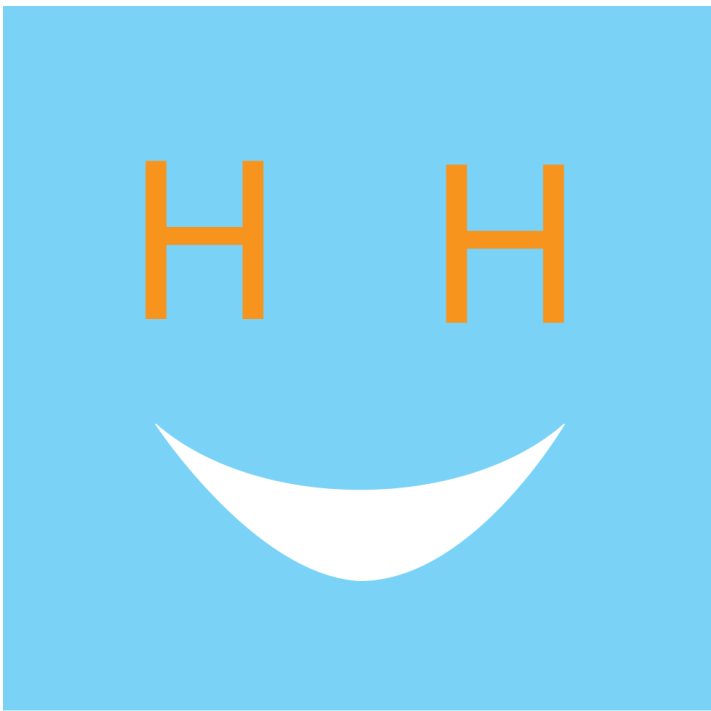


happier  
human



# The Happiness Report

**16 Happiness Strategies That Work**

**by Amit Amin**

# Introduction

Over the past 50 years, our GDP per capita has increased by 400% - we're 4 times richer than our grandparents.

But over that same period, self-reports of life satisfaction and happiness have increased 0%, and rates of depression have increased 200% to 600%.

We're laughing and loving less. We're frowning more.

## Something is seriously wrong.

Too much of what we've learnt about happiness is wrong.

We idealize the rich, powerful, and famous - not the happy. The self-help movement is full of pseudoscience. Spirituality, a traditional source of happiness, is on the decline. And science... has been trying, but has only recently started making real progress.

You'd think human happiness would be easier to figure out than sending man to the moon, building floating trains, or decoding the human genome.

No. Only in the past decade has it become scientifically clear that prestige, money, self-reliance, and mind numbing entertainment are poor sources of happiness.

But we knew that all along. If only we had listened to [the dying](#), "I wish I hadn't worked so hard. I wish that I had let myself be happier. I did not realize until the end that happiness was a choice."

# Happiness is Complicated

More money ≠ more happiness. I have nothing against economic progress.

I studied finance at Harvard when I was in high school, started my own company when I was 19, mingled with Ben Bernanke and other business leaders before I got my driver's license, and got a high-paying Wall Street job after graduating from business school.

I wish money bought happiness, because I had been trained my whole life to make lots of it. But it doesn't.

## Adaption - A B\*itch and a Blessing

Immediately after being disabled, paraplegics feel terrible. Four years later, they feel just as happy as "normal" people.

Humans get used to many terrible things: a poor job, low income, physical disability, cockroaches, a cramped apartment. You are more resilient than you think. But we get used to the good just as easily as we get used to the bad.

Studies have shown that lottery winners feel great for a few weeks; but after a few months, they feel just as happy as their million-dollar poorer-past selves. We get used to all sorts of great things: a new job, a great income, physical excellence, a beautiful house.

Adaption can be a b\*itch, because it keeps us wanting more. It keeps our desires burning. Don't fall for that mistake - just because you desire something doesn't mean having it will make you lastingly happier.

# How to Use this Book

There are enough ideas on how to get happy already out there. But are they actually any good? How effective are they? How easy are they to implement? Will they make me happy for a few days or weeks and then stop working?

There are three categories of activities resistant to adaptation, which can continue providing additional satisfaction and happiness, months and years into the future: improving your health, using your time wisely, and improving your personality. This book includes many of the most effective activities for each of those categories, 16 in all.

Each chapter contains the following components:

1. An overview of the activity, and how it can improve your life.
2. First steps that you can take.
3. Additional resources for you to explore.

