

THE GUIDE TO HAPPINESS

A woman in a light blue dress stands on a grassy field, holding a large bunch of colorful balloons (red, pink, purple, and white) that float into the sky. The background features a sunset over a body of water with mountains in the distance. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene.

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“The man who makes everything that leads to happiness depend upon himself, and not upon other men, has adopted the very best plan for living happily.”

~ Plato

In June of 1997, Billie Harrell, a shelf stocker at a Home Depot outside of Houston, Texas, won the lottery. The prize was \$31 million. Harrell was deeply religious and had struggled his entire life to provide for his wife, Barbara Jean, and his three children. The lottery seemed to be the pay off he and his family finally deserved after a long life of faith and sacrifice.

In July, he arrived in Austin to pick up a check for \$1.24 million dollars, the first of 25 checks he was would receive over the next 25 years.

Billie bought himself a ranch and horses. He put money away to send his kids to college. He bought homes for members of his family. He donated money to his church. And two years later, in May of 1999, he locked himself in his bedroom, put a shotgun to his chest, and pulled the trigger. A confidant said that Harrell claimed, “winning the lottery is the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

Christopher Reeve was born in 1952 to a wealthy family in New York. Chisel-jawed and good-looking, Reeve split his young adult life between Ivy League schools in the US and sipping wine and riding horses around Europe. An aspiring actor, in 1978, Reeve hit his big break and scored the role of Superman in a big-budget Hollywood movie. He earned millions and became one of the most recognizable celebrities in the world.

Reeve made a fortune. He spent that fortune on nice houses,

nice cars, luxurious parties and his passion for riding horses.

Then in 1995, Reeve fell off a horse and cracked two vertebrae in his spine. He would never walk or breathe on his own again.

Reeve became an advocate for the disabled and spent the rest of his life fundraising for spinal cord research. He was the first celebrity supporter of stem cell research. Reeve later claimed that his accident helped him “appreciate life more.” It wasn’t a joke. He noted that there were “able-bodied people more paralyzed than I am,” and once remarked, “I can laugh. I can love. I am a very lucky guy.”

Human happiness is a perplexing topic to delve into. It would seem obvious but it’s not at all. So the first part of this guide will deconstruct happiness: what it is, how we experience it, how we perceive it. Chances are this will blow your mind. But from there we’ll pick up the pieces (of your mind, that is) and put together ways you, me, or anyone can experience happiness more often.

Most of your assumptions about happiness are likely wrong. For one, psychologists have found that we’re terrible at perceiving our own happiness and estimating what will or will not make us happy.¹ On top of that, large-scale cross-cultural surveys find that despite income gaps, natural disasters, geography, culture, and gender, people self-report more or less the same level of happiness on average everywhere in the world.² So if natural disasters, culture, gender and income aren’t reliable predictors of our happiness, what is?

There are a few guiding principles we can learn to be happier

¹ Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. T. (2005). Affective forecasting knowing what to want. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14(3), 131–134.

² Diener, E., Ng, W., Harter, J., & Arora, R. (2010). Wealth and happiness across the world. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99(1), 52–61.

and stay happier in our everyday lives. That's what this guide is about: what you can do right now to start improving your overall quality of life. Call it "The Guide to Being Slightly and More Consistently Happier" if you'd like.

Let's get into it.

DECONSTRUCTING HAPPINESS — PART I

Don Draper of *Mad Men* fame stated in one of the series' final episodes that the definition of happiness is "the moment before you need more happiness." As cynical as it is, the brilliance of this line lies in the fact that we rarely notice happiness while we're experiencing it, we only notice a lack of it once it's gone.



Don Draper, dishing out happiness since 1960.

