. "I'm worrying about money." "I'm obsessing about problems at work."

Treat yourself like a friend. When you are feeling negative about yourself, ask yourself what advice would you give a friend who was down on herself. Now try to apply that advice to you.

Challenge your negative thoughts. Socratic questioning is the process of challenging and changing irrational thoughts. Studies show that this method can reduce depression symptoms. The goal is to get you from a negative mindset ("I'm a failure.") to a more positive one ("I've had a lot of success in my career. This is just one setback that doesn't reflect on me. I can learn from it and be better.") Here are some examples of questions you can ask yourself to challenge negative thinking.

First, write down your negative thought, such as “I’m having problems at work and am questioning my abilities.”

- Then ask yourself: “What is the evidence for this thought?”
- “Am I basing this on facts? Or feelings?”
- “Could I be misinterpreting the situation?”
- “How might other people view the situation differently?”
- “How might I view this situation if it happened to someone else?”

The bottom line: Negative thinking happens to all of us, but if we recognize it and challenge that thinking, we are taking a big step toward a happier life.

Controlled Breathing

Science is just beginning to provide evidence that the benefits of this ancient practice are real. Studies have found, for example, that breathing practices can help reduce symptoms associated with anxiety, insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and attention deficit disorder. For centuries yogis have used breath control, or pranayama, to promote concentration and improve vitality. Buddha advocated breath-meditation as a way to reach enlightenment.

Try it.

Rewrite Your Story

Writing about oneself and personal experiences — and then rewriting your story — can lead to behavioral changes and improve happiness. (We already know that expressive writing can improve mood disorders and help reduce symptoms among cancer patients, among other health benefits.)

Some research suggests that writing in a personal journal for 15 minutes a day can lead to a boost in overall happiness and well-being, in part because it allows us to express our emotions, be mindful of our circumstances and resolve inner conflicts. Or you can take the next step and focus on one particular challenge you face, and write and rewrite that story.

We all have a personal narrative that shapes our view of the world and ourselves. But sometimes our inner voice doesn’t get it right. By writing and then editing our own stories, we can change our perceptions of ourselves and identify obstacles that stand in the way of our personal well-being. The process is similar to Socratic questioning (referenced above). Here’s a writing exercise:

- Write a brief story about your struggle. *I’m having money problems. I am having a hard time making friends in a new city. I’m never going to find love. I’m fighting with my spouse.*
- Now write a new story from the viewpoint of a neutral observer, or with the kind of encouragement you’d give a friend.
- *Money is a challenge but you can take steps to get yourself into financial shape.*
- *Everyone struggles in their first year in a new city. Give it some time. Join some groups.*
- *Don’t focus on finding love. Focus on meeting new people and having fun. The rest will follow.*
- *Couples argue. Here’s what your situation looks like to a neutral observer.*

Numerous studies show that writing and rewriting your story can move you out of your negative mindset and into a more positive view of life. “The idea here is getting people to come to terms with who they are, where they want to go,” said James Pennebaker, a psychology professor at the University of Texas who has pioneered much of the research on expressive writing. “I think of expressive writing as a life course correction.”

Get Moving

When people get up and move, even a little, they tend to be happier than when they are still. A study that tracked the movement and moods of cellphone users found that people reported the most happiness if they had been moving in the past 15 minutes than when they had been sitting or lying down. **Most of the time it wasn’t rigorous activity but just gentle walking that left them in a good mood.** Of course, we don’t know if moving makes you happy or if happy people just move more, but we do know that more activity goes hand-in-hand with better health and greater happiness.

Practice Optimism

Optimism is part genetic, part learned. Even if you were born into a family of gloomy Guses, you can still find your inner ray of sunshine. Optimism doesn’t mean ignoring the reality of a dire situation. After a job loss, for instance, many people may feel defeated and think, “I’ll never recover from this.” An optimist would acknowledge the challenge in a more hopeful way, saying, “This is going to be difficult, but it’s a chance to rethink my life goals and find work that truly makes me happy.”

And thinking positive thoughts and surrounding yourself with positive people really does help. **Optimism, like pessimism, can be infectious.** So make a point to hang out with optimistic people.

