

Book in for your happiness MOT

Every year we spring clean our houses and take the car for a service – but how many of us take the time to give our own lives the once-over? Our checklist will help you stay on the right track

With such long to-do lists, the things we do for ourselves often come last, and most of us rarely take the time to ponder whether we're actually happy. Some may even feel that's a self-centred thing to do – but the latest research shows that the opposite is true, because happiness is contagious. Our own mood influences – and is influenced by – the people around us, up to three degrees of separation. So by setting aside some time once a year to take stock, you could improve your health, confidence and wellbeing – and your loved ones' too. Start by doing the GH Happiness MOT...



1 What do you really need?

For Nina Grunfeld, 59, it took an exhausting holiday with her husband to make her realise what she really wanted. 'For years, after every holiday my husband would come home feeling relaxed and happy, and I'd feel absolutely drained,' she explains. 'At first I thought there was something wrong with my health, but then I realised that we just have different personality types - he likes rushing around looking at churches and museums, but I need to lie on a deckchair and read all day. We've resolved the problem by picking a destination that has a few ancient sites and a swimming pool, too,' says Nina, who is the founder of Life Clubs, an organisation that runs personal development workshops. She says you have to be aware of what makes you happy, because otherwise you're constantly compromising without even realising it. She suggests you look back through your life and think about the things you loved doing as a child and teenager. If you loved riding your bike, for example, think about what in particular you

liked about it - it could be anything from the shiny red frame to spending time with friends in the countryside. Then you can work that aspect into your life now, from something small like getting a red phone cover, to joining a local walking group. Knowing what makes you happy is the tricky part - then you just need to do it!

2 Does your relationship have direction?

Knowing where you're going - and that your partner's going there too - can have a big effect on how settled and content you feel. Once a year, take a piece of paper and a pencil and try sitting down with your partner to draw a picture together of what you want your future to look like.

For example, you might sketch your dream home and find yourself drawing a cat basket in the lounge and an en suite bathroom, whereas he could be sketching a dog kennel in the garden and a games room. This will get you

talking about your future in a whole new way.

The picture may well change every year as your plans and hopes develop - it doesn't matter if it comes true or not, it's the conversation that counts.

Psychological coach Nick Jankel says: 'It's a visual way of taking stock, and making sure you and your partner are on the same page - doing it this way is much more fun than starting with "Darling, we need to talk".'

3 What does success mean to you?

'If you put your happiness in the hands of others,' says Nick, 'it's just a roll of the dice. But you can bring it under your control by redefining your idea of what constitutes success and failure'. If you tell yourself that success is getting a promotion, there may well be factors beyond your control that mean you fail no matter how hard you work. However, if you aim instead to become more

organised or contribute more ideas, then you're setting goals you can achieve yourself, you'll feel more rewarded - and you may even get that promotion!

4 Do you dream of escaping?

We all have those little fantasies - moving to the country or quitting work to travel round the world - but the trick is knowing when to take them seriously and when to dismiss them. If you start to feel unfulfilled by your life choices - whether it's to do with your partner, job, family or living situation, don't assume life will be different elsewhere.

'If you move house or start a new job you're bound to find things more exciting for the first six months,' says Nick, 'but wherever you go you're still bringing yourself with you, so you may face the same issues'. Whatever your situation, work through your problems before abandoning ship. Ask yourself why you want to escape and how you expect your life to change when you have. Once you've dealt with your own challenges, it's time to start browsing those travel websites!

Depression reduces life expectancy as much as smoking*

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO HONING YOUR HAPPINESS SKILLS

You may think you're either born happy or not, but that's not the case - new research shows that only around 50% of our happiness is influenced by genes or our early life. It's not about money, either, as only 10% is down to our income and environment. A full 40% of how happy we are is down to how we think and what we do. Vanessa King from Action for Happiness, an organisation that raises awareness of psychological wellbeing, recommends these three exercises.

EXERCISE 1: NOTICE THE GOOD THINGS

Counting your blessings really is good for you. In an experiment conducted by psychologists at the University of Pennsylvania, subjects were asked to note three good things that had happened to them during the day, and why they were good. They did this every night for a week, and showed increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for up to six months after. 'Get into the habit of doing this every night when you get

into bed - not only does it help you sleep, but it retrains your brain to notice positive things, which in turn breeds positive emotions and makes us happier overall,' explains Vanessa.

EXERCISE 2: GO EXPERIENCE SHOPPING

If money doesn't bring you happiness you're probably not spending it right, according to a recent study that showed how we can invest more wisely in our mental wellbeing. 'Often we think the only happiness money can buy is a new pair of shoes, but while that will bring you short-term pleasure, it will soon be just another purchase and you'll want the next thing,' says Vanessa. 'Spending money on new experiences is a much better investment, because we meet new people, get new ideas and relive the memory later with loved ones.' In fact, 57% of participants reported gaining greatest happiness from spending money on experiences, compared with 34% from material goods. Trying new things brings you lasting happiness, and it exercises your brain, too.



Money can make you happy - if you spend it on the right things!

EXERCISE 3: DECIDE TO DO GOOD

In an experiment, people who did five random acts of kindness a day boosted their mood for up to six weeks. 'When we do things for others the areas of our brain that light up are the same as when we get a reward,' explains Vanessa. 'There's something about doing things for other people that cements our relationships with loved ones and connects us with strangers.' So note down anything you do to help other people during the week, then read back over it on a Sunday evening - you'll feel that warm sense of wellbeing all over again. □

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