The most time-effective activity in this book is the gratitude journal. It takes five minutes a day, but increases long-term satisfaction by 10 to 20%. For comparison, that's the same increase found by doubling your income, which takes thousands of hours, rather than hundreds of minutes.

The other happiness strategies take more work, but are just as effective, so pick those ideas that excite you and that you think will work best for you - we're all different.

All it takes is one step to spark transformative change. Join me in my unending journey to become a Happier Human.

# Disclaimer

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# Taking Care of Your Body



# 1. Doing Yoga

*"You cannot always control what goes on outside.  
But you can always control what goes on inside."  
-Wayne Dyer*

Yoga is a powerful tool, because it's exercise – plus relaxation – plus autonomic system work-out.

Forget about chakra or oxygenation; yoga has huge, scientifically observed benefits. Still, you should be careful.

Many yoga teachers have a tendency to push too hard - there is no reason to listen. The benefits of yoga do NOT come from the flexibility, and most cases of injury come from stretching too hard too quickly.

Along the same lines, avoid hot yoga if you can - all it does is increase your chances of getting injured. It also makes you feel really good afterwards, but just like alcohol temporarily makes you feel good - don't let the heat trick you.

## Why do it?

Yoga boosts mood, builds heart strength, tones your muscles, promotes weight loss, reduces stress, improves pain management, and more. There have been hundreds of mediocre studies and a few dozen high-quality studies that show these benefits. Don't worry - you won't be wasting your time with yoga.

Yoga works so well because it exercises the nervous

system.

Certain yoga poses and activities stimulate the sympathetic nervous system (the flight-or-fight response), while others stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system (the relaxation response).

Switching back and forth between these types allows for deeper relaxation than just relaxation on its own. This is similar to the principle behind progressive muscle relaxation, in which practitioners alternate between tensing and relaxing their muscles.

In addition, just like the strategic stimulation of your muscle fibers is healthy (it's called exercise!), the strategic stimulation of your nervous system is healthy – it's just another form of exercise. This exercise, rather than making your heart stronger and reducing your resting heart rate, makes your nervous system stronger and reduces your resting stress levels.

## First Steps

1. Yoga is a system of moving your body through a series of poses, breathing in different ways, and meditating. Find a class if you can - it will keep you motivated. But don't feel restrained if there are no classes nearby.

## Resource

- [This](#) is a great series of yoga YouTube videos targeted at complete beginners. I used to use this series of videos in my daily yoga practice at home.

## 2. Exercising

*"Lack of activity destroys the good condition of every human being, while movement and methodical physical exercise save it and preserve it."*

-Plato

Forget about fighting obesity and heart attacks. Yes, exercise does those things.

It's also one of the most effective and reliable methods of increasing our moods, both today and for the weeks to follow.

In one study of its mood-boosting effects, exercise had a larger and longer-lasting effect than the popular antidepressant Zoloft.

I exercise every day, but it's not because I'm smart enough to be looking out for my heart.

It's because I want to be more happy, starting with today.

### Why do it?

You already know about the physical benefits of exercise, so let's focus on the mood benefits.

Exercise is one of the best ways of getting more energy. Energy is the fuel of life. Tired people are less likely to be happy. Energized people are more likely to be happy. It's as simple as that.

Exercise also busts stress and anxiety - two energy killers - and has such powerful mood-elevating effects that it is being considered as a treatment for depression.

1. In the short-term, exercise releases feel-good chemicals like serotonin and endorphin. Long-term, it reduces the production of stress-inducing chemicals like cortisol.

2. Exercise is a great way to enter flow - the Mayo Clinic calls it [meditation in motion](#). Flow and meditation are great stress busters and mood boosters.

3. Exercise stimulates the release of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which in turn improves our mental performance and mood over the long-term. For comparison, many antidepressants are thought to work in part because they increase the activity of BDNF.

## First Steps

1. Exercise is any physical activity which stresses your muscles or cardiovascular system. For best results, do both cardio as well as strength training, as each has distinct beneficial effects.
2. A brisk walk is better than nothing, but don't kid yourself. Real exercise takes effort.
3. You don't have to go to the gym or spend money to exercise. I do progressive body weight training and jogging - they're free but effective.

## Resources

- [A list](#) of exercises you can do with your kids.
- [This](#) is a list better suited for adults.

