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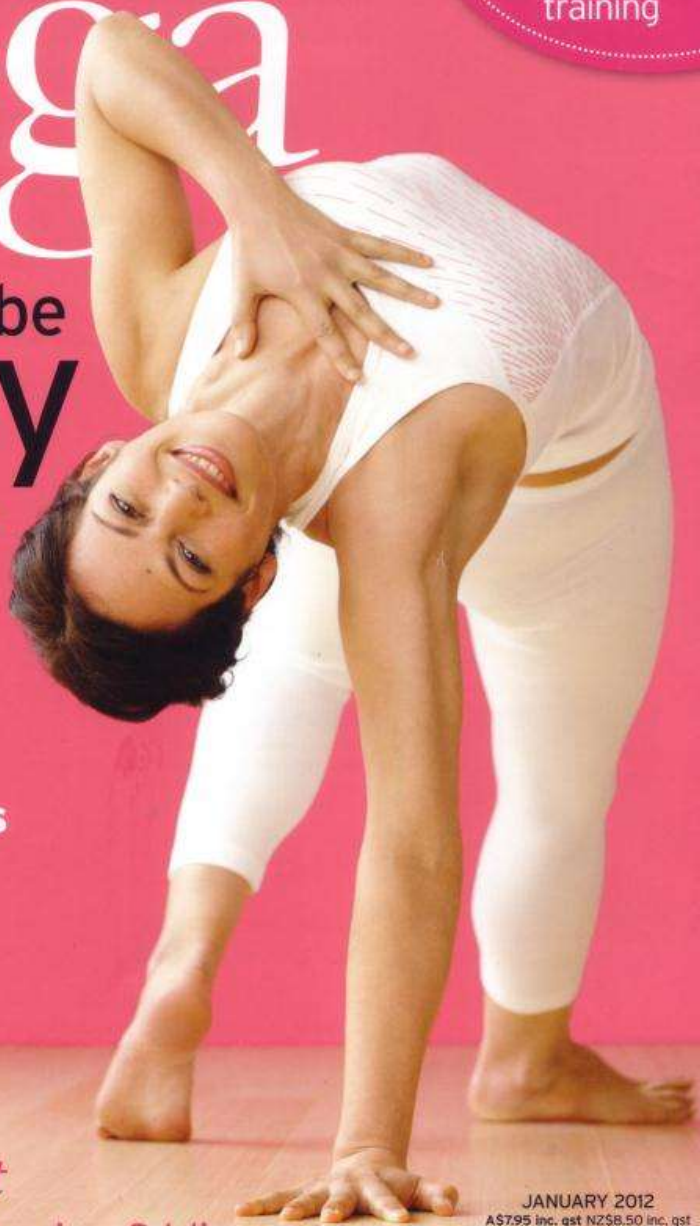
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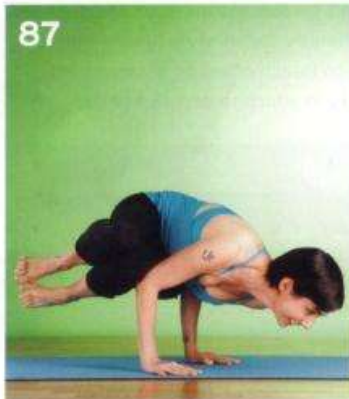
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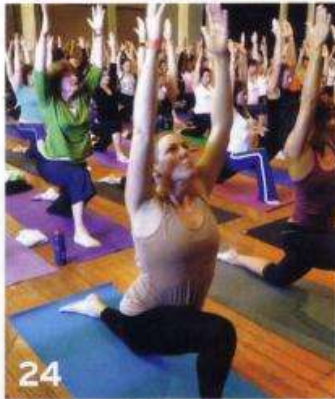
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the secrets of happiness

New research shows that happiness is your choice, writes **Diana Timmins**.

We all want to be happy, right? After all, the Dalai Lama believes the purpose of our lives is to seek happiness. So what really makes us happy: extrinsic goals of material wealth and climbing corporate ladders, or intrinsic values surrounding family and friends?

These are the questions Academy Award nominated director Roko Belic set out to answer with his inspiring documentary, *Happy*, which debuted in Australia at the 2011 Happiness & Its Causes conference. Belic travelled to five continents inhabited by the richest of the rich to the poorest of the poor, including the Indian slums of Kolkata and his homeland of America, to find that the wealth of happiness is by no means materialistic.

"Despite the fact that they [Kolkata] live in little huts made of bamboo sticks covered in plastic tarps and bags; despite the fact that there's open sewerage running in front of where they sleep; despite the fact that they have no income for medical care or schooling or for anything in excess of subsistence living, they're as happy as the average American," shares Belic.