Home

Where you live — the country, the town, your neighborhood and your home — all have an effect on your overall happiness.



Finding Your Happy Place

Imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?

This so-called happiness ladder is famously used as a way to measure and compare happiness across the globe. The “World Happiness Report” ranks countries based on the subjective well-being and happiness of people who live there and their responses to the ladder test. Here are the 10 happiest countries on Earth:

10 HAPPIEST COUNTRIES ON EARTH	
1. Finland (7.769)	6. Switzerland (7.480)
2. Denmark (7.600)	7. Sweden (7.343)
3. Norway (7.554)	8. New Zealand (7.307)
4. Iceland (7.494)	9. Canada (7.278)
5. Netherlands (7.488)	10. Austria (7.246)

Countries you’d expect to be happy — those with strong economies and quality of life — are still pretty happy, even though many fell short of the top 10 and could improve policies to make their citizens even happier. The United States (6.892) is ranked 19. France (6.592) ranked 24. Japan (5.886) was 58.

The least happy places on Earth are not surprising. They tend to be countries that have experienced war, natural disasters and hardship: 152. Rwanda (3.334) 153. Tanzania (3.231) 154. Afghanistan (3.203) 155. Central African Republic (3.083) 156. South Sudan (2.853).

One thing we’ve learned from the happiness report is that there are six variables that explain differences in human happiness across countries:

FACTORS THAT ACCOUNT FOR HAPPINESS WITHIN A COUNTRY

1. Gross Domestic Product per capita
2. Social support
3. Healthy life expectancy
4. Social freedom
5. Generosity
6. Absence of corruption

The research is intended for use at the public policy level, but there are lessons to learn at the personal level as well. **Find a sustaining and satisfying job; do your best to live in a happy place; surround yourself with social support; take care of your health; and be generous (in spirit, time and money) in order to pave your own personal road to happiness.**

Choosing a Happy Community

What factors make a community a place where people are happy? The Knight Foundation and Gallup interviewed 43,000 people in 26 communities to find out.

- **Openness:** People are happy when they live in a community that is welcoming to all.
- **Beauty:** Living in a scenic, picturesque or charming community, with lots of trees and green space, makes people happier.
- **Social opportunities:** When a community is designed to foster social connections — restaurants, community spaces, sidewalks, trails and other public spaces — people are happier.

The lesson is that where you live can have a profound effect on your happiness. If you don't fit in, if you don't know your neighbors, if walking outside doesn't put a spring in your step — find a new place to live if you can afford it. Explore new neighborhoods, rent before you buy, talk to friends, talk to potential neighborhoods and relocate your way to a happier life. The key, says Jay Walljasper, author of "How to Design Our World for Happiness," is to find a place where neighbors can encounter each other spontaneously. Look for neighborhoods with a green commons, sidewalks, parks, street festivals and community gatherings. If you're in the city, choose an apartment with a shared backyard or a street known for its Halloween festival or a community newsletter. Look for signs that the people there are connected and create opportunities to connect with each other on a regular basis.

Spend Time in Nature

Numerous studies support the notion that **spending time in nature is good for you**. We know that walking on quiet, tree-lined paths can result in meaningful improvements to mental health, and even physical changes to the brain. Nature walkers have "quieter" brains: scans show less blood flow to the part of the brain associated with rumination. Some research shows that even looking at pictures of nature can improve your mood.

Sunlight also makes a difference. Seasonal affective disorder is real. Epidemiological studies estimate that its prevalence in the adult population ranges from 1.4 percent (Florida) to 9.7 percent (New Hampshire). Natural light exposure — by spending time outside or living in a space with natural light — is good for your mood.

Declutter (But Save What Makes You Happy)

Getting organized is unquestionably good for both mind and body — reducing risks for falls, helping eliminate germs and making it easier to find things like medicine and exercise gear.

Excessive clutter and disorganization are often symptoms of a bigger health problem. People who have suffered an emotional trauma or a brain injury often find housecleaning an insurmountable task. Attention deficit disorder, depression, chronic pain and grief can prevent people from getting organized or lead to a buildup of clutter. At its most extreme, chronic disorganization is called hoarding, a condition many experts believe is a mental illness in its own right, although psychiatrists have yet to formally recognize it. While hoarders are a minority, many psychologists and organization experts say the rest of us can learn from them. The spectrum from cleanliness to messiness includes large numbers of people who are chronically disorganized and suffering either emotionally, physically or socially.

