So You Want to be Happy? Information for Teens



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Summary: Everyone wants to be happy. Some people think happiness is about having fun, like playing video games, and watching movies all the time. However, that is just leisure and pleasure, which is not the same as happiness. The secret to happiness is to have a life with people and activities that give you a sense of belonging, purpose, meaning and hope. Belonging is when we feel connected to people such as family and friends. Purpose is having things to do to keep us busy, like being a student, helping out the family, or having a job or volunteer work. Or perhaps it is your passion about a hobby or interest. Meaning is knowing that your life means something and makes a difference to someone, whether it is your parents, or others. Hope is knowing that the future is going to continue to be good, or that it will get better.

Introduction



Everyone wants to be happy, i.e. have mental wellness, the state of well-being where we feel contentment, love, satisfaction, pleasure or joy. Throughout history, people have struggled to find the secret to happiness.

What’s the Secret to Being Happy?

Is it having fun all the time, like playing video games and watching movies all day?
As it turns out, living a life of leisure does not lead to happiness...

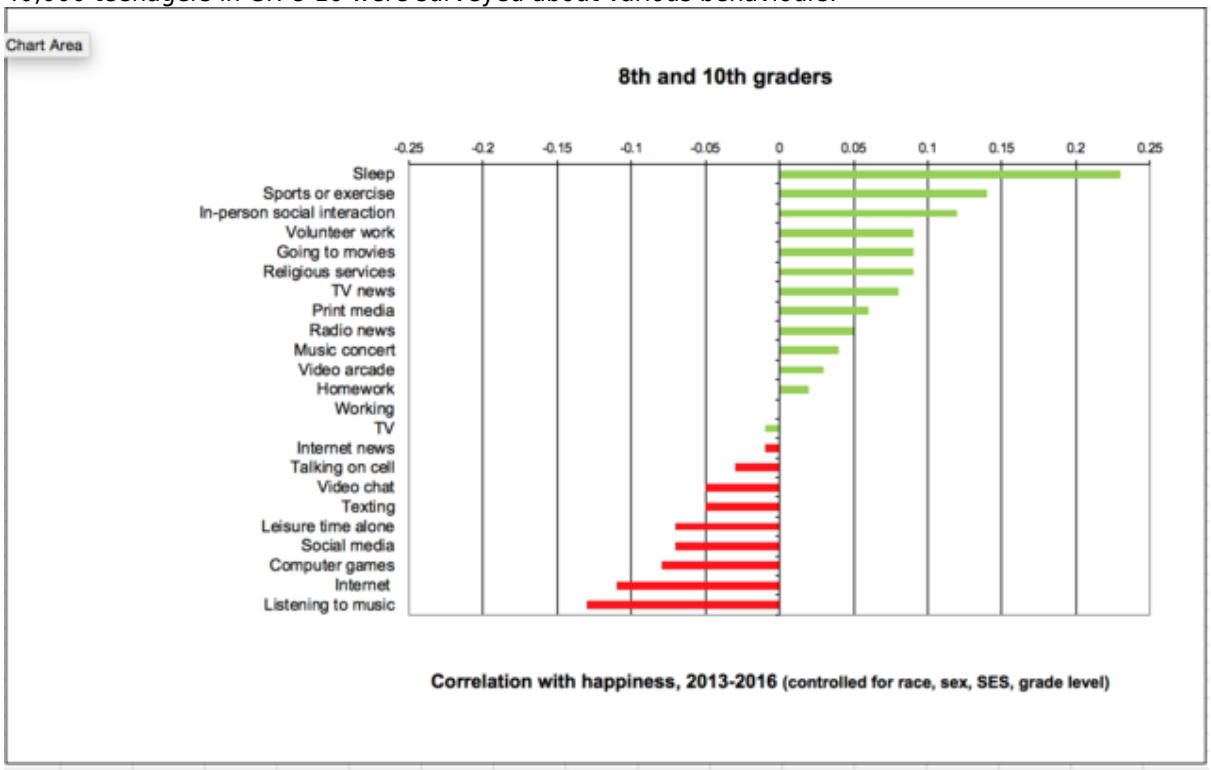
Happiness (and Mental Wellness) is about Belonging, Purpose, Hope and Meaning

Happiness (and mental wellness) is a positive side effect that happens when you live a life with belonging, purpose, meaning and hope (Health Canada, 2014).

1. Belonging is when you feel connected to your family, community and culture;
2. Purpose is having activities that keep you busy, e.g. going to school, going to work, contributing to your home, neighborhood or community.
3. Meaning is seeing that your life isn't just about you, but is about helping others, making a difference, making the world a more beautiful place, caring for the environment and the planet, or some other meaningful goal for you.
4. Hope is knowing that you have a future ahead of you.

What Can I Do To Be Happy?

Many studies that have looked at what is important for mental health and wellness. One of these is the Monitoring the Future Survey, which has surveyed tens of thousands of teens since 1975. In the survey from 2013-2018, 40,000 teenagers in Gr. 8-10 were surveyed about various behaviours.



The following behaviours were associated with positive mental health:

- Sleep
- Sports or exercise
- In-person social interaction, i.e. interacting with someone face to face.
- Volunteer work
- Going to movies, i.e. seeing a movie in a theatre with other people.
- Religious services, e.g. going to church, mosque or synagogue.
- Watching news on TV
- Print media, i.e. reading print such as books.
- Music concerts, i.e. going to hear music at a live concert.

- Video arcade, i.e. going to play video games at an arcade, which is usually a social activity with others.