"What I saw in the slum that I see missing in many American neighbourhoods is a real, genuine sense of camaraderie and a bond among the people who live there. John Lennon said 'love is all you need', and we're discovering through scientific data and research that, for happiness, that may be true."

INNER JOY

The heightened interest in positive psychology over recent years has raised one very important question: what is the *real* point of happiness, beyond the enjoyment of simply feeling good? Dr Robert Holden, psychologist and director

of The Happiness Project, addressed this at the Sydney leg of the widely acclaimed I Can Do It! conference. "Happiness is a compass in that it helps us navigate our life according to our values, to live with a sense of purpose, direction and meaning," he said. "Happiness isn't just a state of mind; it's our original energy. We follow our joy so we can tap into the inner gold of our true nature and learn more about our spiritual DNA."

Fellow conference speaker and world-renowned authority in mind-body healing, Dr Deepak Chopra, expanded on this, claiming happy people aren't only more successful, but also have better health. "Happy people make neuropeptides, serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin and opiates, which not only make them happier and have more self-esteem, but also modulate the activity of their immune system."

BOUNCE BACK

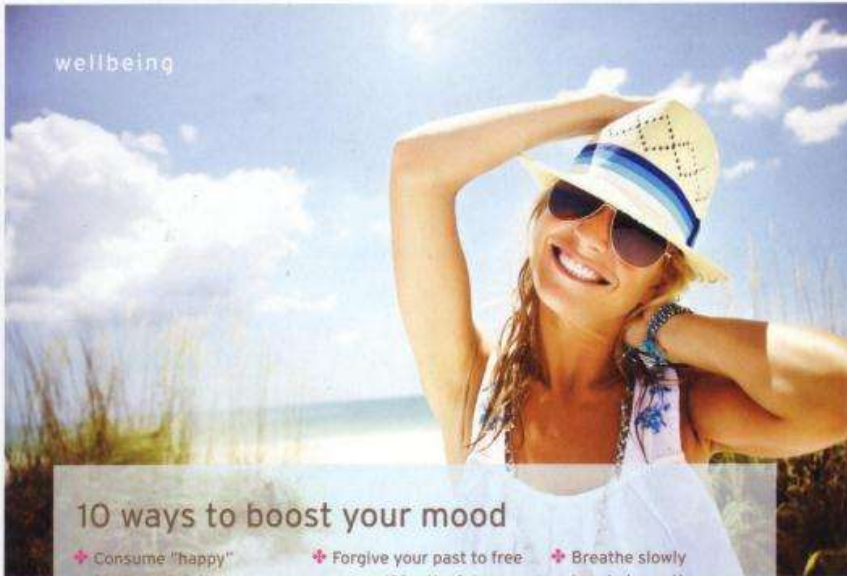
There is, of course, another vital point of happiness: our "set-point". Extensive worldwide research into subjective wellbeing, including the Australian Unity Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI), reveals that we all have a happiness set-point which acts as a buffer to maintain emotional equilibrium.

"This homeostatic system is resilient. When unusually good or bad experiences happen, the system is briefly defeated, but then bounces back to restore happiness to within normal range," explains Deakin University's Professor Bob Cummins, the author of the PWI. According to Cummins, the average person fluctuates





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10 ways to boost your mood

- ✦ Consume "happy" foods containing mood-boosting amino acid, tryptophan, including: bananas, turkey, pumpkin seeds and walnuts.
- ✦ Salute the sun for a burst of vitamin D.
- ✦ Immerse yourself in creative hobbies that evoke a sense of "flow" (unbreakable concentration and focus).
- ✦ Forgive your past to free yourself for the future.
- ✦ Laugh more: 10 to 15 minutes of daily laughter is enough to stabilise stress hormones and mental health.
- ✦ Spend time in nature to enhance your sense of grounding.
- ✦ Sleep well to stress less: aim for seven to eight hours per night.
- ✦ Breathe slowly to rebalance the secretion of the stress hormone cortisol.
- ✦ Create a compilation of your favourite songs: music can reduce depression and assist with pain management.
- ✦ Get aerobically active: dancing to your heart's content releases dopamine.

a marginal six points either side of their set-point in standard day-to-day situations. Some psychologists claim this baseline is 50 per cent determined by genes, but latest studies into epigenetics—that our genetic code can be altered by environment and choice—give rise to Holden's claims that it may be more flexible than fixed.

