

BeWell Newsletter

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5 Simple Habits to Make You Healthier & Happier

Happiness has become a popular field of study for researchers over the last decade, and universities are creating whole courses around the topic. Dr. Laurie Santos, a professor in psychology and cognitive science, teaches a hugely popular course on happiness at Yale and is a leading researcher on the science of happiness. Through her research, she has developed science-based recommendations on how we can increase our happiness levels. Here are five simple ways we can create happier, healthier lives for ourselves.

1. List three things you feel grateful for every day

According to Santos, writing down three awesome things about your day can have a significant effect on retraining your brain to feel more gratitude and, as a result, feel happier. Pairing this practice with another habit, such as brushing your teeth, can enhance your awareness and make it easier to remember to do each day. Becoming more aware of the things for which you feel grateful—even small things such as your morning cup of coffee or a call from a friend—is a great way to help you focus on the positives in your life rather than the things you may perceive to be lacking.

2. Get moving

People who are physically active for even small amounts of time each week (150 minutes or less) have lower odds for developing depression. And the options for adding activity to your day are endless. Take your dog for a walk, for example, or go to a playground and play on the equipment. Practice mobility drills while watching your favorite television show. Find stairs and take them. Go for an easy swim in a lake or work in the garden. The point is to get moving, whenever and wherever you can.

3. Spend time in nature and unplug

The writer Anne Lamott wrote, “Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.” Taking time away from technology is important, particularly for those who feel overstimulated and fatigued by constant notifications and work-related stress. And if you can unplug outdoors, even better. David Strayer, a professor and cognitive psychologist, has been researching brain-based measures in cognitive restoration and believes that spending time in nature is important for elevating mood and reducing stress. For example, one study of people walking through an urban green space showed that participants’ brains exhibited lower frustration, engagement and arousal while in the green area. So get outside without any tech. Again, the possibilities are endless. Walk through a garden. Go hiking. Scramble up some rocks. Run barefoot in the grass. Rent a canoe. Listen and take it all in, allowing nature and its calming effects to wash over you.

4. Take care of others

Acts of kindness make us happier and spending time caring for others is a great way to increase your happiness level, says Santos. “Spending time and money on ourselves isn’t as fulfilling as focusing your time and money on other people,”

Santos explains. “Those that volunteer more, tend to be more on the happier side than those that do not volunteer.” Pure altruism—the kind that you want to do rather than feel obligated to—has long-lasting effects on happiness levels, so take some time to think about issues or causes that speak to you and consider what simple acts you can take to help. Could you offer to go grocery shopping for those who may be unable to leave their homes or take dinner to someone who recently had a baby? If you love nature, consider planting perennials for bees and butterflies. Send a friend a favorite book. Bring in your neighbor’s garbage cans. Send a card full of encouragement to someone who needs it, or volunteer for your favorite organization. Time spent helping others is time well spent.

5. Meditate

So much of modern life is geared toward getting as much done as possible, which leads to increased stress and anxiety. Meditation is a way to use the breath to help calm the nervous system. When you breathe properly, the diaphragm stimulates the vagus nerve, which helps you connect to the parasympathetic system. Just 10 minutes a day can begin to change the patterns of your brain. While starting a meditation practice can feel challenging, here are some ideas on how to get started: Begin your day in silence, before you check your phone for emails or texts. Find a comfortable chair or go outside and find a peaceful spot where you can pause and bring awareness to your breath. Close your eyes and count your breaths for 10 minutes. You can also find many useful apps that will help guide your meditation practice, which can be particularly useful for beginners. While learning to meditate requires discipline and practice, it doesn’t have to require a lot of time and you don’t have to do it perfectly to reap the benefits.

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Exercise at Home With YouTube: Videos to Avoid and Videos to Watch

When you need the convenience of an at-home workout, YouTube is overflowing with options. A quick search for the type of exercise you want to do and length (e.g., barre, 20 minutes) leads to dozens or even hundreds of videos. However, the ease of finding a workout contrasts with the need to watch for red flags regarding exercise safety, quality of the workout and tone of workout messages.

Exercise Safety

When following an at-home exercise video, no one is checking on your form and offering specific suggestions for safety. The person leading the workout should include exercise modifications and it's important that you do what feels right for your body and fitness level. You can also look for workouts that include additional people in the video who are demonstrating the modifications.

Quality of the Workout

On YouTube, anyone can post an exercise video, qualified or not. Check the YouTuber's channel information. If they have qualifications, they will likely display this information. Certifications, such as those from ACE, ensure the person leading the class has met an expected level of competence for that certification. If you would like to verify the instructor's credentials you can do so by visiting the US Registry of Exercise Professionals

Another way to determine the quality of a workout is the class design. It is standard practice for exercise classes to have a warm-up, main workout, cool-down and stretch. However, it is common for YouTube videos to get straight to the main workout without the other components or have abbreviated versions of these components. There are, however, some easy fixes for this:

- If there is not a warm-up, pause the video and march in place for the length of a song (3-5 minutes). Remember, the purpose of the warm-up is to prepare the body for the more intense activity to follow. Make sure the warm-up adequately prepares you for the main workout.
- If you do not feel ready for the main workout after the warm-up, restart the video to repeat the warm-up. For example, if the warm-up lasts 30 seconds and the next move is burpees, pause the video and keep going with the warm-up.
- If there isn't a cool-down or you feel your heart rate is too high after the main workout, repeat some of the exercises in the main workout, but at a lower intensity. For example, if you were lunging forward, side and back, you can change those to toe taps forward, side and back. The cool-down should mirror the warm-up and be of equal duration and intensity.
- If there isn't a stretch component, consider the muscles worked in the video. Did you do a lot of push-ups? Stretch your chest. Squats? Stretch the glutes, quadriceps, and hamstrings. The

ACE Healthy Living Blog includes a wide range of articles with pictures on how to stretch a variety of muscles.

Ultimately, listen to your body and keep moving even if the exercise in the video is not working for you because it is too complicated or painful you can do an exercise swap and continue your workout with a move of your choice that is more enjoyable. Another red flag to watch for is up/down/up/down movement, where one exercise is completed standing and the heart rate elevates, followed by an exercise on the floor and then another standing exercise. Repeatedly going up and down can cause dizziness so avoid this type of movement. Exercises should gradually move from up to down or down to up over the course of the video.

Tone of Workout Messages

The person leading the workout has the ability to influence the viewer of the video, which is why the instructor's words are important to note. Is the person leading the video motivating and inspiring or belittling and body shaming? You should feel good when you move your body so click to another video if needed.

Also, be aware of product promotion. Many YouTubers get video sponsorships to promote a product as a source of income. Product promotion is not necessarily good or bad, but it may influence the messages you hear. For example, you shouldn't be told you need a specific product to perform a certain exercise when it is not needed.

Checklist for YouTube workout videos to watch:

- Warm-up: Heart rate gradually increases
- Main workout: Logical sequence of exercises; gradually move from up to down or down to up over the course of the video; not up/down/up/down for each exercise; enjoyable
- Cool-down: Heart rate gradually decreases
- Stretch: Muscles used in the exercises are stretched; range of motion is addressed
- Instructor: Uses positive/motivating language; provides exercise modifications

As in real life, there will be YouTube instructors you connect with and others you simply don't. Cue up several videos you would like to try—if you don't connect with the first video, you have another lined up and workout time is not wasted trying to find another video.

While working out with a certified exercise professional is ideal, being able to spot red flags when working out at home with YouTube can alert you when to click away or find ways to improve your workout.

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