

the science of happiness

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“I AM NOT SUGGESTING WE PUT ON ROSE-COLOURED GLASSES AND PRETEND OTHERWISE, BUT I AM SUGGESTING WE FIND A NEW PATH TO FOLLOW.”

I am fascinated by the science behind happiness and the application of positive psychology to enhance the well-being of veterinary teams. Thanks to neuroplasticity, which is the brain’s ability to create new pathways in response to learning, experience, or injury, it is possible to create new mental maps that build our brain’s “happiness muscle.” Our brain is constantly creating associations and connections between our thoughts, memories, skills, and experiences, and these connections, maps, or neural pathways are unique to each of us.

As a bicycle enthusiast, I picture my brain’s neural pathways as a three-dimensional layering of maps—topographic maps overlaid by highway maps, secondary roads, and finally my favourite, bike trail maps. These layers upon layers of maps are influenced by a lifetime of human experience. Because our brains can only hold so many working concepts in memory at any time, repeated thoughts or actions that are tagged as important get pushed down into the area of our brain that holds long-term memories and processes. This frees up our working brain for more capacity. Using my trail analogy, the trails I ride every day become hard-wired into my subconscious, so that I automatically know when to gear down for a climb or stand on the pedals for a drop. Repeated focus on a problem, a new idea, or a belief system creates a well-worn “trail” or neural pathway that we travel on autopilot. Because it is easy to ride these trails, we return to them and ingrain them into the deepest layers of our brains. This hard-wiring becomes firmly implanted, explaining why habits are so difficult to change.

What does all this have to do with happiness and more importantly the future of veterinary medicine? To help us survive, humans have developed what

scientists call a negativity bias. From an evolutionary perspective, having a stronger reaction to negative experiences than positive ones helped keep us safe, but consider an average day in veterinary medicine. We interact with multiple people, most of whom are appreciative, respectful, and enjoyable to work with, yet it is the one difficult client interaction that we focus on and allow to influence our perception of whether it was a “good day.” This is an example of the negativity bias at work. The brain preferentially looks for, reacts to, and stores negative information over positive information. Studies have identified that it takes at least five positive interactions to make up for just one negative interaction. Furthermore, neuroscience has established that the more we focus on a problem, the more we ingrain it.

Veterinary medicine can be exhausting. I see the strain in our people, I understand the challenges, and I am worried. I am worried because I believe we become the stories we tell ourselves. The more we focus on a problem, the more we ingrain it. The more we let our negativity bias colour our perception of veterinary medicine, the more likely we are to only see the negative in veterinary medicine. The problems are real; the challenges exist. I am not suggesting we put on rose-coloured glasses and pretend otherwise, but I am suggesting we find a new path to follow. We can consciously steer our bicycle off the well-worn and comfortable trail to intentionally create a new one. Neuroscience and the study of organizational psychology show us how human systems move toward that which they consistently and persistently focus upon. What is the positive future you envision for yourself? Your practice? The future of veterinary medicine? How can we challenge our negativity bias and find a way toward flourishing?

In the book *The How of Happiness*, Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California Riverside, describes three determinants of happiness.

- Set point
- Circumstance
- Intentional activity

She goes on to describe the relative weight each of these factors has on our overall happiness. Our set point or genetic predisposition is responsible for 50 per cent, our circumstance 10 per cent, and our intentional activity 40 per cent. These findings, backed by extensive research, are exciting to consider. While we cannot change our genetics, and our circumstances may

also be fixed, 40 per cent of the happiness we experience is within our control. Lyubomirsky calls this the “40 per cent solution.”

So how do we leverage the 40 per cent? The activities outlined by Lyubomirsky draw from the works of the founders of positive psychology Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as well as a wealth of current research from the branch of psychology focused on the science of flourishing. The following list of 10 techniques to build your “happiness muscle” is not a substitute for direct medical advice from your doctor or qualified mental health professional. Rather, these findings are presented as tools to grow your resilience and augment other interventions.

