

The Secret to Happiness and Well-Being



HAPPINESS, NEUROSCIENCE, SELF DEVELOPMENT
By [Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.](#)

Like love, happiness is often treated like a physical object we must find and snatch up. Yet, also like love, happiness is something we are more likely to cultivate within ourselves than stumble upon in our wanderings. As the Dalai Lama said, “Happiness is not something ready made. It comes from your own actions.”



Determining what these actions are is each individual’s personal adventure, but research can provide some guidance. [Studies](#) show that the happiest people are those who seek meaning as opposed to immediate gratification or pleasure. To find fulfillment, each of us must uncover our true hopes, ambitions, dreams and ideas, then make our actions match these ideals. As Albert Camus once wrote, “But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads?”

Of course, no matter how perfectly we conduct our lives, they won’t always be joyful. The happiest and fullest of life stories are sure to be colored with waves of pain and sadness. So, perhaps, a richer, more attainable goal than “happiness” is to seek well-being.

A 2011 study from the British Psychological Society concluded that “well-being amounts to more than mere happiness and involves a wide range of personal and social domains, including positive relationships and a sense of meaning and purpose in life.” Research reported in the [2015 World Happiness Report](#) found four new constituents of well-being and their underlying neural bases. According to the report “well-being has been found to be elevated when individuals are better able to sustain positive emotion; recover more quickly from negative experiences; engage in empathic and altruistic acts; and express high levels of mindfulness.”

These findings mirror the work of Dr. Richard Davidson, an award-winning psychologist and, most recently, the author of [The Emotional Life of Your Brain](#). At this year’s Wisdom 2.0 conference, I had the privilege of hearing Davidson speak on what he has discovered through his research to be the four elements of well-being. According to Davidson, these traits include:

1. Generosity — Being generous means taking an action toward another person that is attuned and sensitive to that person’s needs and wants. It involves being giving of ourselves in ways that extend beyond ourselves. As the [World Happiness Report](#) concluded, “well-being depends heavily on pro-social behavior,” which involves “individuals making decisions for the common good that may conflict with short-run egoistic incentives.” The report lists pro-social behavior as including “honesty, benevolence, cooperation and trustworthiness.”

Yet, generosity doesn’t just benefit the recipient of our offerings. It’s incredibly valuable to our own mental and [physical health](#). It can help naturally [reduce stress](#) and combat depression, while [enhancing our sense of purpose](#). It can even help [lengthen our lifespan](#). I write more about the surprising rewards of giving in my blog “[The Benefits of Generosity](#).”



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accomplish their goals.

This approach to life represents what my father [Dr. Robert Firestone](#) has identified as being in an adult mode, in contrast to maintaining a childish stance or adopting a parental/ judgmental point of view. He sees these characteristics as essential elements to being an emotionally healthy individual.

The idea that resilience is one of the primary keys to well-being is backed by Dr. Salvatore Maddi's 35 years of research into "[hardiness](#)," a form of psychological resilience that predicts how well we will do in our lives, relationships, personal goals and careers. Maddi's famous 12-year longitudinal [study](#) of Bell Telephone employees concluded that "hardiness is the key to the resiliency for not only surviving, but also thriving, under stress. Hardiness enhances performance, leadership, conduct, stamina, mood and both physical and mental health."

3. Attention — As Davidson describes it, attention involves being present and putting our focus where we want it. This places us in a receptive rather than a reactive mode. [Mindfulness](#) can be extremely useful in this process, as it helps us to develop our ability to focus our attention and cultivate a sense of presence. When we remain in the present moment fully experiencing our lives, we are able to concentrate on what currently needs tending to and thereby take the necessary steps to reaching our long-term goals. The many [benefits of mindfulness meditation](#) include reduced stress and exhaustion and increased psychological well-being, self-esteem and quality of life.

4. Goodness — According to Davidson, we are all better off when we believe in the basic goodness of our fellow human beings and ourselves, for that matter. If we adopted this principle, we'd all feel less aggressive and experience less violence in our society. Dr. Kristin Neff, who's done extensive [research](#) on the benefits of self-compassion, also lists "common humanity" as one of three key elements to self-compassion.

"All humans suffer," said Neff. "The very definition of being 'human' means that one is mortal, vulnerable and imperfect. Therefore, self-compassion involves recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience — something that we all go through rather than being something that happens to 'me' alone."

In his book [The Ethics of Interpersonal Relationships](#), Dr. Robert Firestone addresses the benefits of seeing our common humanity and outlines the dangers of focusing on our differences and the need to see "our group" as superior.

Truly adopting these four principles of well-being into our lives can help us to live a more harmonious and rewarding existence. However, there is a fifth element I would add that can enhance our ability to live a more generous, resilient, attentive and good life, and that is differentiation.

5. Differentiation — For each of us to tap into our inner strength and live in an "adult mode," we must differentiate from negative past influences and programming that act as overlays on our behavior. We must identify and separate from unhealthy adaptations we've made to our past. These include destructive attitudes and unfavorable ways of seeing ourselves and our abilities as well as of viewing others and their shortcomings. This process of differentiation, developed by my father, involves four key steps, which I explain in more detail in my blog, "[Becoming Your Real Self](#)." Put most simply, the steps are:

1. Separate from destructive attitudes that were directed toward us that we've internalized
2. Differentiate from negative traits of parents and other influential caretakers

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pressures that have shaped our psychological defenses. It helps us shed unneeded armor, mechanisms and patterns of behavior we’ve built up that actually prevent us from achieving these essential tasks for psychological and physical well-being.

While the process of differentiation may sound like it’s all about you, in truth, this focus on yourself isn’t selfish. It benefits everyone, because in being happier more fulfilled individuals, we have more value to those around us. Enhancing self-understanding and self-compassion extends our understanding and compassion for others. Feeling good about ourselves allows us to be good to the people in our lives.

Like, generosity, resilience, attention and goodness, differentiation provides a powerful lamplight on the pathway to well-being. It is a means of finding meaning and a method of fulfilling our unique destiny. And while none of these principles seem to offer an overnight, quick fix to the challenges in life, they do reveal a way of living that enhances our overall quality of life.

About the Author



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Dr. Lisa Firestone is the Director of Research and Education at **The Glendon Association**. An accomplished and much requested lecturer, Dr. Firestone speaks at national and international conferences in the areas of couple relations, parenting, and suicide and violence prevention. Dr. Firestone has published numerous professional articles, and most recently was the co-author of *Sex and Love in Intimate Relationships* (APA Books, 2006), *Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice* (New Harbinger, 2002), *Creating a Life of Meaning and Compassion: The Wisdom of Psychotherapy* (APA Books, 2003) and *The Self Under Siege* (Routledge, 2012). Follow Dr. Firestone on Twitter or Google.

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