The chronically-messy person can change through behavioral therapy or with guidance from numerous self-help books on the topic. The goal, says the happiness guru Gretchen Rubin, is to free yourself from the weight of meaningless clutter but still surround yourself with useful, beloved things, ranging from a child's art work to your grandmother's tea cup collection. Get rid of the rest.

Some tips from the self-help, de-cluttering movement:

- Fold things neatly.
- Keep only items that make you truly happy.
- Throw away papers — all of them.
- Put all your clothes in one pile on the bed, then start discarding, keeping only those you wear and love.
- Organize your closet by color.
- Pick one thing to preserve a memory. Sentimentality breeds clutter. If your grandmother had 10 collections, choose one item from each — or pick the one collection that triggers the best memories.
- Stop buying tchotchkes on vacation. Take a picture.
- Spend money on experiences, not things.
- Take pictures of children's school projects. Keep a few items from the year, and keep culling year after year.

The 1-Minute Rule

One of my favorite bits of happiness advice comes from Ms. Rubin, author of “Happiness at Home” and many other useful guides and articles on happiness and good habits. She proffers a one-minute rule that I have found incredibly useful in my own life. Here it is:

Do any task that can be finished in one minute.

This simple sage advice helps you decide what to tackle in a messy room. Do the one-minute tasks first. Here's her list:

- Hang up a coat.
- Read a letter and toss it.
- Fill in a form.
- Answer an email.
- Jot down a citation.
- Pick up phone messages.
- File a paper.
- Put a dish in the dishwasher.
- Put away the magazines.

If you do nothing else, incorporate the one-minute rule into your life. It will give you a short boost of happiness after you accomplish so much in a short time — and as a bonus, you will end up with a cleaner room, which will also make you happy.

Good Things Happen in the Bedroom

A lot of potential for happiness happens in the bedroom. It's the place where we sleep, have sex and retreat for quiet contemplation — all of which are activities that can improve happiness. As a result, many people who study and write about happiness encourage people to focus on life in the bedroom.

A “living well” index created by British researchers found that the two strongest indicators of wellness being were sleep and sex. People who feel rested most of the time are happier than people who don't. The same can be said for people who are happy with their sex lives — they are happier overall than people with less-than-satisfactory sex lives.

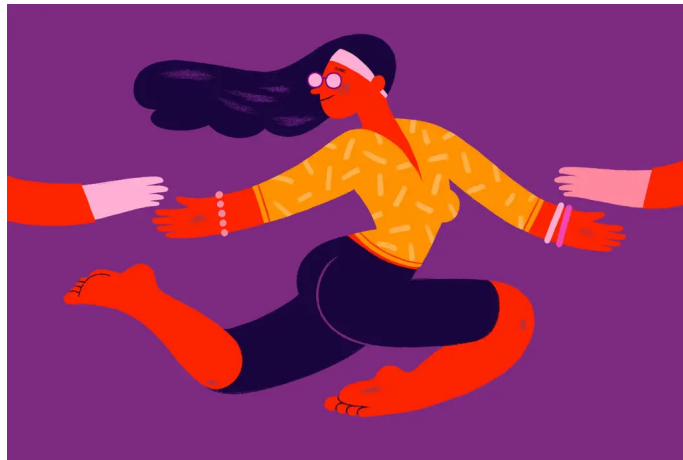
So as you think about your living space and how it's affecting your happiness, make the bedroom a high priority.

- *Turn your bedroom into a luxury hotel suite.* Think of the feeling you get when you escape to a nice hotel on vacation. Capture that in your home every day.
- *Invest in comfort.* Buy comfortable sheets, pillows and bedding and a quality mattress.

- *Don't skimp on window treatments.* Blocking out light will help you sleep better.
- *Remove the television.* Bedrooms are havens for sleep, sex and contemplation, not screen time.
- *Make the bed.* Ms. Rubin says that in talking to people about their own “Happiness Projects” and the small steps they take to be happier, she hears one remarkably consistent task — they make the bed. Making the bed starts your day off with a small accomplishment, and you can end your day returning to a neat, tidy welcoming retreat.