# 3. Laughing

*"Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand."*  
-Mark Twain

Laughter is a social tool. It help us build relationships with other people. We like people who make us laugh, we like people who laugh at our jokes, and we like people who are laughing with us.

Thank you biology. Without my humor I probably wouldn't have gotten as many dates. But now, let's make laughter a happiness tool.

## Why do it?

Laughter immediately lowers levels of stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline, and immediately releases the feel-great hormone endorphin. It increases our pain resistance, and increases the volume and activity of our immune cells.

Its mere anticipation immediately improves mood, reduces pain, and boosts our immune system. Just anticipating future laughter increases levels of endorphin by 27%, and levels of human growth hormone by 87%.

The problem is that we've stopped laughing.

The average baby laughs fifteen times as much as the average adult.

Why not more?

Our biology often hijacks our body for its own purposes.

It makes us crave food when we're trying to diet; it makes us cheat on our spouse even though we love them; it makes us read useless books like this one when we should be working.

Watching a 30-minute comedy show or browsing a humor website will net us, at best, a few minutes of laughter.

So let's be lazy. The body can't tell the difference between real and "fake" laughter.

If solo sex is socially acceptable, why not solo laughing?

## First Steps

1. Find a private space. Now laugh. Rest when you need to, but do it for at least three minutes.
2. Slowly increase the frequency and length of your laughter sessions. It feels great, and will tone your abs.

## Resources

- [This](#) is a video of me just laughing, for no other reason than because I want to be happy and healthy.
- [This](#) is laughter yoga, the source of my idea. If you'd like a more social laughing experience, need some inspiration, etc... check it out.

## 4. Relaxing

*"This art of resting the mind and the power of dismissing from it all care and worry is probably one of the secrets of energy in our great men."*

Captain J. A. Hadfield

Do you have a hobby, routine, or activity that relaxes you?

I'm not talking TV, relax. I'm talking dissolving muscle aches and destroying headaches, relax.

I'm not talking unwind or or vegetate; I'm talking parasympathetic nervous system activation, slower breathing, and alpha waves.

Until recently I did not – and I suffered from untreatable headaches and fatigue. Your symptoms are probably smaller, but as long as you live in the modern world, in one form or another, they exist.

### Why do it?

You may be a tough man (or woman), but our bodies were not biologically built to handle much of what we now throw at it: long commutes and pain in the a&& drivers, loud noises throughout the day, bright lights at night, money problems, job worries, poor nutrition, media overload, and physical inactivity.

Even if you function at a high level, there is a cost to ignoring your stress.

That cost is a reduction in energy and productivity (compensated for by our coffee addiction), minor to major health impairments, a worsening of moods, and worse social relationships.

## First Steps

1. There are hundreds of different ways to cope with and destroy stress. Some are more effective than others, but what's important is to keep experimenting until you find something that works for you. My own routine is to go for a five-minute walk, then laugh for five minutes, then meditate for five minutes.
2. Here are some ideas to get you started: exercise, pet an animal, kiss your lover, volunteer, listen to music, light a candle, break free of unwanted engagements, do yoga or tai chi, pursue your hobby - if you don't have one, pick one up - take a walk or warm shower, eat chocolate, hang out with happy friends, reminisce with a photo album, or take a nap.

## Resources

- Some of the most effective relaxation techniques include: yoga (chapter 1), exercise (chapter 2), laughter (chapter 3), meditation (chapter 15), [deep breathing](#), and [progressive muscle relaxation](#).



# 5. Getting Good Sleep

*"Sleeping is no mean art: for its sake one must stay awake all day."*

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Good sleep is not optional if you want to maximize your levels of happiness and overall life performance.

According to a poll by the National Sleep Foundation, less than 37% of Americans routinely get high-quality sleep.

## Why do it?

Poor Sleep = Poor Mood.

The relationship between sleep and mood is complex, but strong.

Those with insomnia are ten times more likely to have depression, and several times more likely to develop anxiety and psychiatric disorders. But that's insomnia, which 'only' 15% of the US population has.

Mild sleep deprivation hurts too. In one study, subjects who were limited to 4.5 hours of sleep a night for one-week reported feeling more stressed, angry, sad, and mentally exhausted. When the subjects resumed normal sleep, they reported a dramatic improvement in mood.

