**What happiness isn’t** Reviewed by [Brooks Baer, LCPC, CMHP](https://therapist.com/reviewer/brooks-baer/) Written by [Elise Burley](https://therapist.com/author/elise-burley/) Last updated: 03/14/2023

We all want to be happy—no matter our [age](https://therapist.com/life-stages/aging-mental-health/), [gender](https://therapist.com/identity/gender-identity-and-mental-health/), background, ethnicity, culture, or [religion](https://therapist.com/identity/religion-spirituality-mental-health/).

Inexperience can lead us to go looking for [happiness](https://therapist.com/moods-and-emotions/what-is-happiness/) in the wrong places without realizing it. Eventually, though, we tend to learn that finding happiness has a lot to do with understanding everything that it *isn’t*. Stick with me here.

**Happiness isn’t the same as excitement**

New experiences are exhilarating and fun—and they tend to make us happy, right?

Our brains release dopamine when we try something new, which creates pleasurable feelings in our bodies. Because it feels so good, it’s easy to mistake this experience for happiness.

But that rush of excitement doesn’t usually last very long, and it’s not sustainable. You can’t feel that way all the time or you’ll become exhausted.

Excitement doesn’t require much effort on your part. Happiness, on the other hand, is something that you can feel on a more consistent basis—but you have to work at it.

**Happiness doesn’t necessarily make your life meaningful**

You can live a meaningful life and be happy, but they’re not the same. When researchers looked at what it means to live[happily versus meaningfully](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2013.830764), they discovered a few key differences:1

* Happy people tend to focus on satisfying their wants and needs.
* Happiness involves the present moment, while meaningfulness involves the past, present, and future—as well as how they’re all connected.
* Meaningfulness is associated with [giving more to others](https://therapist.com/society-and-culture/how-to-create-positive-change/).
* Meaningfulness typically involves a certain degree of [stress](https://therapist.com/stress/stress/) and challenge.
* Self-expression is an important part of living a meaningful life.

We might look at our lives and wonder why we’re not as happy as we think we should be. One reason could be that we focus more on meaningful pursuits rather than our own wants and needs at any given moment.

**Lasting happiness doesn’t come from achievement**

In many cultures, society expects us to live in a constant state of learning, doing, and reaching new milestones from the moment we’re born. When we do this successfully, we’re praised for it—and we feel good about ourselves as a result.

That’s the main reason why we learn to associate achievement with happiness. When we don’t achieve what’s expected of us on a typical timeline, we tend to feel disappointed, regretful, guilty, or embarrassed.

But achievements are characteristics of ego—the part of ourselves that needs to feel validated and important in society. There’s nothing wrong with achieving things, but the happiness you get from those wins is always fleeting. No matter what level you reach, you’ll eventually adapt to it and start looking for newer, better ways to experience that sense of accomplishment again.

**Happiness isn’t the absence of negative feelings**

Feeling [negative emotions](https://therapist.com/moods-and-emotions/emotions-emotional-health-emotional-regulation/) is inevitable, and trying to avoid them isn’t healthy. Happiness is more about how you deal with negative emotions when they come up than it is about doing whatever it takes to never feel bad again.

Do you ruminate on negative emotions and let them consume you? Or do you accept them, understand that they’re a part of life, and move on? Happy people tend to bounce back from negative experiences relatively quickly instead of dwelling on them.

Happiness depends on a huge range of factors, not just the circumstances you’re in. It’s important to keep an open mind and be aware of different aspects of life that can affect your happiness. You have to be willing to put in the effort to seek out ways to hold on to those positive feelings, even when times get tough.

**Happiness isn’t something you reserve for later**

Happiness isn’t a destination you reach, then suddenly you’re done. It’s more a way of life that you work continuously to maintain, because it’s always changing.

We might say to ourselves, “I’ll be happy when I finally meet my soulmate” or “I’ll be happy when I make X amount of money,” but happiness isn’t something you go out and find. It’s something you cultivate in the present moment.

Some instances of happiness may be easier to notice than others—and when you’re having trouble recognizing your own happiness, try tuning into what brings you comfort or peace.

This is also where [gratitude](https://therapist.com/self-development/how-to-feel-more-grateful/) comes into play. It’s one of the simplest and most effective ways to help you connect with happiness. Being grateful for what you have, even when happiness feels hard to find, is a sign that you’re always open to receiving happiness.

**Happiness isn’t the same for everyone**

Happiness is what you make it, the saying goes. In other words, nobody else but you can decide how to make yourself happy.

What makes you truly and genuinely happy? What lifts you up, makes you feel alive, and sparks an almost spiritual sensation—like your soul is expanding?

Only you can answer that question, and it’s essential to be honest with yourself when you do. Once you find an answer, you can start living a life that’s more in line with your own values rather than someone else’s idea of happiness.

If you’re struggling to feel happy and aren’t sure how to shift your mindset, consider talking to a mental health professional. They can help you explore what brings you happiness and make it easier for you to uncover what you really want.

**Happiness is within reach**

“I think self-knowledge is a key to happiness,” says [Gretchen Rubin](https://gretchenrubin.com/books/the-happiness-project/), author of New York Times bestseller “The Happiness Project.” “We can build happy lives only on the foundation of our own natures, our own values, and our own interests.”

The process of recognizing what makes you truly happy and letting go of the expectations that don’t serve you may be difficult, but it isn’t impossible. It requires practice, [self-awareness](https://therapist.com/self-development/self-awareness-whole-person-perspective/)—and, in some cases, a willingness to take risks. Every journey starts with a single step, and once you take that first one, you’ll be on your way to finding true and lasting happiness.