Relationships

We tend to be happier when we connect with other people.



Spend Time With Happy People

Studies consistently show that our own happiness is linked with the happiness of others. One of the ways we know this is from the Framingham Heart Study, a massive study started in 1948 that has tracked three generations of participants. The study was designed to identify risk factors for heart disease, resulting in reams of data on health, food, fitness habits, stress, family issues and happiness.

To measure happiness, the Framingham study asked people how often they experienced certain feelings during the previous week.

- I felt hopeful about the future.
- I was happy.
- I enjoyed life.
- I felt that I was just as good as other people.

Yale scientists decided to mine the data to study happiness and social networks. The structure of the study allowed them to track changes in happiness over time. And because the scientists who designed the study wanted to keep track of people, they asked participants to identify their relatives, close friends, place of residence and place of work. The result was a complete picture of the participants' social networks.

After parsing the data, the Yale researchers reached a number of conclusions about happiness:

- People's happiness depends on the happiness of others with whom they are connected.
- Social networks have clusters of happy and unhappy people.
- A person's happiness extends to three degrees of separation — meaning that it can influence (and be influenced by) their friends, their friends' friends, and the friends of people who are friends of their friends.
- People who are surrounded by many happy people are more likely to become happy in the future.
- Each additional happy friend increases your chance of happiness by about 9 percent.
- Geography matters. Our happiness increases when we live close to happy friends and family members.

Cats and Dogs Make Us Happy

Psychologists conducted a series of experiments to determine the role that pets play in our happiness. They found that **pet owners were happier, healthier and better adjusted than were non-owners**. Pet owners said they received as much support from their pets as they did family members. And people who were emotionally closer to the pets also tended to have deeper ties to the humans in their lives.

Dog owners who felt a strong connection to their pets were happier and healthier. And in one expressive writing exercise, writing about pets was just as effective as writing about a friend when it came to staving off feelings of rejection, according to the report published by the American Psychological Association.

You Can Be Happy Alone

Many people think of their marriages as a source of happiness. That's great, but it doesn't mean that if you're not married that you won't be happy.

In one study of 24,000 people in Germany over 15 years, researchers found that getting married only triggered a small bump in happiness, measured as one-tenth of a point on an 11 point scale. Of course, there were big variations among individuals. Some people were much happier after marriage; and sadly, some were much less happy after getting married. The bottom line was that **if you are already a happy person, you will not gain much extra happiness from marriage**, probably because you already have a rich social network. The extra companionship of marriage, while nice, doesn't have a marked impact on your overall sense of happiness.

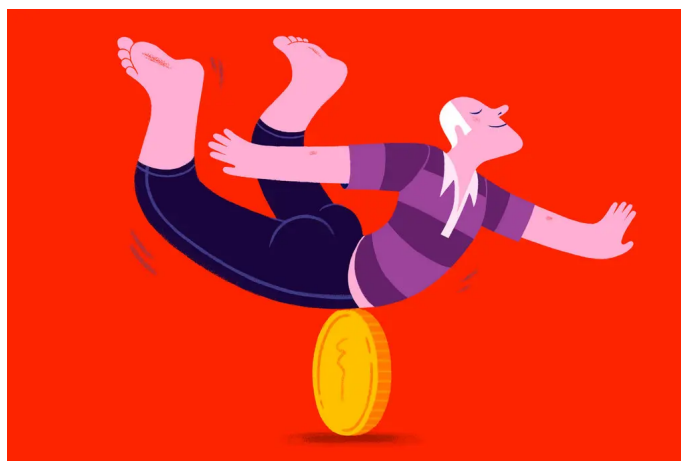
At the same time, if you lack a strong social network, you will get a bigger happiness benefit from partnering up. At the same time, a married person with a limited social network will suffer more after divorce or the death of a spouse. Here's what we know about relationships and happiness:

- Individual personality tends to influence overall happiness, married or not.
- Happier people are more likely to get married.
- Marriage triggers a short bump in happiness, but after two years, everyone settles back to pretty much the same level of happy they were before getting married.
- The more isolated you are now, the bigger the happiness benefit you will get from getting married.