Think you don't have the time to improve your sleep? That belief is an illusion - the world of bright lights, TV drama, and one-click web entertainment is tricking your body into

thinking it's better to stay awake than to sleep. It's not. You'll be more productive and more happy if you choose sleep over stimulation. I know, it's a hard choice to make.

## First Steps

1. Getting good sleep is a journey - no single change will get you there. It will take effort, but it can be done, and it is worth it.
2. You don't need me to repeat the advice of the sleep doctors; you already know it: avoid stimulation before sleep, pick a fixed time to wake up, block out light while sleeping, get enough sleep, and treat your snoring.

## Resources

- [This](#) is an amazing collection of sleep tips.
- Keeping a [gratitude journal](#) at night has been shown to improve sleep quality by about 20%.
- The [best book](#) on improving sleep that I've yet to read - *Sound Sleep, Sound Mind: 7 Keys to Sleeping Through the Night*.
- [F.lux](#), free software based on hard science. Blue light signals to our brains that it is daytime. The old source of blue light use to be the sun. But with modern technology, computers give off blue light all the time, even at night. F.lux blocks it - preserving your circadian rhythm.

## 6. Energizing

*"When blood sugar levels are up, you feel energized. When they drop, energy levels plummet."*  
-Friedrich Nietzsche

You won't see blood sugar mentioned in any other books about happiness. But here is what I know: my happiness takes a nose-dive after lunch. I feel drowsy and unmotivated, but am expected to get good work done. Impossible. Painful.

So if you're like me, let's do something about it. Not so that we can get more work done, but so that our afternoons feel better, and perhaps even pleasant.

### Why do it?

Those few hours in the afternoon when I feel tired ruin good days and dampen great ones. They make work boring and make me want to vegetate once I get home. On the other hand, when I feel energetic, I also usually feel happy.

The correlation between mood and energy is large: the happiest people are the most energetic. Are you more likely to see a tired happy person, or an energetic happy person?

People who were born more energetic, or who take the time to increase their energy levels by improving their diet, exercising, and reducing stress, experience more happiness.

Energy is happiness. So do whatever you can to avoid feeling tired.

## First Steps

1. Drink tea or coffee. If you can't handle caffeine, like me, take a pill of theanine, which reduces the mental and physical jitteriness.
2. Go for a walk, laugh, and/or listen to energizing music.
3. Avoid over-eating and carb-heavy meals.

## Resources

- [A great](#) resource on avoiding feeling drowsy after lunch.
- [The Seven Day Energy Surge](#), a good book on rewiring up energy levels.
- [More](#) information on the caffeine - L-theanine combo.

# Using Your Time Wisely

# 7. Socializing

*"A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature."*

-Ralph Waldo  
Emerson

We are social creatures. A 2004 survey showed socializing to be the second most pleasurable activity, behind sex. Watching TV, relaxing, childcare, and eating all fell far behind.

That should come as no surprise. Taking a moment of reflection, recall those moments in your life that have been the most pleasant. Most of my moments involved other people. Yours?

## Why do it?

Socializing is difficult. It's so much easier to just stay on our couch and watch TV or to stay on our chair and use Facebook.

But our bodies are built to work best with other people, not alone. Socialization is socialization, whether it involves two people or fifteen.

Increasing the volume of social activity has been shown to increase levels of dopamine and serotonin, as well as boosting cognitive performance.

Unlike the many things we get used to in our lives, like our house or a new job, we never get used to our friends. Every

time we see them, we're likely to feel just as happy as the last time.

The largest obstacle between us and other people is a lack of limits. We let the lazy part of our brain keep us glued to the TV, computer, video game, book, and so on.

## First Steps

1. Find a way to increase your level of social activity. That can mean inviting a friend for dinner, signing up for a salsa class, or saying yes to that invitation you always reject.
2. Create limits. Figure out where most of your free time is going. If it involves something passive and non-social like watching TV, put a limit on it.

## Resources

- [How to Win Friends](#), one of the greatest books of all time.
- [One](#) resource for the shy.
- [Another](#) resource for the shy.
- Remember, [make friends, not acquaintances](#).

# 8. Using Your Strengths

*"If your senses are numbed with delusion and denial, you will stop looking for your true strengths and wind up living a second-rate version of someone else's life rather than a world-class version of your own."*

-Donald O. Clifton

In following your desire to be accepted by society, have you found yourself doing less of what you once wanted, and more of what makes you look good?