The following behaviours were associated with negative mental health:

- Reading internet news
- Talking on cellphones, video chatting, or texting (as opposed to talking face to face with someone else in the same room)
- Spending time on social media
- Spending leisure time alone
- Spending time on computer games
- Surfing the internet
- Listening to music on your own. Although people think of music as being a helpful strategy, listening for long periods tends to be isolating, which is negative for mental health.

In other words:

- **Less happiness is linked to nearly all activities on a cellphone, e.g. spending too much time on social media or video games. This is probably because cellphone activities tend to disconnect us from other people, and other meaningful activities.**
- **More happiness is linked to nearly all non-phone activities, e.g. getting more sleep, spending face to face time with people. This is probably because humans are wired to need social contact and real world activities.**

Mental Wellness Tips

Take Care of Your Body



- Get enough sleep. Get at least 8-11 hrs of sleep a day.
  - Read about how to get enough sleep
- Nature. Spend enough time in nature. The exact time is uncertain, but studies on eye health suggests that humans need at least 10 hrs / week (i.e. at least 1-hr daily outside).
  - Learn more about nature time



- Get moving. Try to spend at least 30-minutes a day of aerobic exercise. It could be walking, biking, playing sports, ideally outside in nature.
  - Learn more about getting physically active
- Nutrition and diet. Ensure a well balanced diet consistent with Canada's Food Guide recommendations, and try to ensure that you:
  - Eat plenty of multicolored fruits and vegetables ("rainbow diet").
  - Get enough omega 3 fatty acids, e.g. consume fish, or vegetable sources such as flax seeds.
  - Limit excessive calories.
  - Limit processed foods.
  - Limit soft drinks including artificial sweeteners.

    - Limit animal fats.
    - Learn more about healthy nutrition for positive mental health



- Put down the screens. Don’t spend too much time in front of a screen. Studies show that when people spend too much time in front of screens (e.g. more than 3-4 hrs /day), it can contribute to depression and other mental health problems.
    - Don’t ignore other people. When you are around fellow humans, put down the screen -- don’t ignore other people for a screen.
    - Try to keep your recreational screen time (e.g. video games, entertainment videos) to less than 1-2 hrs a day.
    - Learn more about how to cut back on screens to improve our mental health

Take Care of Your Mind

- Invest time and energy in healthy relationships. Humans are social creatures and need social interaction.
    - Do you have people that make you feel supported? If so, then great.
    - Do you have people in your life that are stressful? If so, what is it that they say or do which is stressful?
        - Often, what people need for emotional support is simply someone to listen and validate your feelings (as opposed to someone giving you advice and judgement).
        - So you might say things like, "I know that you want to be helpful. Right now, all I need is for you to listen and validate how I feel. I'll let you know if I need advice or suggestions on what to do. Thank you."
    - Do things with other people such as going for a walk, a meal or having a coffee, tea or hot chocolate...
- Recreation. In your free-time, do you have healthy, fun activities to do? Examples include:
    - Creative activities, e.g. art, music, dance, reading
    - Physical activities such as sports or going for a walk, or biking.



- Relaxation and stress management. Do you feel stressed all the time? Do you have ways to cope with stress? Practice relaxation skills, meditation, deep breathing or mindfulness to help keep you calm in the face of stress.

- Positive coping skills for stress. Do you have problems with stress at school, home, relationships and other areas. What are your stresses? Are you able to get help with those stresses?



- Altruism and acts of kindness: Do you give to others? It turns out that people that contribute to others feel

better about themselves as well. So by helping others, you are actually helping yourself. Examples include: Do good deeds for others (e.g. helping family and friends with their household chores such as cooking, groceries or laundry); volunteer work.

- Gratitude. Are you grateful for what you have in life? Or do you worry about what you do not have? Being grateful improves your mental wellness. Be grateful for that which you have in life. Every day, try to thank someone for simply being there, or for something specific that they do for you.
- Forgive others: Holding on to anger and resentment hurts you more than the other person. Forgiving others allows you to move on.
- Be present. Live in the present moment, as opposed to focusing on the past, or future.



- Practice self-acceptance and self-compassion. Unfortunately, many of us tend to have a self-critical voice that makes us feel guilty or ashamed. Perhaps it's because we think that being self-critical will be helpful, but unfortunately, it usually doesn't help and just makes us feel worse.
    - Accept that you are imperfect and flawed, because after all, you are only human. Everyone gets anxious, depressed, or stressed from time to time -- it is part of being human, and it means you are not alone.
    - What would you tell a loved one who is suffering from depression, anxiety or stress? You'd say positive things, such as "Its okay, you're not alone, you are a good person, etc." Try telling yourself those same supportive things you'd tell another.

Take Care of your Spirit



- Be spiritually involved. We are all connected to one another. Consider going to church, mosque or synagogue. Or practice contemplative practices such as meditation, or spending time in nature.

Make Your Own Plan

Here is a template for a "Wellness Action Plan" that you can use to make your own plan.
https://docs.google.com/docume...

When and Where to Get Help

Unfortunately, life is complicated. There are many things in modern society which can get in the way of belonging, purpose, hope and meaning.
And sometimes, even if you do have a sense of belonging, purpose, hope and meaning, you can still struggle with feeling anxiety, sadness, and stress.
If you are struggling, please consider doing the following:

- Talk to a trusted adult, such as a parent or caregiver, teacher or guidance counselor
- See your doctor
- Call a telephone help line.

Let them know that you are struggling, and you need help and support. You are not alone -- many people are struggling in modern society. Help is out there.

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For More Information

Self-Care 101 for Students
https://smho-smso.ca/blog/online-resources/self-care-101-for-students/

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