The lesson: Improving all of our social connections and relationships is good for overall happiness. But if you are not married, or don't have a happy marriage, you can still improve your happiness by nurturing your friendships and social connections.

Work and Money

More money won't necessarily make you happier, but finding meaningful work and a little extra time will.



Money Doesn't Buy Happiness

We know you don't believe us. So tell us, what do you think will make you happy? More money? A bigger house? A dream job?

Most of the time, what we think will make us happy actually won't. **Studies show that happiness doesn't come from more money or more stuff.** Even lottery winners are not any happier than those of us who never win anything.

Of course, truly poor people are happier with more money because they don't have to worry about getting enough to eat, having a home or paying for medicine. But once people escape poverty and achieve a middle-class or slightly higher lifestyle, more money does not result in significantly more happiness.

The constant quest for the things we don't have is called the hedonic treadmill. It means that when we get what we want (money, job, love, house) we may get a burst of happiness, but we quickly settle back to our previous level of happiness and then start thinking about the next thing that will make us happy.

Find Purpose at Work

We like to complain about work, but it plays an important role in our happiness. Work, even the most mundane work, helps us feed our families, put roofs over our heads and connect with other people.

Ideally, we will find work that has meaning to us. But not everybody can quit their day job and pursue charity work or join Teach for America. As a result, it's important that we find ways to find meaning in our day-to-day work.

Studies show that we get satisfaction from all kinds of work — not just our dream job. Yale researchers studied custodians who worked in a hospital. Far from seeing the drudgery of their jobs, the janitors had unofficially broadened the definition of hospital custodial work. Many of them viewed their work as including providing comfort to patients, helping families find their way around the hospital and providing a clean, pleasant environment for doctors and nurses to do their work and for patients to heal.

Even people who do telephone solicitation — viewed by many as the bottom of the career ladder — can find satisfaction in work. Wharton professor Adam Grant arranged for a student to talk about the difference his scholarship made to his life. After the talk, the phone solicitors hired to raise money for the school's scholarship fund raised almost double the money as they had before. The work and pay hadn't changed, but their sense of purpose had.

In a column about Why You Hate Work, Christine Porath, a Georgetown associate professor, and Tony Schwartz, chief executive of a consulting firm called The Energy Project, found that the jobs that make us happiest are those that include four characteristics: renewal, value, focus and purpose.

- **Renewal:** Employees who take a break every 90 minutes report a 30 percent higher level of focus than those who take no breaks or just one during the day. They also report a nearly 50 percent greater capacity to think creatively and a 46 percent higher level of health and well-being. The more hours people work beyond 40 — and the more continuously they work — the worse they feel, and the less engaged they become. By contrast, feeling encouraged by one's supervisor to take breaks increases by nearly 100 percent people's likelihood to stay with any given company, and also doubles their sense of health and well-being.
- **Value:** Feeling cared for by one's supervisor has a more significant impact on people's sense of trust and safety than any other behavior by a leader. Employees who say they have more supportive supervisors are 1.3 times as likely to stay with the organization and are 67 percent more engaged.
- **Focus:** Only 20 percent of respondents said they were able to focus on one task at a time at work, but those who could were 50 percent more engaged. Similarly, only one-third of respondents said they were able to effectively prioritize their tasks, but those who did were 1.6 times better able to focus on one thing at a time.
- **Purpose:** Employees who derive meaning and significance from their work were more than three times as likely to stay with their organizations — the highest single impact of any variable in our survey. These employees also reported 1.7 times higher job satisfaction and they were 1.4 times more engaged at work.

Buying Time Promotes Happiness

When you are deciding how to spend your money, consider buying some more time. Harvard researchers found that spending money on convenience items and time-saving services help can lower stress and make us happier.

In two surveys of more than 6,000 people in the United States, Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands, the researchers found that when people spent money to save time, (such as ordering takeout food, taking a cab, hiring household help or paying someone to run an errand) they were happier than those who didn't.

Now it's possible that people who can afford time-saving help are happier to begin with. But in another experiment, Canadians were given \$80 over two weekends and told to spend it on material items or time-saving purchases. The time-savers had less time-related stress and a bigger increase in well-being.