That's normal, and I'm just as guilty as you are. But doing what you're good at is more fun and more exhilarating. If you don't have any hobbies you're passionate about, this may be the reason - you're not using your strengths.

## Why do it?

We're not talking about making major life changes, like getting a new job. In one study, just one week of participants using their strengths in a novel way once each day led to a multi-month happiness boost.

If, like most people, you find math difficult, the hours of strain required to solve that multi-variable pre-calculus problem will leave you tired and bored. But what if you could solve it in two minutes? And then just as easily move on to calculus?

You'd be making rapid, visible progress, which is



exhilarating. You'd be focusing effortlessly, repeatably entering into flow. You'd be having fun. You'd be growing.

For most people it won't be math; it'll be something like piano, tennis, volunteering, or arts & crafts. The specifics don't matter; just give yourself permission to do something you're good at.

Don't think that the only strength you have is watching TV. The resources below can help you figure out where to start.

Do you want mediocrity or excellence? Because we improve our strengths faster than our weaknesses, focusing on those areas where we naturally excel creates exponential growth - the kind that quickly leaves others behind.

## First Steps

1. Take the Basic Strengths Test on [this page](#). It's free and will take less than five minutes.
2. Find ways to use your top five strengths each day for the next week. Afterwards, see what worked the best and try to continue the change. If you're not sure where to begin, discuss your top strengths with a friend or family member and brainstorm ideas together.

## Resources

- You can take the [Strength Finders](#) Test if you would like more detailed results, but it costs \$13.68.
- [Here](#) is a list of 100+ hobbies, if you're looking to explore and develop a new passion.

## 9. Finding Flow

*"It does not seem to be true that work necessarily needs to be unpleasant. It may always have to be hard, or at least harder than doing nothing at all. But there is ample evidence that work can be enjoyable, and that indeed, it is often the most enjoyable part of life."*

Mihaly  
Csikszentmihalyi

Positive Psychology founder Martin Seligman believes engagement, also known as flow, to be one of the key components of the most happy life.

That is, a life with more flow has more happiness; a life with less flow has boredom.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of the book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, would agree - suggesting that work and hobbies are the two greatest opportunities to find flow.

### Why do it?

Flow is an innately positive experience; when we're lost in our work, we're actually enjoying it for once!

Best still - when we're in flow, not only are we experiencing enjoyment, we're also more productive.

Flow is also great for personal development. When in flow we are learning our skills and pushing our boundaries faster

and farther than before. Because of the rapid, seemingly effortless, enjoyable progress, we're motivated to continue working and growing.

## First Steps

1. Flow is the mental state in which you are fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus and full involvement. It's that feeling that makes time pass so quickly that when you look at the clock, an entire hour or more of productive work or play has passed without you knowing it.
2. To enter into flow, the activity must have a clear set of goals, the activity should be challenging but doable, and the activity should provide clear and immediate feedback.
3. Flow requires intense focus. As a result, I've developed my own system for more frequently and easily entering into the state:
  - a) I first clear my mind of worries by making a To Do list on [Evernote](#).
  - b) Next, I clear away my other distractions, like my email notification and growling stomach.
  - c) Then, I charge my mental batteries by meditating for five minutes.
  - d) Lastly, I set a goal of being highly-productive for just five minutes. The start is the [hardest part](#).

## Resources

- [\*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience\*](#), the original book which introduced the idea of flow.
- Multi-tasking kills the ability to enter into flow. [This](#) is a great alternative.

# 10. Volunteering

*"I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."*

-Albert Schweitzer

The most selfish thing that you can possibly do is... volunteer. Did you expect me to say something like "get rich" or "do drugs"?

Mindlessly pursuing wealth and doing drugs isn't selfish - it's stupid. On the other hand, volunteering is selfish. After all, it'll make you feel good.

## Why do it?

Think you're too busy to volunteer? You're not.

Volunteering provides a larger boost to happiness than traditional happiness activities like watching TV or surfing the web.

1. Volunteering benefits the one giving as much as, if not more than, the one receiving. Our biology rewards us for our kindness with feelings of happiness and contentment. Do you know what it gives you in return for getting a raise? The desire to make even more money.

2. Volunteering makes us feel higher status. When we expose ourselves to the less fortunate, we remember that we are better off than others. That, in turn, increases our

happiness and lowers our levels of stress.

3. Volunteering validates our unique life experiences. What better way to feel valued than to have others ask you for help?