- 1. Count your blessings:** What are you thankful for? Who do you appreciate? How can you convey this appreciation to others who you have never thanked? Cultivating gratitude through active practices such as reflection, journaling, and sharing with others starts the process of building new neural pathways.
- 2. Cultivate optimism:** Practice finding the silver lining and imagining a positive future for yourself. This is not about toxic positivity or moving forward with a falsely positive facade. Acknowledge the hard stuff with genuine empathy and learn to move forward with a positive focus.
- 3. Avoid overthinking and social comparison:** Find strategies to stay grounded, stop comparing yourself to others, and stop dwelling on your problems. The story you are telling yourself is just that, a story. The truth is often much different than we imagined. We are all imperfect beings just doing our best to figure life out.
- 4. Practise acts of kindness:** Consider the wake you leave behind and how you make others feel. Is it the way you want to be remembered? Discover the joy in doing things for others with no expectation of anything in return. Do good, cultivate kindness, and feel good in return.
- 5. Nurture your relationships:** We all need connection. Invest in nurturing the relationships that sustain you to strengthen and build a community of support.
- 6. Do more activities that truly engage you:** Find flow or

those moments when you are fully present and so immersed in an activity that there is no room for distracting thoughts or emotions.

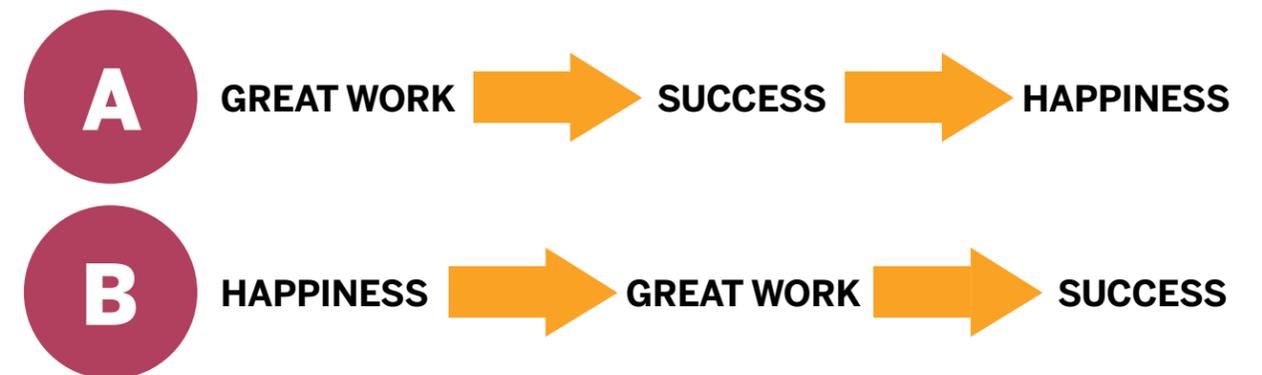
- 7. Replay and savour life’s joys:** Pay attention, delight in, and revisit those great moments and pleasures through writing, art, or sharing with others.
- 8. Commit to your goals:** Maybe you have always wanted to run a marathon, explore Paris, or complete your master’s degree. Take time to consider a significant goal that is meaningful to you and devote the time and energy to pursuing it.
- 9. Learn to forgive:** Holding anger and resentment toward those who have wronged you traps you in a negative mind-set, reinforcing old mental maps and effectively stifling your growth and happiness. Letting go of those hurts and learning to forgive is a step toward building empathy and compassion.
- 10. Take care of your body:** Release endorphins through laughter, meditation, and engaging in physical activity. Bonus points if you can do this in nature.

In his book *The Happiness Equation*, Neil Pasricha shares his perspective that the happiness model we have been fed from childhood is flawed. The belief that great work leads to big success and results in happiness is backwards. Rather by cultivating a positive attitude we will be more productive, more creative, and experience improved relationships, and this will lead to great success.

Changing long-standing patterns and habits is difficult. Rewiring your brain and intentionally creating new neural pathways takes time. When I am challenged with the struggle of creating new habits, I remind myself of the joy of discovering a new bike trail, experiencing flow, and discovering the freedom of being fully present. Wishing you happy trails this summer.

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Author Neil Pasricha suggests that the belief that great work leads to success and results in happiness (A) is flawed. Instead, cultivating a positive attitude leads to great work and greater success (B).