



The Link Between Happiness and Health

Happiness and health have been anecdotally linked for quite a while now--'laughter is the best medicine' has become a cliché for a reason--but relatively new research has been backing up what many people have instinctively assumed all along: that happiness and health really are connected, and that one's level of happiness really can impact the level of one's health.

The relatively new field of [Positive Psychology](#) is exploring the factors that contribute to [emotional resilience](#), happiness and health, among other life-affirming topics, and what we now know for certain about these topics can help us all live healthier, more meaningful lives--and reduce stress.

"Experiences that induce positive emotion cause negative emotion to dissipate rapidly. The strengths and virtues...function to buffer against misfortune and against the psychological disorders, and they may be the key to building resilience. The best therapists do not merely heal damage; they help people identify and build their strengths and their virtues," wrote Martin Seligman, the father of the field of Positive Psychology, in his book *Authentic Happiness*. And solid research continues to culminate, supporting this view. Here are a few studies on happiness and health:

- **Happiness and Longevity:** A landmark study involving nuns was able to pinpoint health benefits that come with positive emotion. (Nun studies work well because so many other lifestyle variables are uniform, so reported differences can often be narrowed down to a handful of factors, like personality and outlook.) In studying the lives and deaths of the nuns, given clues to their emotional state, researchers were able to make an important discovery about happiness and health--positive emotion is correlated with longevity! 90% of the most cheerful quarter of nuns was alive at the age of eighty-five, whereas only 34% of the least cheerful quarter lived to that age. Similarly, 54% of the most cheerful fourth was alive at age ninety-four, versus 11% of the least cheerful.
- **Happiness and Marriage:** As if that's not enough, positive emotion is also linked by research to marital satisfaction. In another astonishing study, researchers were able to examine the cheerfulness of smiles in women's yearbook photos and predict which ones, on average, would be more likely married, stay married and experience more personal wellbeing over the next thirty years. (Hint: it was, again, the most cheerful group.) What's striking about this is that healthy relationships are linked to strong immunity and, thus, overall health and so the 'upward spiral' continues.
- **Happiness and Optimism:** Researchers have also found [optimists](#) to have longer lives. Optimism is distinct from positive emotion, though the two are related. Rather than just being cheerful, however, optimists tend to see the world in a distinct way: when positive events occur in their lives, they give themselves personal credit, attribute the cause to lasting traits under their control, and see each good event as a sign that more positive events are to come. (See this article for more on [traits of optimists](#).) This specific lens through which they see the world allows them to maintain more of an [internal locus of control](#) (a sense of personal control), as well as resulting health-promoting behaviors and is associated with many benefits, including longevity: one study found that optimists had a 19% longer life span on average. Clearly, happiness and health can be linked by optimism.
- **Happiness and 'Mature Defenses':** Another factor that's closely related to positive emotion and optimism is a set of strengths known as 'mature defenses'. These traits, which are not displayed by everyone, and vary over a lifespan, include [altruism](#), the ability to delay gratification, future-mindedness and [humor](#). According to a Harvard study that followed a cohort of men through their lives, the mature defenses are closely linked with joy in living, high income and a vigorous old age in men from varied backgrounds.
- **Happiness and Health:** Happiness researcher Robert Holden conducted a survey and found that 65 out of 100 people would choose happiness over health, but that both were highly valued. Fortunately, we don't have to choose: happiness and health go hand-in-hand. As Holden stated, "There is no true health without happiness."

There is also ample evidence that unhappiness—depression, [anxiety, and stress](#), for example—are also linked to poor health outcomes. These negative states, if [chronic](#), can dampen immunity and increase inflammation in the body leading to a multitude of diseases and [conditions](#). The principles of Positive Psychology can combat these negative states, further increasing the likelihood of good health.

Source [By Elizabeth Scott, M.S.](#) http://stress.about.com/od/happinessandpositivity/a/happiness_and_health.htm

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