

# Myths and Secrets of Happiness

*Handout created by Sarah Arnold, Psy.D.*

Who is happy? What makes a person happy?  
Researchers continue to find answers to these long asked questions.

## Myths of happiness

Before learning what relates to happiness, researchers, such as David Myers, Ph.D., have learned that there are several myths to popular beliefs about happiness.

- Myth #1:**      **Age predicts happiness.** Research studying more than a million people in many countries revealed that happiness is about equally prevalent among people of all ages.
- Myth #2:**      **Gender predicts happiness.** Research has found that happiness does not favor males or females.
- Myth #3:**      **Wealth predicts happiness.** Research has found that those with very high incomes and those in the richest of countries are no happier than others. In fact, as income in Western countries has doubled over the last half century, happiness has failed to increase. While many can have access to luxuries such as air conditioning, cell phones, Internet access, and other gadgets, research suggests we are no happier than were our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents without these items.

## Secrets of Happiness

So, if the above factors do not predict happiness, what does?  
Research suggests the four following secrets to happiness.

1. **Positive Traits.** Having optimism, self-esteem, and perceived control over one's life are factors repeatedly related to happy people.
2. **Flow.** What's flow? Flow is an optimal state in which we feel balanced between overwhelmed and underwhelmed. When we feel flow, we are so absorbed in an activity that we lose our sense of self and time and simply enjoy ourselves. Often, people think they would just be happy if they could be mindlessly passive, but research shows that we are happier when we are engrossed in a mindful challenge. So, work and leisure experiences that engage our skills promote happiness. Something to remember when we think making time to watch TV will make us happy, rather than spending time in our favorite hobby.
3. **Close, supportive relationships.** Humans are social animals, so we have a need to belong. So, we benefit from having companions through the journey of life. Research has found that having people with whom we can share our hurts and our celebrations relates to happiness.
4. **Faith.** Having a hope-filled faith has also been repeatedly found to relate to happiness in the research. For some, faith is a source of social connection, for some it is a source of meaning, for some it is a source of ultimate hope, and for others it is a combination of these.

So, while age, gender, and money do not relate to happiness, having a positive attitude, involving oneself in engaging activities, involving oneself in caring relationships, and having a hope-filled faith seem to be the secrets to happiness. Other factors that repeatedly are related to happiness in the research include the fact that happy people tend to have energy that is enhanced by regular aerobic exercise, adequate sleep, and positive attitudes including a sense of gratitude for one's health, friends, and family.

*Sources of Handout:*

- Authentic Happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment by M. Seligman (2002)
- "Pursuing Happiness" by D. Myers (2007)

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