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IWK Health Centre

So You Want To Be Happy? The Secret to Mental Wellness and Happiness

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Summary: For millennia, philosophers have pondered the question of happiness and how to achieve it. Most would agree, that happiness is not simply about searching for hedonistic, pleasurable experiences. Rather, mental wellness is about having connections to people and activities that give one a sense of 1) belonging, 2) purpose, 3) hope and meaning.

What is the Secret to Happiness and Mental Wellness?

Everyone wants to be happy, i.e. have mental wellness, the state of well-being where we feel contentment, love, satisfaction, pleasure or joy. Throughout history, people have struggled to find the secret to happiness.

Mental wellness can be defined as the “state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and is able to make a contribution to her or his own community” (Health Canada, 2014).

But simply living a life of pleasure is not enough to lead to a life of happiness. A life spent simply focused on entertaining oneself and having fun and leisure all the time, is not going to lead to true happiness.

Rather, happiness and mental wellness is the positive side effect that happens when people live a life with belonging, purpose, meaning and hope:

- **Belonging** is when a person feels connected to their family, community and culture;
- **Purpose** is having something to do in one’s life, whether it is through education, employment, caregiving, or cultural ways of being and doing;
- **Meaning** is seeing how one’s life is part of something bigger than just oneself, and how one’s life is part of their family, community;
- **Hope** is feeling positive about the future.

Strategies for Mental Wellness

Research shows that the following activities can contribute to mental wellness:
Take Care of Your Body

- **Sleep.** Ensure that you sleep ideally 9-11 hrs a day. There is an epidemic of sleep deprivation in many modern societies. Interestingly enough, the symptoms of sleep deprivation match those of depression.
- **Nature**. Spend more time in nature. The exact time is uncertain, but studies on eye health suggests that humans need at least 10 hrs / week (i.e. at least 1-hr daily outside).
- **Movement and exercise**. At least 30-minutes a day of aerobic exercise (e.g. walking), ideally outside in nature. For more information, visit the Public Health Agency of Canada.
- **Nutrition and diet**. Ensure a well balanced diet consistent with Canada's Food Guide recommendations, and try to ensure that you:
    - Eat plenty of multicolored fruits and vegetables ("rainbow diet")
    - Get enough omega 3 fatty acids, e.g. consume fish, or vegetable sources such as flax seeds
    - Limit excessive calories
    - Limit processed foods
    - Limit soft drinks including artificial sweeteners
    - Limit animal fats.
- **Relaxation and stress management.** Ensure that you have ways to relax and manage stress levels. Modern society is stressful, and it is thus important to have practices such as relaxation, meditation, deep breathing or mindfulness to help cope with stress.
- **Reduce overuse of technology**. Do not let devices replace human contact or contact with nature. Limit recreational screen time, e.g. watching movies / TV.

Take Care of Your Social Needs

- **Invest time and energy in positive relationships with family and friends.** Most humans are social creatures and need social interaction.
    - If you have people that make you feel supported, then great. Thank them for being supportive.
    - If you have people that are not so supportive, then gently let them know what you need. Most of the time, what people need for emotional support is simply someone to listen and validate your feelings (as opposed to someone giving you advice and judgement). So you might say things like, "I know that you want to be helpful. Right now, all I need is for you to listen and validate how I feel. I'll let you know if I need advice or suggestions on what to do. Thank you."
    - Do things with other people such as going for a walk, a meal or having a coffee, tea or hot chocolate…
    - If you are not a big people person, then have other activities or things which give you a sense of connection and purpose...

Take Care of Your Mind

- **Have fun.** Ensure that you have enjoyable and pleasurable activities such as those that are:
    - Fun and humour, e.g. watching or listening comedy
    - Creative, e.g. art, music, dance, reading
    - Games and sports
- **Altruism and acts of kindness:** Practice altruism by being giving to others and performing acts of kindness. This can range from simply doing good deeds for others (e.g. helping someone with their household chores such as cooking, groceries or laundry), or volunteer work, or other work.
- **Gratitude**. Be grateful for that which you have in life. Thank those that are important in your life
- **Forgive others**: Holding on to anger and resentment hurts you more than the other person. Forgiving others allows you to move on.
- **Be present.** Live in the present moment, as opposed to focusing on the past, or future.
- **Learn positive coping skills**. Studies confirm that people are happier when they have positive attitudes and emotions and coping behaviours, as opposed to negative attitudes, emotions and coping behaviours.

Take Care of your Spirit

- **Be spiritually involved**. There is more to the world that just you. Find a way to feel connected to other people, the world, the universe. Consider going to church, synagogue, mosque, temple or joining a religion. Or consider a spiritual practice such as meditation, or spending time in nature. All of those help you feel connected to things beyond yourself.

- **Practice self-acceptance and self-compassion.** Unfortunately, many of us tend to have a self-critical voice that makes us feel guilty or ashamed. Perhaps it’s because we think that being self-critical will be helpful, but unfortunately, it usually doesn't help and just makes us feel worse.
    - Accept that you are imperfect and flawed, because after all, you are only human. If you suffer from depression, remind yourself that humans get depressed, and you are human. At the same time, it means you are not alone…
    - Do you struggle at finding that self-compassionate voice? If so, try to think about what you'd tell a friend who is suffering from depression, or dealing with a difficulty? You'd say things like "It’s okay, I'm here with you…" Try to work at being a bit more accepting and supportive of yourself. Because after all, you are human, and humans get depressed, and it’s okay.

      "It’s not your job to like me. It’s mine" -- Toni Bernard

About this Document

Written by the eMentalHealth.ca Team.

References

Health Canada: First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework, 2014.

Further Readings

The New Science of Happiness, TIME Magazine, 2005.
Weblink: http://www.time.com/time/2005/happiness/

The Happiness Project, a blog and bestselling book by Gretchen Rubin.
Weblink: http://www.happiness-project.com/

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