Small things proven to increase happiness

By Dr. Alyssa Musgrove

Do you want to be happier? Research has shown positive psychological well-being is directly linked with lower blood pressure, lower risk of heart disease, healthier cholesterol profiles and stronger immune function.

Happiness can be hard to define. Some experts describe it as having more positive emotions than negative emotions, and an overall satisfaction with life. Others view happiness as feeling good, living good and feeling part of a larger purpose. Although some factors that affect happiness might be out of our control (certain life circumstances or tragedies), there are always actions we can take to elevate our mood. Here are a few of the most effective Happiness Hacks:

**Spend time outside**

Exposure to fresh air and natural light stimulates the release of endorphins, resulting in increased energy and positive mood. Just 20 minutes of sun exposure a day helps optimize vitamin D3 levels. (Vitamin D3 deficiency has been associated with chronic depression and Seasonal Affective Disorder. ) Mushrooms are one of the better food sources of vitamin D and are also rich in the antioxidant selenium. If you cannot get out in the sun and don’t like mushrooms, flavorless vitamin D3 drops are available to help support optimal levels.

**Smell some citrus**

Citrus scents and essential oils like orange, lemon, grapefruit and lime have been shown to improve mood, lower anxiety and create a higher level of calmness.

**Spend time with a furry friend**

Whether you own a pet, or temporarily foster one, animals have been shown to increase levels of happiness, sociability and activity. The Oconee Regional Humane Society is always looking for foster families, and they also encourage people to stop by to pet and love on the animals.

**Turn up the music**

Jamming out to your favorite upbeat songs can help reduce anxiety and stress. That’s because listening to music you enjoy triggers the brain to release the feel-good chemical dopamine and lowers levels of cortisol, a stress hormone.

**Exercise**

Whether it be an hour-long cardio session or a 20-minute walk around the neighborhood, exercise releases endorphins, which naturally elevate mood. In fact, research suggests regular physical activity may lead to lasting happiness, and is one of the most effective ways to prevent and treat depression.

**Pick a bouquet**

Flowers not only brighten a room but also brighten up your mood. Looking at flowers first thing in the morning leads to feeling happier and more energetic. Flowers can also brighten up your 9-to-5 workspace and have been shown to help increase creativity.

**Practice gratitude**

Having an attitude of gratitude can boost feelings of happiness and lead to an overall increase in energy and optimism. Consider writing down three things you are grateful for before you turn in for the night.

**Try yoga**

Yoga boosts your mood by integrating mental, physical and spiritual elements. At times yoga can be viewed as a form of meditation that demands your full attention as you move from one yoga position to another. Yoga increases balance and flexibility, while also centering and calming the mind.

**Help another**

Volunteering can improve health, happiness and longevity. Researchers have found when people dedicate time or money to help others, they experience higher self-esteem and psychological well-being.

**Don’t forget your beauty sleep**

Skimping on sleep can damage our daily performance and mood. Studies have shown that when we are sleep deprived, the function of the hippocampus (the part of the brain that processes our positive thoughts and memory) declines. Shoot for 7 to 8 hours of sleep a night, and make time to catch a nap if necessary.

Happiness is not only one of the most positive emotions we can experience, but it’s also the key to a fulfilled, healthy life. Incorporate as many of these happiness hacks into your life as you can, and you will be on your way to a healthy, happier you!