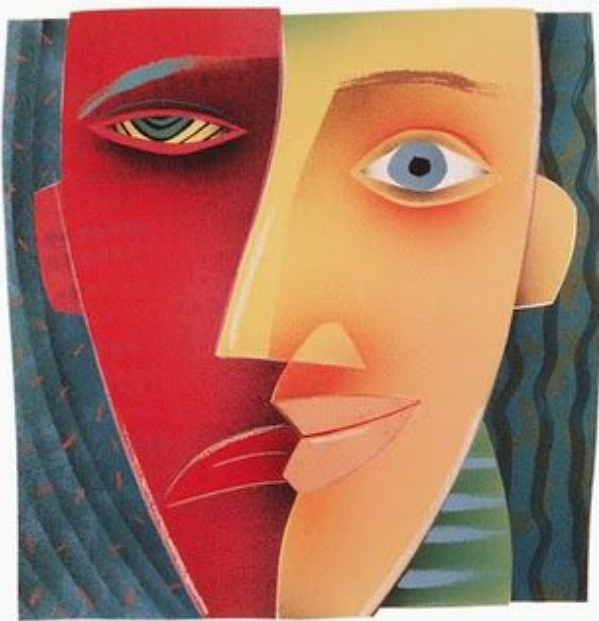
In psychology, the concept Draper speaks of is referred to as *loss aversion*, and it states that, on average, the pain of losing something is three to four times greater than the happiness of having it. According to studies by psychologist Daniel Kahneman, humans consistently overestimate the

value or pleasure of what they don't have and overestimate the pain or loss of losing something they do have.³ Everyone is wired this way.

And not only do we feel the pain of losing something to be greater than the joy of having it, but loss aversion works in reverse as well. We estimate the happiness of acquiring something we don't have to be far greater than the pain of remaining without it. So not only do we experience the pain of crashing our favorite car to be far worse than the joy of buying it, but we also estimate that buying a new car will be far more enjoyable than the pain of crashing it. It seems we're wrong both ways. And for whatever reason, Mother Nature wanted it this way — loss aversion seems to be evolutionarily programmed into us.

Now, before I ruin your day (this is an article about happiness after all), the reality of loss aversion has an important lesson buried within it — a lesson extremely applicable to how we choose to lead our lives and how happy we are as a result:

We are terrible judges of knowing what makes us happy or unhappy.



In fact, not only are we horrible at predicting what will make us happy or unhappy in the future, but the research of Harvard Psychologist Dan Gilbert has repeatedly shown that we're bad at remembering what made us happy or unhappy in the past as well.

For instance, in one study, they asked supporters of two

³ Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1984). Choices, values, and frames. *American Psychologist*, 39(4), 341.

presidential candidates (George W. Bush and Al Gore) how happy or unhappy they expected to be if their candidate won or lost.⁴ Then a month later, after Bush won, they went back and asked people how happy or unhappy they were about the outcome. Bush supporters were less enthused than they expected to be and Gore supporters were less upset than they expected to be.

But *here's the kicker*: five months later, psychologists asked the same people how happy/upset they *remember* being after Bush won, and across the board people exaggerated how they had actually felt at the time.

Bush supporters *remembered* being happier than they were, and Gore supporters *remembered* being more upset than they were. It seems that our estimations of how happy/unhappy we are become more and more exaggerated the further away from the present they occur.

This means that horrible family trip that we hated so much as a kid probably wasn't as bad as we thought it was, and winning the *Call of Duty 4* tournament we practiced so hard for won't actually be as enjoyable as we expect. The reason for this is that our minds aren't capable of remembering every tiny detail of experience, nor are they capable of predicting every detail of experience either. As a result, our mind takes the general vision of an experience (past or future) and [fills in the blanks](#). If what we remember was somewhat painful and unenjoyable, we just assume that all of it was painful and unenjoyable. If, in our future fantasies, all we can imagine are the enjoyable and exciting aspects of an experience, our mind goes ahead and fills in the blanks and assumes everything about the situation will be great.

This matches up with my own experience. When I was broke and struggling, working 12-16 hours a day to get my business

⁴ Wilson, T. D., Meyers, J., & Gilbert, D. T. (2003). "How happy was I, anyway?" A retrospective impact bias. *Social Cognition*, 21(6), 421–446.

off the ground so I could travel the world, I assumed I would be blissfully happy once I did. And granted, I've been pretty damn happy [traveling around the world](#) the past few years. But there are a whole host of [problems and drudgery](#) to this existence that I couldn't fathom when I was slaving away for my dream: the language barriers, cultural differences, difficulty making new friends, stresses of poor economies, losing luggage, visa problems, strange illnesses, and on and on.

