

The Neuroscience of HAPPINESS



‘Understanding the nature of HAPPINESS’ is a hot new topic in Science – it appears in all the scientific magazines, and the BBC recently devoted a series of programs to the subject, interviewing scientists from all over the world. It even has a name, ‘The neuroscience of happiness’.

The scientists tried to understand how the different mechanisms of desire, want, happiness and pleasure work in the brain. And from their million dollar research on the subject, **they ‘discovered’ that most of the things we think will make us happy, but they DON’T, at least not for long.** For example to their surprise they found that money, beyond enough for basic needs, does not bring more happiness. Nor do the things money can buy. Research showed that even people who win vast sums in a lottery, after just a few years are as miserable as they were before they won.

Why is this so? The things that give us pleasure are usually physical – they give us bodily gratification or mental gratification. **But all these are transitory pleasures.** After a while, we take ‘things’, including people, for granted – even things that once made us ecstatic. For example, the new lover, or the new car or house, the new dress or the new technological gadget... the initial thrill soon wears off, and then we are looking for something better. It is what the scientists call the *‘hedonic treadmill’*. This is pleasure, not happiness.

So what makes one truly HAPPY? The research outlined following four keys that Science is now proclaiming will improve one’s ‘HAPPINESS LEVEL’:

1. FRIENDLINESS

Scientists say that friendship has a much bigger effect on happiness than a typical person's income, and just as stress can trigger ill health, it looks as if friendship and happiness can boost our immunity against disease.

We all have a huge source of friendliness inside, but in fact, most people die without this source being developed at all, because what we call friendship is usually hypocrisy.

We have to constantly create a milieu of friendliness around ourselves, sending waves of friendly energy all around. One method the research suggests, is, **to do one or two things for others every day, for which you expect nothing in return.** Today, altruism, or performing acts of kindness to others, is one of the main suggestions being proposed by happiness scientists.

2. COMPASSION

Let’s face it - usually when we look at people, our thoughts are critical rather than compassionate. But the research says **there is a heart inside the worst of people, and if you are able to see it, you will be filled with compassion.** This is not the same as pity, which makes us feel superior to others, and want to help or change them in some way. Compassion involves love and acceptance of people as they are.

If you can understand compassion, then you will know how to spread happiness to others, and that in turn will develop the happiness center inside you. If, on the contrary, you go on being cruel and critical and judgmental of others, it will feed your own unhappiness.

3. CHEERFULNESS

The research says, as ‘Sadness’ is just a habit, ‘Cheerfulness’ can also be cultivated as a habit. We just have to start looking for things in life which are full of light, not darkness, because the way we look at life directly affects what develops inside us. If we see radiance and light everywhere, we will feel radiant and light – we will feel joy.

Doctors have also discovered the benefits of laughter – in many hospitals laughter therapists now work with patients, since it has been shown that people who can laugh heal much faster.

4. GRATITUDE

There are so many things in life to be grateful for, and if we can shift our focus from grumbling or complaining to those things, **if we can start to experience and express gratitude more, the research says, it will change our life tremendously.** We will be filled with so much peace, and so much mystery and wonder.

The happiness scientists even suggest keeping a gratitude diary in which every day you write down things for which you are thankful.

A Sufi mystic who had always remained happy, for seventy years people had watched him, he had never been found sad. One day they asked him, “*What is the secret of your happiness?*” He said, “*There is no secret. Every morning when I wake up, I meditate for five minutes and I say to myself, ‘listen, now there are two possibilities today: you can be miserable, or you can be blissful. CHOOSE.’ And I always choose to be blissful.*”

Friends, there are people who can be blissful even when they are imprisoned, and there are people who remain miserable even when they are living in marble palaces. All alternatives are open. As we celebrate the ‘**International Day of Happiness**’ on 20th March, *Let’s choose to transform our impure emotions to pure emotions, by developing in ourselves the above mentioned four qualities and **BE BLISSFUL!***



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