

# HAPPINESS | Annual To-Do List

These 22 steps will help boost your happiness.

Research suggests that happiness can be cultivated by focusing on relationships, constant learning, and feeling grateful and optimistic, among other strategies. These 22 steps can help you foster a sense of happiness in your own life:

## ALL AGES

- Cultivate these twelve behaviors, which Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of *The How of Happiness*, has identified as practices that help people lead happier lives: Express gratitude; cultivate optimism; avoid overthinking and social comparison; practice acts of kindness; nurture social relationships; develop strategies for coping; learn to forgive; increase flow experiences, or intense focus on the present moment; savor life's joys; commit to your goals; practice religion and spirituality; and take care of your body.
- Review your values. Intrinsic values include self-improvement, helping others, and making the world a better place. Extrinsic values include wealth and material accomplishments, physical appearance, and the appearance and reality of social influence. People say that intrinsic values make them happier, but most actually adopt extrinsic values in their lives.
- Invest in your relationships. Spouses, lovers, friends, and family are the keys to what gives our life meaning and happiness.
- Assess whether you're lonely. More and more people live alone, while others can be lonely in an unhappy household. Whether you are living alone or with others, are you lonely and isolated, or is your living arrangement bringing you all the benefits you'd hoped? If your home life is not what you'd wish, evaluate how and when you might be able to change it. Having a strong social network is good for our health and happiness.
- Consider the role work plays in your identity. Whether you're a "work to live" or "live to work" type, there's no question that working can be central to your identity and sense of value. It's important to have a realistic sense of what work means to you and to have the self-awareness and confidence to judge whether your work life is satisfactory or needs to be changed.
- Evaluate how well you cope with adversity, which is a reliable indicator of happiness. Make a list of the major problems you've faced in the past year. How did you deal with them, and what have you learned about yourself as a result? If you're stuck, it might be time to seek professional help.
- Engage in life. Learning new things and being engaged in a variety of meaningful activities are essential to happiness at all stages of life. Are you fully engaged with life or are there areas where you've "checked out"? Has your level of engagement changed substantially in recent years? If something is "missing," what do you plan to do about it?

## 20s and 30s

- Review the number, quality, and status of your important friendships. Whether it's with family members, work colleagues, social acquaintances, or college friends, having roughly half a dozen strong friendships (there is no magic number) will pay big dividends for the rest of your life.
- If you live alone (and even if you don't), think about the way you are living and whether you're lonely—lots of empty evenings by yourself, no one to share special or even ordinary events with, and the like. If you don't like the quality of your life, make changes by reaching out to groups or social networks.
- While careers can be intense and all-consuming passions in your earlier working years, it's not too early to begin thinking about work-family balance. Work rarely tops family in people's rankings of life's most important achievements.
- If parents want good relationships with their kids later in life, the foundations of those relationships are built now. Review the values you are passing onto your children. Engage them at a young age in volunteer activities that help other people, and you will be increasing their lifelong odds of being happier.
- Evaluating the value and health of your marriage or other romantic relationship probably requires at least a daily check-up! It's important not to take things for granted. No relationship brings more happiness or, potentially, sadness, than the one with your closest partner.

## 40s and 50s

- Children-centric relationships change and often fade when the kids are grown. It's important to work at replacing these parts of your social network.
- Take stock of your relationship with your grown children and your parents. You are, increasingly, the key decision-maker for both of these generations. What kind of a job are you doing?
- Are you stuck in one or more ruts in middle-age? Review the activities and flow of your life and, as needed, build a plan to find new activities, experiences, and friends.
- Replacing the time and emotional pull of raising children is a huge task for many people. Review how you're spending your time. This is a good time to build and expand community and volunteer activities.
- Think about whether you have a great career or just a job. Either path can lead to happiness, but only if you accept a role for your working life that meshes with your aspirations and values. Understanding yourself and how work fits in with your life is increasingly important at this age.

## 60s and Up

- Review how well you've matched your long-term aspirations with your financial resources. You don't need buckets of money to be happy. But you need some money. More importantly, happiness requires a balance of what you want to do and what you can do. How is your lifestyle balance faring?
- Consider expanding your volunteer activities. It's a great way to match your interests and values with new things to do and interesting people.
- Make a spring-cleaning plan. As we get older, households tend to get cluttered with possessions we no longer need and which, if we admit it, no one in our family needs, either. Regular downsizing is a good practice.
- Is your spiritual gas tank full or running on fumes? It is natural and healthy in later years to begin thinking about issues that transcend daily living.
- Use it or lose it! Build a fitness plan or, if you've got one, review how you're doing. Even into old age, vigorous exercise can help your physical and mental health.