At the time, all I pictured was me on a beach or at a party and my mind assumed everything else would be gravy. It's not. It's great, but [it's not easy](#) and not, err... "gravy."

Meanwhile, when I tell people about how I slaved away at my laptop for years to get to this point, I make it sound terrible — sixteen hour days, no money, fighting for any client I could get, living with my mother, building site after site only to have them fail. It sounds horrible. And I honestly *remember* it being that bad. But the truth is, when I really think about it, it wasn't that bad. I loved the work I was doing. I was passionate about the business. I was learning a lot. And I was independent and striking out on my own. It was difficult and stressful, but exciting and exhilarating at the same time.

While psychologists have consistently found this effect when we judge our own happiness, they've also asked whether or not happiness varies at the extremes of human experience.

Short answer: It doesn't.

On average, when measured a year later, people who had won the lottery weren't any happier than people who had become paralyzed or people who were neither lottery winners nor paraplegics.⁵ A vast majority of conjoined twins with heads

⁵ Brickman, P., Coates, D., & Janoff-Bulman, R. (1978). Lottery winners and accident victims: Is happiness relative? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36(8), 917.

attached to one another since birth refuse to get surgery to detach their heads. They're happy to be that way. Pete Best, the original drummer for The Beatles, swore that getting kicked out of arguably the most popular band of all time was the best thing that ever happened to him and that he was happier not being a Beatle. Go figure.

DECONSTRUCTING HAPPINESS — PART 2

If you have to try to be cool, you will never be cool. If you have to try to be happy, you will never be happy.

Maybe the problem these days is people are just trying too hard.

Happiness, like other emotions, is not something you obtain, but rather something you inhabit. When you're raging pissed and throwing a socket wrench at the neighbor's kids, you are not self-conscious about your state of anger. You are not thinking to yourself, "Am I finally angry? Am I doing this right?" No, you're out for blood. You inhabit and live the anger. You are the anger. And then it's gone.

Just as a confident man doesn't wonder if he's confident, a happy man does not wonder if he's happy. He simply is.

What this implies is that happiness is not achieved in itself, but rather it is the side effect of a particular set of ongoing life experiences. This gets mixed up a lot, especially since [happiness is marketed](#) so much these days as a goal in and of itself. Buy X and be happy. Learn Y and be happy. But you can't buy happiness and you can't achieve happiness. It just is. And it is once you get other parts of your life in order.

HAPPINESS IS NOT THE SAME AS PLEASURE



Tony Montana didn't seem too happy.

When most people seek happiness, they are actually seeking pleasure: good food, more sex, more time for TV and movies, a new car, parties with friends, full body massages, losing 10 pounds, becoming more popular, and so on.

But while pleasure is great, it's not the same as happiness. Pleasure is correlated with happiness, but does not cause it. Ask any drug addict how their pursuit of pleasure turned out. Ask an adulterer who shattered her family and lost her children whether pleasure ultimately made her happy. Ask a man who [almost ate himself to death](#) how happy pursuing pleasure made him feel.

Pleasure is a false god. Research shows that people who focus their energy on materialistic and superficial pleasures end up more anxious, more emotionally unstable and less happy in

the long run.⁶ Pleasure is the most superficial form of life satisfaction and, therefore, the easiest. Pleasure is what's marketed to us. It's what we fixate on. It's what we use to numb and distract ourselves. But pleasure, while necessary, isn't sufficient. There's something more.

HAPPINESS DOES NOT REQUIRE LOWERING ONE'S EXPECTATIONS

A popular narrative lately is that people are becoming unhappier because we're all narcissistic and grew up being told that we're [special unique snowflakes](#) who are going to change the world and we have [Facebook](#) constantly telling us how amazing everyone else's lives are, but not our own, so we all feel like crap and wonder where it all went wrong. Oh, and all of this happens by age 23.

Sorry, but no. Give people a little more credit than that.

For instance, a friend of mine recently started a high-risk business venture. He dried up most of his savings trying to make it work and it failed. Today, he's happier than ever for his experience. It taught him many lessons about what he wanted and didn't want in life and it eventually led him to his current job, which he loves. He's able to look back and be proud that he went for it because otherwise, he would have always wondered "what if?" and that would have made him unhappier than any failure he experienced.