4. Volunteering is usually a social activity, and so is a great way to meet other ~~selfish~~ loving individuals like yourself.

## First Steps

1. There are volunteer opportunities available to us all. The best opportunities are those that put you in direct contact with the project beneficiaries. For example, the impact of renovating an empty park is left entirely to your imagination - it's intangible. However, if you get to interact directly with the kids who will use the park, you'll feel like you've truly made a difference. That is why volunteer activities like coaching, tutoring, and handing out food leave us feeling good.
2. Pay it forward. Mentoring others is a powerful experience, for both the mentor and the mentee.

## Resources

- [Student Mentor](#) is a great way to help others from the ease of your computer.
- [Volunteer Match](#) is a useful resource to find both local and virtual volunteering opportunities.

# 11. Ditching Dopamine

*"Every form of addiction is bad, no matter whether the narcotic be alcohol, morphine or idealism"*

C.G. Jung

Watching TV, surfing the web, compulsively checking email, eating too much, watching porn, whatever it is, I have a simple test to see if you're addicted.

If you were sufficiently motivated, could you avoid that activity for one month? Everyone I know is addicted to at least one thing.

## Why do it?

Addiction leads to harmful behavior, reduces sensitivity to pleasure, decreases self-control and free will, and hijacks the reward center of the brain.

My grandfather rarely eats sweets, and when he does he has just one. Yes, because of this self-control he has great health at old age, but counter-intuitively, he may actually be experiencing more pleasure than someone who eats sweets every day.

The first piece of chocolate makes us smile with delight. But because of the adaptation process, the second piece brings much less pleasure and no smile. Worse still, because we wish to recapture the delight of the first piece (because we're addicted), we continue eating more chocolate, even though each subsequent piece brings less pleasure.

On the other hand, my grandfather treats each piece of chocolate he consumes like a feast, with each sensation carefully savored. He's not addicted.

Not the kind of dysfunctional addiction a psychologist would diagnose, but the kind that makes you feel less pleasure despite increased consumption.

Let's look at a widespread but dangerous addiction - watching porn.

“Evolution has not prepared your brain for today's Internet porn. Internet porn addiction is not a sex addiction. It's an Internet addiction. Although masturbation is often involved, this is an addiction to novel pixels on a screen.” -Your Brain on Porn

Dopamine is the neurochemical of pleasure and motivation. When you're excited - about having a new car or having time alone with your significant other - that's dopamine.

Our bodies motivate us to have sex by releasing dopamine. Once we've had sex and gotten too tired for more, we can still be motivated to have more, but only in response to new, receptive sexual partners.

Each subsequent time a man is re-exposed to the same erotic film, his arousal will decrease. As soon as he is introduced to a different film with different women, his arousal will shoot back up, because the brain releases dopamine in response to novelty.

In the world of high-speed Internet, a single Google search is all that stands between you, your son, your spouse, or your male friends and millions of dopamine-releasing, novel, naked females.

Female readers: porn users don't search out a single

stimulus and then masturbate; they masturbate with one hand while clicking between tabs with the other.

Back in 1970, when a man had a surge of excitatory dopamine, his only choice was his imagination or a still Playboy page, which he would have already looked at many times. Now a single click will provide a new, moving image. Pop – dopamine!

Each click releases a surge of dopamine. The surge in dopamine further stimulates novelty-seeking behavior.

The pornographic, Internet underground is a massive dopamine pill.

If you have an over-abundance of dopamine, your body will adapt by decreasing your number of dopamine receptors. That's called tolerance, and it makes you less sensitive to pleasure - all kinds of pleasure, not just sexual.

The next time you feel like you have to watch just one more episode, or click on one more page, or eat one more piece, I want you to ask yourself this question: are you watching, clicking, or eating because you believe it will give you pleasure and happiness, or because you can't help it?

## First Step

1. Pick an addiction and then kill it. I struggle too.

## Resource

- [\*The Willpower Instinct\*](#) is the best book I have read about fighting addiction.



# 12. Living Your Values

*"I count him braver who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is over self."*

-Aristotle

Values-based living... think I'm talking about becoming a nun or a boring old man? I'm not.

I'm talking about living with intention.

## Why do it?

When you make a decision, be it to read another page of this book, go for a drink, text a friend, or watch TV, who do you think it is making that decision?

Modern cognitive psychology would tell us it wasn't just you. It was as much your subconscious as your conscience self (which is what we think of as "us").

