
< Back

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5 Ways to Be Happier

By Lisa Collier Cool

Being in a positive mood can actually make you healthier. So start smiling, and reap the benefits! These 5 suggestions will show you how.

"Dr. Happiness" Is Real

If there were a Dr. Happiness, would you rush to get in line to see him, especially if his prescriptions were for things like joy, inner peace, and contentment (no side effects identified)? Of course you would! And the really jolly news is that he's *not* fictitious. Dr. Happiness is a nickname given to Ed Diener, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Okay, he doesn't dole out joy, but he has studied it, plus other positive emotional states we're all capable of. And research shows that their benefits include boosting our immune system and defenses against illnesses ranging from colds and flu to cancer and heart disease. Here's a look at the emotions that can actually help your body perform its best -- and why.

Laughter

Have a chuckle -- and your arteries will thank you. A March 2005 study at the University of Maryland Medical Center, in Baltimore, showed for the first time that mirth may promote heart health by making blood vessels work more efficiently. Twenty healthy, nonsmoking male and female volunteers watched clips from two movies selected to provoke opposite emotional extremes -- the disturbingly violent opening scene of 1998's *Saving Private Ryan* and a hilarious sequence from *Kingpin*, a 1996 comedy. The effect on an artery in the arm was measured before and after by ultrasound.

The two films produced dramatically different effects. Viewing the *Private Ryan* scene caused the volunteers' blood vessels to constrict, reducing flow by an average of 35 percent. Chortling over the comedy, however, increased the subjects' blood flow by 22 percent -- an improvement similar to that induced by aerobic exercise, without the aches and pains, as researchers noted. Although they aren't sure why laughter has such a powerfully positive effect, the experts speculate that either the movements of the diaphragm as we chuckle, or possibly the release of such feel-good chemicals as endorphins, may be the explanation.