The failure to meet our own expectations is not antithetical to happiness, and I argue that the ability to fail and [still appreciate the experience](#) is actually a fundamental building block for happiness.

If you thought you were going to make \$100,000 and drive a Porsche immediately out of college, then your standards of

⁶ Vansteenkiste, M., Duriez, B., Simons, J., & Soenens, B. (2006). Materialistic Values and Well-Being Among Business Students: Further Evidence of Their Detrimental Effect1. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36(12), 2892–2908.

success were skewed and superficial, you **confused your pleasure for happiness**, and the painful smack of reality hitting you in the face will be one of the best lessons life will ever teach you.

The “lower expectations” argument falls victim to the same old mindset: that happiness is derived from without. In other words, if you reason that lowering your expectations will lower the threshold for what makes you happy, you are still viewing happiness in terms of external validation. The joy of life is not having a \$100,000 salary. It’s working to reach a \$100,000 salary, and then working for a \$200,000 salary, and so on.

So, I say raise your expectations. Elongate your process. Lay on your deathbed with a to do list a mile long and smile at the infinite opportunity granted to you. Create ridiculous standards for yourself and then savor the inevitable failure. Learn from it. Live it. Let the ground crack and rocks crumble around you because that’s how something amazing grows, through the cracks.

HAPPINESS IS NOT THE SAME AS POSITIVITY

Chances are you know someone who always appears to be insanely happy regardless of the circumstances or situation. Chances are this is actually one of the most dysfunctional people you know. Denying negative emotions leads to deeper and more prolonged negative emotions and emotional dysfunction.

It’s a simple reality: shit happens. Things go wrong. People upset us. Mistakes



are made and negative emotions arise. And that's fine. Negative emotions are necessary and healthy for maintaining a stable baseline of happiness in one's life.

The trick with negative emotions is to 1) express them in a socially acceptable and healthy manner and 2) express them in a way that aligns with your values.

Simple example: A value of mine is to pursue non-violence; therefore when I get mad at somebody, I express that anger, but I also make a point to not punch them in the face. Radical idea, I know.

There are a lot of people out there who subscribe to "always be positive" ideology. These people should be avoided just as much as someone who [thinks the world is an endless pile of shit](#). If your standard of happiness is that you always feel good, no matter what, then you've been watching way too much *Leave It To Beaver* and need a reality check (but don't worry, I promise not to punch you in the face).

I think part of the allure of [obsessive positivity](#) is the way that we're marketed to. I think part of it is being subjected to happy, smiley people on television constantly. I think part of it is that some people in the [self-help industry](#) want you to feel like there's something wrong with you all the time.

Or maybe it's just that we're lazy, and like anything else, we want the result without actually having to do the hard work for it.

Which brings me to what *actually* drives happiness....

HAPPINESS IS THE PROCESS OF BECOMING YOUR IDEAL SELF

Completing a marathon makes us happier than eating a chocolate cake. Raising a child makes us happier than beating a video game. Starting a small business with friends and struggling to make money makes us happier than buying a

new computer.

And the funny thing is that all three of the activities above are exceedingly *unpleasant* and require setting high expectations and potentially failing to always meet them. Yet, they are some of the most meaningful moments and activities of our lives. They involve pain, struggle, even anger and despair; yet once we've done them we look back and get misty-eyed about them.

Why?

Because it's these sort of activities that allow us to become our ideal selves. It's the perpetual pursuit of fulfilling our ideal selves that grants us happiness, regardless of superficial pleasures or pain, regardless of positive or negative emotions. This is why some people are happy in war and others are sad at weddings. It's why some are excited to work and others hate parties. The traits they inhabit don't align with their ideal selves.

It's not the end results that define our ideal selves. It's not finishing the marathon that makes us happy; it's achieving a difficult, [long-term goal](#) that does. It's not having an awesome kid to show off that makes us happy, but knowing that you gave yourself over to the growth of another human being that is special. It's not the prestige and money from the [new business](#) that makes you happy, it's the process of overcoming all odds with people you care about.