To illustrate the point, did you consciously deliberate on whether to lean forward or relax into your chair? The order in which you brushed your teeth this morning? Whether to walk starting with your right foot or left foot?

Of course you didn't - your conscious mind would be quickly overwhelmed if you tried to, which is why you left it to your subconscious.

The problem is when this automatic way of thinking extends into the rest of our lives.

Are you really okay with watching too much TV, procrastinating on your dreams, putting off exercise yet again, failing to appreciate those close to you, and otherwise living your life in a way that you don't really want to?

Values-based living is a life-long journey - no one said you shouldn't eat that doughnut, but eat it because you want to, not because your body is forcing you to. It will taste much sweeter.

## First Steps

1. List out your most important values - those core components of life that you wish to pursue over all else. If you need some help, follow [these](#) instructions.
2. Now that you've picked out your values, you've got to live them!

## Resources

- Re-asserting control over our actions is, like Aristotle said, one of, if not the most difficult goal we may ever set in our life. I've used a strategy [similar to the one used by Benjamin Franklin](#) to live a more values-based life.
- A [list](#) of 418 values.

# Improving Your Personality

# 13. Keeping a Gratitude Journal

*"We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures."*  
-Thornton Wilder

Growing up, I thought gratitude was for the weak.

I was wrong. After making gratitude a daily part of my life, I have become much happier. I also started receiving more.

It started with a five-minute-a-day activity: keeping a gratitude journal.

## Why do it?

Gratitude increases our happiness, improves our relationships, makes us healthier, improves our sleep, and more. It does so reliably. More than 40 research studies have shown the same thing – gratitude rocks.

A grateful attitude creates the belief that one is surrounded by people who are kind and caring. That belief, in turn, creates feelings of security, hope, and optimism.

Just as importantly, we only find joy from those things we are currently appreciating. Remember the last time you bought yourself a game, car, TV, or piece of clothing. It probably made you happy, but for how long?

After you bought your last TV, for the first few times you sat

down to watch it you probably appreciated its features. You might have thought: “The quality is so much better than that old piece of junk I had,” or, “I’m so glad I bought it; the size is great.”

That appreciation was effortless. But then it stopped. There was no more recognition, no more conscious thought of the good. It became a part of your reality, undeserving of your mental resources. With that change, the shiny new TV no longer gave you happiness, forcing you to seek out the next toy.

It is appreciation of good that creates happiness. Gratitude fights that adaptation process and allows you to continue to find joy in those things that you already have. Don't worry - studies have shown that gratitude won't make you lazy, although it may make you less materialistic.

## First Steps

1. At the end of the day, write down three things that went well that day. That's enough. The only rule is to keep it interesting.
2. Don't want to keep a journal? Do it mentally or say it out loud.

## Resources

- [This page](#) summarizes the 31 benefits of gratitude.
- [This page](#) provides seven strategies for cultivating gratitude.

# 14. Becoming Spiritual

*"Religion can be both good and bad - it is spirituality that counts."*

Pat Buckley

What does spirituality have to do with happiness? A lot.

In a survey of Americans between 1972 and 2008, 26% of those who never attended religious services reported being "very happy." On the other hand, 48% of those who attended services more than weekly reported being "very happy."

In other words, spirituality doubles your chances of being very happy. That's huge. Winning the lottery doesn't come close. Besides the character strengths of optimism, compassion, and gratitude, nothing else is as highly correlated with happiness.

## Why do it?

Spirituality is awesome for three reasons:

1. The social support provided by a religious community is unmatched, by most, if not all other modern institutions.
2. Spirituality is highly correlated with increased feelings of gratitude, compassion, and optimism.
3. Spirituality provides purpose and meaning in life.

What about for the irreligious, like me? On the first count, there isn't much one can do - the level of trust, bonding, bridging and linking found in a church will rarely be found at your book club, dinner party, or workplace.

On the second count, there is much that can be done. Cultivating an attitude of gratitude through secular or religious practice increases feelings of respect and optimism.

On the third count, while religion may provide the most ready-made answer to the meaning of life, with enough effort one can construct their own purposeful narrative.

To do so, these four criteria should be met, applying to work and hobbies alike:

- Frequent opportunities to enter into a state of flow.
- Frequent opportunities to use and develop your strengths.
- Frequent opportunities to develop social connections.
- Frequent opportunities to act in alignment with your values and beliefs.