"I prefer to call it the 'familiar point' in happiness, because it's not set by anything. We can move this point around through the power of choice, grace, prayer and meditation. We can choose our state of mind, whereby we can choose our experience of life," says Holden, who believes the choices we make the very moment we wake can impact our baseline by as much as 90 per cent. "How did you wake up this morning?" he asks. "Was it rise and shine, or rise and whine? Was it good morning God, or good God—morning?"

BEYOND MONEY

Can money buy happiness? Not entirely; research shows anything extensively beyond the means for basic needs can only loan fleeting pleasure. In fact, continuously aspiring for superficial gain can send us sprinting frantically on a vicious cycle known as the "hedonic treadmill"; that is, the more we have, the more we adapt, the more we want.

"Evolution has supplied a highly developed 'on' button that drives us to seek more and more resources. This is a useful strategy in a resource-poor environment, but isn't well adapted to modern life," says Cummins. "Averaged across Australia, happiness rises only marginally beyond a gross household income of about \$100,000. After \$150,000, there is no further reliable increase."

German psychologist, Dr Michael Titze, says people laughed three times

more per day 60 years ago, despite having less access to money and materialistic pleasures. And consider this: Japan, one of the wealthiest and most technologically advanced countries, is ranked the saddest industrialised nation in the world. The pressure of maintaining professional lives over personal has led to a high statistic of deaths resulting from the physical and emotional demands of over-working; a pandemic the Japanese call *karoshi*. In comparison, Denmark has far less material prosperity and more co-housing communities than any other modern industrialised nation, and consistently ranks as one of the happiest nations due to its strong sense of community support.

GIVE LOVE

Many positive psychologists perceive love is the equivalent of happiness and vice versa, as unhappiness is often the result of not acting out of love. The PWI findings support this notion, revealing people in loving relationships are generally happier than those who are single or divorced. Bearing in mind, the Australian PWI average of 75 points has remained fairly stable since the study's birth in April 2001; the most recent report revealed married couples have a score of 85.4, while de facto couples happily hang around 82.6. The sad news is that the PWI of those who've never married plummets to 67.8, and people divorced or separated drops to 64.5 and 59.2 respectively.

The road to happiness can be deeply etched in the quality of the company we keep, as research proves moods are incredibly contagious. Dr James Fowler from the University of California tracked 4739 participants from 1983 to 2003 to conclude that happy and unhappy people tended to cluster, and that having a happy friend who lives within a mile increases our chances of being happy by a whopping

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25 per cent. What's even more impressive is that the relationship between people's happiness extends up to three degrees of separation, for example, to the friend of one's friends' friends. So choose your mates wisely!

According to Fowler, happy waves spread more reliably than unhappy waves, so the more you connect with people, the more you expose yourself to them. "You have to constantly renew your contacts to get the full effect," he advises.

SPREAD KINDNESS

Retired battalion chief of the New York City Fire Department, Dan Daly, has found yoga immensely helpful in rebuilding his life after his involvement in the city's rescue and restoration following the 9/11 terrorist attacks; not just by cultivating peace of mind during his morning asana class, but on a more noble level of karma yoga.

"One of the most powerful factors of attaining true happiness is exercising

our sense of altruism," says Daly, who volunteers regularly with prisons, schools and wounded war veterans on what he passionately calls his "peace mission".

"I've spent much of my life travelling the world doing wild things to percolate feelings of happiness, but nothing comes close to volunteering. It hits me right in the heart like no pleasure-seeking activity can," he says.

Allan Luks, a leader in social change and advocacy, labels this response as "helper's high". A study he conducted with more than 3000 volunteers proved regular helpers are 10 times more likely to be in good emotional and physical health, as volunteering reduces stress and releases endorphins.

Additional research into neuroplasticity suggests compassionate thoughts may be just as powerful as actions; a concept pioneered largely by the Dalai Lama in collaboration with neuroscientists at the University of Wisconsin. Studies on Buddhist adepts (seasoned meditators)

get happy

Learn more about how to be happy at the Happiness & Its Causes conference in Sydney on 1-2 March, 2012. Visit www.happinessanditscauses.com.au.

revealed that cultivating compassion through loving kindness meditation stimulates pleasure-centres in the brain, such as gamma waves, therefore potentially enhancing the structure and functioning of the brain for longevity of health and happiness.

Slipping into the trap of "I'll be happy when I get this and get that" is a common error in the pursuit of happiness. Clearly, banking on interactions rather than financial transactions appears a far more fruitful investment. Take it from Belic: "If you don't have anything, what you do have are people, and that's actually everything." ✦

Diana Timmins is a freelance writer and hatha vinyasa teacher based on the South Coast of NSW.


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