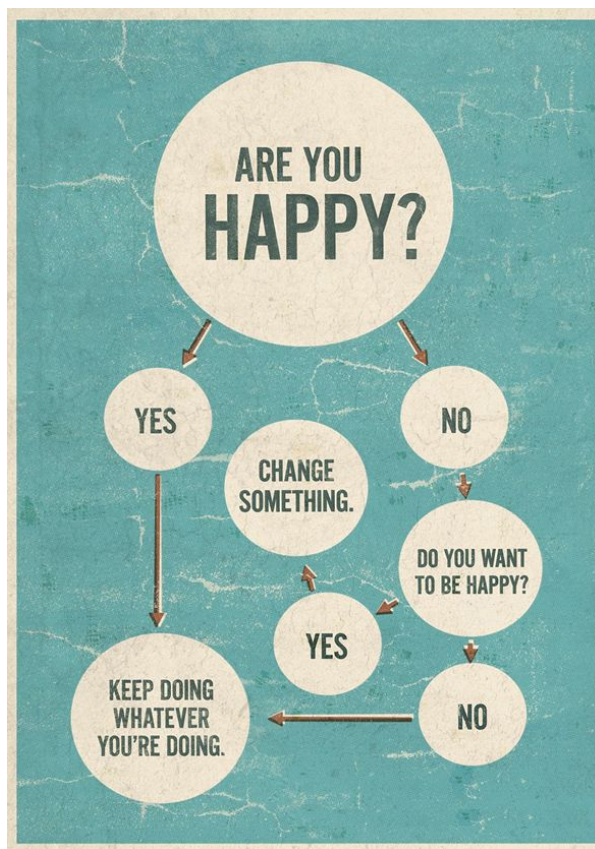
And this is the reason that *trying* to be happy inevitably will make you *unhappy*. Because to try to be happy implies that you do not already inhabit your ideal self, you are not aligned with the qualities of who you wish to be. After all, if you were acting out your ideal self, then you wouldn't feel the need to try to be happy.

Cue statements about “finding happiness within,” and “knowing that you're enough.” It's not that happiness itself is *in you*, it's that happiness occurs when you decide to [pursue](#)

what's in you.

And this is why happiness is so fleeting. Anyone who has set out major life goals for themselves only to achieve them and realize that they feel the same relative amounts of happiness/unhappiness knows that happiness always feels like it's just around the corner waiting for you to show up. No matter where you are in life, there will always be that *one more thing* you need to do to be extra-especially happy.

And that's because our ideal self is always around that corner, our ideal self is always three steps ahead of us. We dream of being a musician, and when we're a musician we dream of writing a film score, and when we write a film score, we dream of writing a screenplay. What matters isn't that we achieve each of these plateaus of success, but that we're **consistently moving towards them**, day after day, month after month, year after year. The plateaus will come and go, and we'll continue following our ideal self down the path of our lives.



And with that, with regards to being happy, it seems the best advice is also the simplest: Imagine who you want to be and then step towards it. Dream big and then **do something**. Anything. The simple act of moving at all will change how you feel about the entire process and serve to inspire you further.

Let go of the imagined result; it's not necessary. The fantasy and **the dream** are merely tools to get you off your ass. It

doesn't matter if they come true or not. Live, man. Just live. Stop trying to be happy and just be.

YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL IMMUNE SYSTEM

Gilbert's research showed that whatever major life events happen to you — you buy a new sports car, you get fired from your job, your spouse [cheats on you](#) and leaves you, you win a paid vacation to Tahiti, whatever — your happiness will naturally return to an original baseline level after a period of time. Your mind will naturally do this by convincing itself certain experiences weren't as great or as bad as they actually were. Tahiti was nice but the water could have been warmer and we didn't have an air conditioner. Losing the job sucked but at least it gave me more time to be with the kids. Yeah, she cheated on me, but we went to marriage counseling and now we're closer than ever; it's the wake up call we needed.

Gilbert dubbed this tendency to color prior experiences, good or bad, as the “psychological immune system,”⁷ and its purpose makes sense if you think about it.

Evolutionarily speaking, humans who were prone to being ecstatically happy all the time would be weeded out of the gene pool because they'd be easily satisfied and would not compete for greater resources or accomplish greater achievements. Humans who were prone to being horribly depressed all the time would be weeded out of the gene pool because they would have little to no motivation to achieve anything (not to mention they'd be a total drag to be around).

