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Top Seven Ways To C'Mon Get Happy

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Manoj Singh, a rickshaw driver living in the slums of Kolkata, India, calls himself happy and his life good. His makeshift, one-room home protected by a plastic tarp may be a struggle during monsoon season but is otherwise wonderful because it has a window and nice airflow. His neighbors are his friends. His son, who waits for him to return home each day, and his baby daughter's face regularly fill him with joy. "I feel that I am not poor because I am the richest person," he says. "Sometimes we eat only rice with salt, but still we are happy."

Singh's story is the opening of new documentary *Happy*, which explores the [science of happiness](#) and its prevalence across cultures. Director Roko Belic shot over 400 hours of footage all over the world—from the swamps of Louisiana to co-ops in Denmark and the streets of Japan—to explore what really makes people happy. The film has won numerous awards in nations like Mexico, Costa Rica, the Netherlands and the U.S., and tomorrow it will screen in 200 cities in 30 countries for an effort the producers have dubbed [World Happy Day](#).

Six years in the making, the film is full of insight from happiness researchers, positive psychologists and real people from every demographic, all asking the question: What lies at the core of a human being's [happiness](#)? I spoke with Belic to find out what he learned.

Practice Happiness

Scientists believe that 50% of our happiness is controlled by our genes, which is known as the happiness set point. Meanwhile, just 10% is based on the circumstances of our lives: status, money, career and the objects we surround ourselves with. The remaining 40% is believed to be subject to intentional behavior and choices. "When I started this, I thought 95% was genetic—you're either born grumpy or finding the silver lining," says Belic. "I know now that happiness is within our control. That's inspiring." Think of happiness like any other [skill](#) that can be developed.

Keep Moving

If happiness is intentional, you'll have more if you, quite literally, exercise it. "Physical exercise is like medicine," says Belic. The movie follows several people who've discovered the happiness chemical induced by physical activity. Tanned and toned, one man gushes that surfing keeps him young, while a middle-aged woman says she gardens because she loves to sweat. Moreover, losing yourself in an activity or hobby that gives you great joy, something psychologists have called "flow," boosts happiness and fulfillment.

Invest In Your Community

Having a sense of community and positive social relationships may be one of the best influencers of happiness. Belic takes viewers to the island of Okinawa, Japan, home to the [largest concentration of centenarians](#) per capita in the world. A chipper 106-year-old woman explains that in their community they work hard, all look after the children, get together frequently with peers to talk and gather cross-generationally to listen and dance to the island's one musical group. The mantra in Okinawa: We're here for each other.

Rethink Success

Income has risen steadily over the last 50 years, but happiness has not. Researchers say making \$50,000 a year versus \$50 million will not greatly impact happiness levels. "I was culturally trained to believe in certain truths and laws: good grades lead to a prestigious college, which leads to a high-status, high-paying job, a nice house and ultimate happiness," says Belic. "I've been trained to focus on the wrong things." In Tokyo, Japan, he says, citizens prioritize work over their relationships and health. The Japanese use the word "Karoshi" to describe someone literally working to death, and the film profiles one young man's family after his purported death from overwork. An abundance of work hours likely won't lead to happiness.

Prioritize Helping Others

Happiness researchers believe extrinsic goals like fame, power and good looks are less likely to increase happiness than intrinsic goals like being compassionate, cooperation and helping others. Belic explains that he was recruited to the project by [Tom Shadyac](#), writer and director of blockbuster movies like *Ace Ventura* and *The Nutty Professor*. "He had been living an extreme lifestyle," says Belic. "He was a single man with a 17,000-square-foot home, and he noticed that the people who cleaned his house and tended his garden were happier than the millionaires in Hollywood."

So he traded the mansion for a mobile home and put up the money for *Happy*. Interestingly, not only does helping others make us happier, but it elevates the whole community and becomes self-fulfilling. Belic says happy people are less likely to commit crimes and more likely to help strangers. In Bhutan, the government switched its primary focus from GDP, or Gross Domestic Product, to GNH, or Gross National Happiness, on a mission to increase quality of life.

Express Gratitude

Belic says his favorite take-away from the movie is how important feeling and expressing gratitude is to our happiness. If you write a letter thanking someone from your past, he says, even if you don't mail it, you'll feel happier for days. If you do mail it, you'll feel it for longer, and if they respond in kindness, it may change your entire outlook. "Start saying thank you, and meaning it," he says.

Evolve Self-Awareness

Self-knowledge and happiness are often a parallel journey. "It's pretty simple; happy people do the things that make them happy," notes Belic. "Fundamentally, as you become happier you connect more closely to who you truly are." Figuring out what you want and what's really important to you will improve your happiness. The key is being authentic versus faking positivity. It's not about being 10 out of 10 on the happiness scale all the time, says Belic. There's an important place for anger, sadness and anxiety, and balance is crucial.

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Readers: Are we culturally taught to prioritize the wrong goals? Do you practice happiness as if it's a skill? What works for you?