But even very wealthy people can sometimes feel reluctant and guilty about the indulgence of spending money on maids, messengers and other helpers. But do it anyway if you can afford it. **Giving yourself the gift of more time, if you can afford it, is a quick and convenient way to a happier life.**

Happy Life

Being kind to others is a proven path toward happiness. And don't forget to be kind to yourself as well.



Esther Aarts Esther Aarts

Be Generous

Generosity makes people happier. As we noted earlier, generosity is one of the six variables found to consistently influence happiness in the World Happiness Report. And several studies have found that people who behaved generously were happier compared to people who made selfish decisions. In fact, **just thinking about being generous and kind triggers a happiness reaction in our brains.**

In a series of experiments in New Zealand, 50 people were promised 25 Swiss francs every week for four weeks (That's about \$25 a week in United States dollars). Half of the people were told to spend the money on themselves. The other half was instructed to spend the money on someone they knew.

The groups went through a series of exercises making decisions about how much money to give away in various scenarios. While the study subjects were making these decisions, the scientists were measuring brain activity in the parts of the brain where generosity, happiness and decision-making are processed.

The researchers found that simply promising to be generous activated neural changes related to happiness. And the more generous people were happier overall than those who behaved more selfishly. The lesson is obvious: If you're feeling blue, be generous with your money, your time and your resources. You will be glad you did.

Related Guide

How to Make a Plan for Giving

Most of us want to give. But then we're faced with the predicament of figuring out the details. This guide helps you come up with answers to all those questions and set a plan for giving that works for you.

Volunteer

Volunteering is linked to health benefits like lower blood pressure and decreased mortality rates. We also know that volunteering builds your resilience — your ability to bounce back from trauma, grief and other small and big setbacks in life.

A University of Exeter study found that volunteering is essentially a prescription for happiness that can prolong your life and make your years on earth better in many ways. After reviewing 40 studies on volunteerism, the researchers found that volunteering was associated with less depression, more life satisfaction and greater well being. In five large studies of volunteerism, volunteers had a 22 percent lower mortality rate during the study period.

Of course, it's possible that happier people are simply more likely to volunteer. But overall, the evidence supports a strong link between giving and happiness, and that includes giving your time to others.

Give Yourself a Break

Do you treat yourself as well as you treat your friends and family?

That simple question is the basis for a burgeoning new area of psychological research called self-compassion — how kindly people view themselves. People who find it easy to be supportive and understanding to others, it turns out, often score surprisingly low on self-compassion tests, berating themselves for perceived failures like being overweight or not exercising.

But it's time to give yourself a break and work on self compassion. People who score high on tests of self-compassion have less depression and anxiety, and tend to be happier and more optimistic.

Kristin Neff, a University of Texas psychologist, is the author of “Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself.” Dr. Neff has developed a self-compassion scale to help people measure their own levels of compassion for themselves. Take this mini-test to see if you are hard on yourself or more likely to give yourself a break. Use a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being “less likely to feel that way” and 5 being “very likely to feel that way.”

- I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.
- When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.
- When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.
- When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.
- When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself.
- When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through.
- When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.
- When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.
- When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective.
- I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies.

It's pretty obvious that if you score high on the first five questions and low on the rest, you are pretty tough on yourself. If your higher scores were in questions six to 10, then you are doing a pretty good job of practicing self compassion.

For those low on the self-compassion scale, Dr. Neff suggests a set of exercises — like writing yourself a letter of support, just as you might to a friend you are concerned about. Listing your best and worst traits, reminding yourself that nobody is perfect and thinking of steps you might take to help you feel better about yourself are also recommended.

Other exercises include meditation and “compassion breaks,” which involve repeating mantras like “I'm going to be kind to myself in this moment.”

Dr. Neff reminds us that it takes practice to be nice to yourself.

“The problem is that it's hard to unlearn habits of a lifetime,” she said. “People have to actively and consciously develop the habit of self-compassion.”

Tara Parker-Pope is a columnist covering health, behavior and relationships. She is the founding editor of Well, The Times's award-winning consumer health site. More about Tara Parker-Pope