So it seems Mother Nature programmed us to be, well...

⁷ Gilbert, D. T., Pinel, E. C., Wilson, T. D., Blumberg, S. J., & Wheatley, T. P. (1998). Immune neglect: a source of durability bias in affective forecasting. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(3), 617.

humdrum. No matter what happens.

If you get a pay cut, a year later you tell yourself it was one of the best things that happened to you because it inspired a career change you had been contemplating. If you get a job that lets you travel the world, a year later your enthusiasm wanes as you get used to the travel hassles, the visa problems, the jet lag and the time away from your family.

Conjoined twins claim that the relationship they're forced to build with one another is something they value and would never give up to become "normal." Paraplegics, like Christopher Reeves, claim that losing the ability to walk gave them more perspective on life and they wouldn't take it back.

90% of cancer patients believe they are better off than the average cancer patient. A [UN study](#) found that above a middle-class income, money has no direct correlation to happiness. Rich people report being just as happy as they were when they were average and vice versa.

This is our psychological immune system in action, returning us to our baseline of happiness, always keeping us hungry for more. No matter what happens, we return to our baseline. We all do.

The important question is: where is your baseline? Is your natural state of happiness high or low?

Longitudinal studies find that although life events and external occurrences don't affect people's baseline happiness, *baseline happiness varies from individual to individual*.⁸

Not only does everyone have a different *baseline level of happiness*, but people are also able to slowly inch their

⁸ Lu, L. (1999). Personal or environmental causes of happiness: A longitudinal analysis. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 139(1), 79–90.

baseline happiness up or down over time depending on how they live their lives.

That is the ticket to happiness — not a new car, not a fancier job, not a more attractive partner — but a permanent shift in the baseline happiness you continually return to despite whatever external factors occur in your life.

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR BASELINES HAPPINESS



So if our external life experiences and our superficial gains and losses don't affect our happiness permanently, what does? If we're always doomed to return to our baseline happiness, how do we raise that baseline?

Research suggests that about 50% of our baseline happiness is genetically inherited.⁹ This would also explain the heritability of depression, addiction and negative personality traits such as neuroticism and lack of agreeableness.

If dad was a miserable dick, unfortunately that means you're pre-disposed to be a miserable dick.

⁹ Bouchard Jr, T. J., & Loehlin, J. C. (2001). Genes, evolution, and personality. *Behavior Genetics*, 31(3), 243–273.

The good news is that there's still 50% of our baseline happiness we have control over. And in my opinion, almost none of us are maximizing that 50% of our baseline happiness. For many of us, it's not even close.

Here's the best way to think about it: Life is like driving a car. There are multiple destination we can drive to, some of them pleasant, some of them unpleasant; some of them rich and exciting, some of them poor and horrifying. Everyone assumes that their happiness is determined by which destination they drive to. In fact, we're so convinced of this that we spend most of our lives focused on driving to the best destination possible and getting there as quickly as possible, preferably quicker than anybody else.

But research shows that *where* we drive isn't what makes us happy in the long run (as our psychological immune system showed us). **In fact, what increases our baseline happiness is how much control we feel we have over driving.**¹⁰

People who feel they have little to no control over where they're going experience low baseline levels of happiness *regardless* of the destinations and experiences they have along the way. People who feel they have complete control of where they're going experience high baseline levels of happiness *regardless* of the quality of destinations they go to.

You can be rich, famous, have everything you ever wanted, but if you feel like you had no control of it, like you didn't deserve it or earn it, you will be miserable. Ever wonder why so many celebrities and millionaires become addicts or even kill themselves? There you go.

¹⁰ Lang, F. R., & Heckhausen, J. (2001). Perceived control over development and subjective well-being: differential benefits across adulthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(3), 509.

You can be middle-class, have few possessions, a bad job, but if you feel like you have control over your life and your destiny, then you will be happy. Surely you've met people like this in your life (if not, visit a third world country; you'll be blown away by how happy many of the people are).