## First Steps

1. The easy strategy is to just become more spiritual. However, those who join a religious organization like a church or temple will get significantly more benefits.
2. For those who are irreligious like me, the benefits can be re-created through the secular means discussed in the previous section.

# 15. Meditating

*"The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it."*

-Thich Nhat Hanh

Meditation is the next level of relaxation and can transform the nature of our cognition and daily experience. It is the skill of self-generating happiness.

## Why do it?

First, a warning. Meditation is not for everyone. If you have a negative reaction, like increased anxiety, meditation may not fit with your body.

There are also [ways to go wrong](#).

Most importantly, the benefits of recreational meditation have been overstated by the media.

According to a meta-analysis of 813 studies, compared to treatments like biofeedback and progressive muscle relaxation, meditation (as it is commonly practiced in the west) does only marginally better at reducing stress.

So if you're looking at meditation solely for its stress-busting effects, you may find other modalities easier to practice.

On the other hand, true meditation is hard, effective, and can be thought of as three separate exercises.



1. A strengthening of our attentional and focusing skills - focusing on what we want to is difficult.
2. A strengthening of our awareness. Our mind flutters from thought to thought so seamlessly that we are not consciously aware of its frequent movement.
3. Depending on the type of meditation, a strengthening of our positive emotions, like gratitude and compassion.

As a result, true meditation increases our fluid intelligence, reserves of willpower, the strength of our attentional control, our emotional resilience, our emotional intelligence, our ability to change our thought patterns for the better, improves health outcomes, and creates opportunities for mental silence.

Mental silence, in turn, has been shown to be nearly twice as effective for stress reduction and mood improvement than "normal" meditation.

## First Steps

1. For the beginner, classes are a great way to make meditation a habit.
2. The essence of meditation is pointed focus. That focus is usually turned toward our breath, but more easy targets can be used as one works up to breath meditation, such as music or food.

## Resources

- [Simple](#) meditation instructions.
- [My favorite book](#) on the subject, which manages to be practical, informative, and inspiring all in one.

# 16. Living With Hope

*"Few things in the world are more powerful than a positive push. A smile. A world of optimism and hope. A "you can do it" when things are tough."*  
-Richard M. DeVos

The power of positive thinking, of living with hope and optimism, is real. The personality trait of optimism is the single best predictor of life satisfaction.

But I don't believe in positive affirmations and unrealistic optimism. I believe in building optimism the one way that always works: through hard work.

## Why do it?

Optimism makes us happier and healthier. Not just a little bit healthier - the most optimistic, on average, live a few years longer than the most pessimistic. And not just a little bit happier – optimism does more for happiness than becoming a millionaire, improving health, being born beautiful, running an ultra-marathon, getting married, and everything else.

Then why aren't I am I not more excited about optimism? Why does it come last in this eBook?

1. Optimism is not easy to cultivate. Unlike gratitude, which takes just a few minutes a day, optimism requires dedicated mental effort.
2. Optimism is dangerous.

We thought the Iraq war would be short. That there wouldn't be a financial crisis. That despite failing to achieve our New Year's resolutions for the past fifteen years, that this year would be different. That our next job would be better. That we're better than others. That our marriage would last, even though 50% end in divorce. That having more money would make us happier.

The list goes on - optimism is a blind man's gamble.

## First Steps

1. Keep a gratitude journal. They've been shown to make us 5 to 15% more optimistic.
2. Accomplish your goals. The best way to believe that your dreams will come true is to show yourself that you can accomplish those goals you set for yourself. Hard? Yes. But it's worth it. An easy way to hack this step is to set smaller goals than you usually do. After achieving them, then maybe move on to your hard goals.

## Resources

- [An article](#) I wrote in favor of rationalism over optimism.
- [Learned Optimism](#), a book by the founder of Positive Psychology, Martin Seligman, on how to become more optimistic.

# Afterword

Truly transformative change requires a lifetime of effort and perseverance, but the first step toward positive change is easy. You can do it right now - pick one of the happiness strategies in this book to apply to your life.

You will see substantial change, but it may take a few weeks or months.

If you have any questions, feel free to e-mail me at [amit@happierhuman.com](mailto:amit@happierhuman.com).

Join me in my life-long journey to replace contentedness with excellence and jubilation at [HappierHuman.com](http://HappierHuman.com)!

