

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Traits of Happy People

In order to learn how to be content with our own lives, we need to understand what makes some people generally happier than others. Researchers have found four inner traits that predispose people to have positive attitudes and to be content or happy more often then not. These traits are:

- **Self-esteem.** Happy people respect their value as human beings and have confidence in themselves. When times get tough, people with a solid sense of self-worth and a firm belief in their own competence are the very people who persist until the tough times have passed.
- **Personal Control.** Happy people believe that they have control over what happens to them. They tend to believe that they are actively in charge of their own destiny rather than being a passive victim of fate.
- **Optimism.** Happy people are hopeful people. They expect they have a decent chance to succeed when they try something new. They see the proverbial glass of life as half full rather than half empty.
- **Extroversion.** Happy people tend to be outgoing and sociable. They often find it a pleasure to be around others, rather than a chore.
- **Even in old age, happy individuals tend to be cheerful and full of the joie de vivre - the 'joy of life'.** People who like themselves are confident that other people will like them too. They have friends and they engage in rewarding social activities through which they experience affection and social support. Social support, in turn, reinforces happy people's sense of self-esteem, in a circle of health. Social support is an important part of the foundation supporting a happy person’s sense of well-being and positive outlook on life.

Becoming a Happier Person

Not everyone is born extroverted with high self-esteem and an optimistic outlook. Some people are more pessimistic by nature, prone to depression, to not think well of themselves and to find social activities to be more work than play. Can such pessimistic people become happy despite their nature? The answer is yes.

The way to cultivate greater happiness is deceptively simple. Pretend that you are self-confident and optimistic. You might think that pretending to be happier couldn't possibly work, but in fact, if you give it half a chance, it can indeed help you to become a happier person. There is a very real sense in which being happy is a habit. You can strengthen your own habit of being happy by practicing it again and again. As you become more and more comfortable acting happy, the phoniness will diminish and the happy behaviors and attitudes you have been practicing will begin to feel more natural.

The same goes for your interactions with other people. Pretend to be more outgoing then you are. Smile. Act like you like the people you meet, and you will likely find that you actually do like some of them! As a bonus, you may also find out that you are beginning to like yourself better, that you feel more confident, and that you are becoming more comfortable with other people. These changes can help you feel greater happiness in your life and more optimism for the future.

Believing that you have some measure of control over your life is important for wellness, as it motivates helpful coping that would not otherwise occur. People without control over their environment are vulnerable to feeling helpless and to lapsing into passivity and depression. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in nursing homes filled with formerly vital elderly patients. The research shows that real improvements in nursing home patients' physical and mental well-being occur when those patients are
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granted even small amounts of control over their lives, for instance, being able to choose some of their daily activities.

Although control is important for wellbeing, people never have perfect control over their situations. Birth and death (and some would add taxes) are just some of the many things in life that are not possible to avoid. Recognizing this truth, control is often described as having two critical components.

- Primary Control involves the ability to actually change a situation.
- Secondary Control involves the ability to change how you think about a situation.

Primary control involves actually changing a difficult situation so as to make it less difficult. Taking the initiative to alter a troubling situation is an assertive act that frequently results in a self-esteem boost. Some situations are not possible to change, however, and instead must simply be accepted. When this is the case, secondary control, which involves finding the most positive way to think about a situation you cannot change, remains an option which provides similar positive benefits to primary control.

Recognizing when a situation can be changed and when it must be simply accepted is sometimes a difficult task. The difficulty involved in this recognition has been nicely captured in the Serenity Prayer from Alcoholics Anonymous:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

Courage to change the things I can, and

Wisdom to know the difference."

Though it can be difficult to know when to attempt primary control and when to fall back on secondary control, the "wisdom to know the difference" can be learned and improved upon so that the task becomes easier.

Taking primary control over a situation in order to improve your life is not always an easy task even when it is possible. Sometimes hard decisions must be made in order to get unstuck from difficult situations. People agonize for months and years over whether to leave abusive relationships. Some ultimately find the courage to leave, and others stay stuck and continue to rationalize their choice to stay. Though sometimes difficult to endure, taking primary control over your life where that is possible can result in real improvements in your self-esteem and the quality of your life.

There are many situations that cannot be directly changed. Serious illness, the death of a loved one, divorce, loss of employment, or natural disasters are examples. Your decision to look at such situations in the most positive light (taking secondary control) makes the difference between whether you become helpless and paralyzed or remain vital. Secondary control is the control that you have over your attitude, regardless of the situation.

Developing a Personal Sense of Control

It is important to keep in mind that how you respond to stressful events is at least in part under your control, and that you have the ability to choose to some extent how difficult and painful any given event will be. Your decision to work towards your greater personal sense of control will help you become a more happy and emotionally resilient person.

Developing a personal sense of control means working to become better at:

- **Knowing** when to try to change a situation, and when to instead accept it,
- **Becoming** courageous enough to make the changes you can make to improve your life, and
- **Learning** how to manage your emotional reactions so that when you are faced with a difficult situation you cannot change, you are able to put the best possible face on that situation.

The key to the third 'emotional management' skill listed here is recognizing that you have real control over your emotional reactions.

Your emotional reactions may be provoked by external events and actions, but they are not ultimately wholly determined by them. You have the ability to decide how you will react. For example, if you have a boss who is given to insulting you in front of other employees, it is your pounding heart, your clenched fists, and your thoughts about your boss's behavior that ultimately result in your anger over the situation. Your boss's behavior may trigger an emotional reaction in you, but it cannot sustain that reaction all by itself. Ultimately, you are the only person in control of how you react. Recognizing the power you have over your situation can greatly improve the way that you experience that situation.