So the trick is to learn [how to take more control over our lives](#), to feel like we have more control on where we end up and how we get there. How do we do that? There are a few ways:

1. Take Responsibility for Everything In Your Life. Before we even discuss ways in which you can take more control over your life and determine your personal destination, it's crucially important that you begin to [take full responsibility for everything that occurs in your life](#).

That means the evil boss who treats you poorly, your car that keeps breaking down, not having enough money to move into your own apartment, being out of shape and unattractive, everything. You have responsibility for everything that occurs in your life. You may not be responsible for it happening to you, but you're always responsible for how you respond to it.

Good things and bad things happen to all of us. What distinguishes each of us is how we harness what happens to us. Some people grow up in well-to-do families with everything handed to them and they end up being miserable and alone for most of their lives. Other people grow up being shot at in the ghetto, barely able to eat, and they become some of the happiest and most successful people on the planet. What's the difference?

You can't change your circumstances until you believe you control them. And you can't control your circumstances until you decide to take responsibility for them. That means the therapist who treated you poorly is your responsibility. The job you lost is your responsibility. The medical bills you can't pay are your responsibility. The date who didn't show up to dinner is your responsibility. At every turn ask yourself not "Why did

this happen to me?” but instead “What am I going to do about it?”

2. Build a strong habit of courage. Chances are there are many things in your life that you want that you’re [afraid to pursue or act on](#) because they intimidate you or cause you to experience a lot of anxiety. It could be something as simple as approaching the cute girl in your economics class or as complex and life-changing as quitting your job and [starting your own business](#).

The fact is, the less courage you have, the less you’re going to be able to act despite the fear, the less control over your life you’re going to have, and, therefore, the lower your baseline level of happiness will be.

3. Set and achieve small and attainable goals. Most people, when they want to make a change in their life, try to make multiple drastic shifts in a single moment. They decide that, starting tomorrow, they’re going to lose 10 pounds in 30 days, or they’re going to work four hours a day on their new business idea, or they’re going to study for school three hours a day.

These changes last for a while, but since they’re such drastic changes and sap so much willpower (a finite resource), the vast majority of people revert to their prior lazy habits. And not only do they revert back, but the fact they gave up sends their unconscious mind a message: “You failed. You’re a failure. You can’t do it. You don’t have control.” This message lowers confidence and self-esteem and makes it less likely that the person will have the willpower or resolve to accomplish the next goal they set.

Instead, start with small and easily achievable goals. Instead of losing 10 pounds in one month, challenge yourself to go to the gym three times in one week and to not eat any desserts. This is an easy, attainable goal. Once you achieve it, you’ll send your unconscious a message of: “I did it. I’m a success. I have

control.” This will raise your self-esteem, your confidence, increase your willpower and the belief in yourself for your next goal and, as a result, you’ll feel better about yourself.

Your baseline confidence will have inched ahead.

Then, for the second week, raise the stakes a bit. Work out three times, don’t have any desserts, and don’t eat any fried food. Not much harder, right? Once you accomplish that, you’ll feel even better about yourself, and you’ll be on your way to developing real life habits that continue to benefit you. Do this long enough and not only will you eventually lose that 10 pounds, but you’ll also feel much better about it.

4. Minimize reliance on external validation. External validation is an idea I talk about a lot on my website. It’s extremely important, especially in [American culture](#). External validation is seeking the approval or validation from people or objects outside of yourself. Examples of external validation include: people finding you physically attractive, people thinking you’re rich or successful, competitive achievements, being right all the time, etc.

External validation is about appearances. It’s about what others think of you. It’s about how you appear to society at large. Western culture puts *a lot* of pressure on us to appear successful, handsome and popular. As a result, it conditions us to seek a lot of external validation from others.

Internal validation comes from setting and achieving objectives and meeting standards you set for yourself. Internal validation is an infinite resource and something you have control over. Internal validation raises self-esteem and baseline happiness. External validation is an ego boost. Like a drug, it feels good for a moment and then it’s over, often leaving you feeling worse.

Internal validation is driving the car. External validation is the

nice destinations.

