

Do This Simple Exercise Every Day for a Week, and You'll Be Happier for Months (or Years)



UPenn professor explains how to improve your outlook for the long term.

Chances are, your answers have a lot to do with trying to relax, destress, and give yourself some downtime. All of which are very important to do, but there's one fundamental problem: You're not actively trying to be happy. You're only trying to avoid *unhappiness* due to stress, anxiety, frustration, and exhaustion. Getting a handle on all those negative factors in your life is only the start, according to Martin E.P. Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*.

In a recent *New York Times* interview, Seligman said that psychology's traditional aim that focuses on removing stressors and dealing with traumas in life but does not seek to actively foster happiness is "empirically false, morally insidious, and a political and educational dead-end."

How to get happy



Instead, Seligman offers some exercises all of us can do to increase our happiness and not just distress.

Some of them, such as listing things that are going well for you or properly thanking people who have supported you, are tried-and-true methods for improving both your outlook and your relationships. But one exercise, called "Identify Signature Strengths," really caught my attention.

It goes like this: Think of an event in your life when you were at your best and that you are proud of, for what you accomplished or how you dealt with a difficult situation. It doesn't have to be an earth-shattering event--something that's small but seems meaningful to you is just fine. Now write down the story of that event. It doesn't have to be the best piece of writing in the world, but it should be a real story with a beginning, a middle, and an end.



Reread that story every day for a week. And each time, ask yourself what qualities you displayed when you were at your best. Were you innovative? Smart? Courageous? Compassionate? Levelheaded? Did you push yourself to do things you didn't know you could? Whatever the answers are, write them down.

Your last step is to take a good long look at the things you're good at when you're at your best--your strengths. Now ask yourself this: How can you make the most of those strengths? How can you use them to your advantage in your work and your daily life?

Do this every day for a week, Seligman advises. One group of subjects did just that, focusing on a different strength every day and looking for ways to use that specific strength each day. Even six months later, subjects in the experiment were, on average, less depressed and more satisfied with their lives than they had been before the experiment, Seligman reports. It's a long-term change that could improve a person's outlook, relationships, and approach to work, and have long-lasting consequences.

It might work the same way for you, too.