Many things in life can bring you both external and internal validation depending on your mindset and perspective. For instance, perhaps you set a goal for yourself to be able to buy a new house by the end of the year. You use this goal as a metric to judge your own performance, and in the process of meeting that goal you set a lot of smaller goals and achieve them as the year goes on. It requires a lot of willpower and effort. This creates internal validation. Of course, once you have the new house and all of your friends “Ooh” and “Ahh” all over it, then that brings external validation with it.

Whether you’re oriented towards internal or external validation is a question of motivation. For instance, are you working for that new house so you can impress your friends? Or are you working towards it because it’s a worthwhile goal that you think will make your life better? Chances are a large part of why you’re doing it is to impress your friends or to make people think you’re successful and make a lot of money.

Are you trying to get that six pack in the gym to impress girls or because being in incredibly good physical condition is something you want to achieve for yourself?

The answer is often both, and that’s fine. But you must be honest with yourself, because if the answer is too often that you’re doing it to impress other people, then you’re no longer driving to your destination — they are. And whether you actually reach the destination or not (the six pack or the new house), you’ll return to your same low baseline happiness, because you weren’t the one driving.

5. Cultivate a perspective beyond yourself. To differentiate between internal and external validation requires perspective and honesty with yourself. We all automatically tend to think what we’re doing is correct. That’s why we’re doing it. Few of us stop and question our motivations or goals. Even fewer have the honesty to say, “Wait, I’m not working for

that new house for the right reasons. It's probably not going to make me happier."

This takes a lot of effort and higher-level thinking, something most people aren't used to. But studies show that people who are able to integrate perspectives outside of their own into their own thinking have higher baselines of happiness and fluctuate in happiness less.

There are many ways to develop this thinking and perspective. [Therapy](#) and [meditation](#) can help. As do altruism and charity.¹¹ In fact, one Harvard Business School study found that giving to charity made people happier regardless of their country, how much money they gave, or even WHY they gave it.¹² For instance, someone buying a gift for their sister created the same amount of happiness as giving a different amount of money to a homeless person. The theory goes that it's not actually giving something away that makes us happy — it's having perspective outside of ourselves that does.

Research shows that keeping a journal, and writing down what one is grateful for in their life, both lead to greater levels of baseline happiness.¹³ It's because these actions force us to cultivate a greater perspective other than just ourselves and our superficial desires.

Surveys also show that religious people are, on the whole, happier and live longer lives than people who are not religious.¹⁴ Theology aside, I personally believe this is because religion is

¹¹ Thoits, P. A., & Hewitt, L. N. (2001). Volunteer work and well-being. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 115–131.

¹² Aknin, L. B., Dunn, E. W., & Norton, M. I. (2012). Happiness runs in a circular motion: Evidence for a positive feedback loop between prosocial spending and happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 13(2), 347–355.

¹³ Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 377–389.

¹⁴ Clark, K. M., Friedman, H. S., & Martin, L. R. (1999). A longitudinal study of

an organized way to force people to think beyond their own validation, and to be grateful for their lives, even if only for a few hours each Sunday.

Another action that I believe leads to a higher baseline level of happiness is to actually [give up many possessions](#). Loss aversion teaches us that we overestimate the value of what we have and we overestimate the value of what we don't have. The result is to collect and hoard more stuff that doesn't make us as happy as we think it does. The more we have, the more we want.

Well, it works both ways. The way to short-circuit loss aversion is to give up what we don't need in our lives and focus on what gives us the most pleasure. The more we give up, the more we want to give up. Not only would we become immune to the stresses of loss aversion (always wanting what we don't have and always afraid of losing what we do), but the lack of possessions, in my experience, actually forces us to seek more internal validation.

We derive a lot of external validation from what we own, maintaining what we own, and getting nicer or better things. When we let go of this tendency, it forces us to motivate ourselves based on our own actions and desires and not on having a nice car or a big TV or whatever.

NEXT STEPS

Hopefully this guide has given you a clear picture of where you need to start to increase the happiness in your own life. It's not easy, but one must identify what is keeping them from driving their own life — what aspects of your life are there because of external forms of validation? What parts of your life are there because of a genuine passion and joy? What useless activities or possessions can you get rid of? What small and attainable

religiosity and mortality risk. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 4(3), 381–391.

goals can you set for yourself and nobody else?

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