

# The Science of Happiness

## What Makes People Happy?

What researchers have discovered about the secrets of a fulfilling life

■ B1 Reading ■ 30 min ■ Fun & Culture

<b>Level</b>	B1 (Intermediate)
<b>Skill</b>	Reading
<b>Topic</b>	Fun & Culture
<b>Duration</b>	30 minutes
<b>Age Group</b>	Teens & Adults

### Learning Objectives

- ◆ Read and understand a text about the science of happiness
- ◆ Learn 15 key vocabulary items related to psychology and emotions
- ◆ Understand the relationship between money, experiences, and happiness
- ◆ Discuss personal sources of happiness and well-being
- ◆ Write a reflective paragraph about personal happiness

## 1 Before You Read — Happiness Check

Think about what makes you happy and discuss:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how happy would you say you are right now? What would make the number higher?
2. Do you think money can buy happiness? Why or why not?
3. What was the happiest moment of your life so far? What made it special?

## 2 Reading: What Science Tells Us

### What Science Tells Us About Being Happy

What does it mean to be happy? For centuries, philosophers, poets, and religious thinkers have tried to answer this question. Today, scientists are joining the conversation, and their findings are surprising. Happiness, it turns out, has less to do with what we own and more to do with how we think, who we spend time with, and the small daily choices we make. The field of **positive psychology** — the scientific study of what makes life worth living — has grown rapidly since the early 2000s, and its discoveries are changing the way we understand human **well-being**.

### Does Money Buy Happiness?

One of the most famous questions in happiness research is whether money makes people happy. The answer is: it depends. Studies consistently show that money *does* increase happiness — but only up to a certain point. Once a person earns enough to cover their basic needs — food, housing, healthcare, and a reasonable level of **comfort** — additional income has a surprisingly small effect on overall life **satisfaction**. A person earning 100,000 euros per year is not necessarily twice as happy as someone earning 50,000.

The reason is a psychological phenomenon called **hedonic adaptation**. When we get something new — a bigger house, a faster car, the latest phone — we feel a burst of excitement. But within weeks or months, we get used to it, and our happiness returns to its previous level. We then want something even better, creating an endless cycle that researchers call the "hedonic **treadmill**." We keep running, but we never actually arrive anywhere.

## The Danish Secret: Hygge

If money does not guarantee happiness, what does? One clue comes from Denmark, which consistently ranks as one of the happiest countries in the world. The Danes have a concept called **hygge** (pronounced "hoo-gah") — a word that has no exact English translation but roughly means a feeling of cosy **contentment** and togetherness. Hygge is about lighting candles on a dark winter evening, sharing a home-cooked meal with friends, wrapping yourself in a warm blanket with a good book, or simply enjoying a quiet moment with a cup of tea.

What makes hygge powerful is its simplicity. It does not require expensive purchases or exotic holidays. It is about being **present** in the moment and appreciating what you already have. Danish culture encourages people to slow down, connect with loved ones, and find joy in everyday **rituals** — and the research suggests this approach genuinely works.

## Gratitude: The Simplest Happiness Tool

Perhaps the most consistent finding in happiness research is the power of **gratitude**. People who regularly take time to notice and appreciate the good things in their lives — even small things like a sunny day, a kind word from a colleague, or a good cup of coffee — report significantly higher levels of happiness and lower levels of depression.

One popular technique is the "gratitude journal" — writing down three things you are thankful for each day before going to bed. Studies show that people who do this for just three weeks report measurable improvements in their mood, sleep quality, and overall life satisfaction. The reason is simple: gratitude shifts your **focus** from what you lack to what you have, breaking the cycle of constant wanting that drives so much unhappiness.

## Experiences Over Things

Another key finding is that experiences make people happier than **material possessions**. A holiday with friends, a cooking class, a concert, or even a long walk in nature creates memories that continue to bring joy for years. Objects, on the other hand, lose their appeal quickly due to hedonic adaptation. You might be thrilled with a new watch for a week, but a trip to a new country can provide happy memories for a lifetime.

Experiences also strengthen social **bonds**. When you share an experience with someone — laughing together at a comedy show, struggling together on a hiking trail, or cooking a meal as a team — you create a connection that deepens your relationship. And as we have seen, strong relationships are one of the most **reliable** predictors of long-term happiness.

## Your Happiness Recipe

Happiness is not a destination you arrive at — it is a way of travelling. The research suggests a simple recipe: invest in relationships, practise gratitude, choose experiences over things, be present in the moment, and stop comparing yourself to others. None of these require money, fame, or extraordinary talent. They require only awareness and a willingness to make small, **intentional** changes in how you live each day.

### 3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
<b>positive psychology</b>	the scientific study of what makes life worth living	Positive psychology focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses.
<b>well-being</b>	the state of being comfortable, healthy, and happy	Exercise and social connections both improve our well-being.
<b>comfort</b>	a state of physical ease and freedom from difficulty	Once basic comfort is met, more money adds little happiness.
<b>satisfaction</b>	a feeling of fulfilment when your needs or wishes are met	Life satisfaction depends more on relationships than on income.
<b>hedonic adaptation</b>	the tendency to return to a baseline level of happiness	Hedonic adaptation explains why new purchases stop making us happy.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
<b>treadmill</b>	a cycle of effort that leads nowhere (figurative)	The hedonic treadmill keeps people chasing happiness without finding it.
<b>hygge</b>	a Danish concept of cosiness, warmth, and togetherness	Hygge is about enjoying simple pleasures with people you love.
<b>contentment</b>	a state of peaceful happiness and satisfaction	True contentment comes from appreciating what you already have.
<b>present</b>	fully focused on the current moment, not the past or future	Being present means enjoying the moment without distractions.
<b>rituals</b>	regular activities done in a fixed way, often with meaning	Simple daily rituals like tea or walking can boost happiness.
<b>gratitude</b>	the quality of being thankful and showing appreciation	Practising gratitude can measurably improve your mood and sleep.
<b>focus</b>	the centre of attention or the ability to concentrate	Gratitude shifts your focus from what you lack to what you have.
<b>material possessions</b>	physical objects that you own	Experiences make people happier than material possessions.
<b>bonds</b>	strong connections or ties between people	Shared experiences strengthen social bonds between friends.
<b>reliable</b>	consistently good; able to be trusted or depended on	Strong relationships are the most reliable predictor of happiness.

## 4

## Useful Collocations

positive psychology · life satisfaction · mental health · well-being · quality of life · sense of purpose · inner peace · personal growth · self-awareness · social bonds · daily routine · simple pleasures · material possessions · emotional intelligence · comfort zone · long-term happiness

## 5

## Reading Comprehension

**1. According to research, when does money stop increasing happiness?**

- a) When you earn more than your neighbours
- b) When you can cover basic needs and reasonable comfort ✓**
- c) When you have saved enough for retirement
- d) Money always increases happiness equally

**2. What is hedonic adaptation?**

- a) A type of meditation technique
- b) The tendency to return to a baseline level of happiness after changes ✓**
- c) A Danish word for cosiness
- d) The ability to adapt to cold weather

**3. What is 'hygge'?**

- a) A type of Danish food
- b) A Scandinavian exercise method
- c) A concept of cosy contentment and togetherness ✓**
- d) A style of interior design

**4. What did the gratitude journal study find?**

- a) People felt worse after writing about their problems
- b) Only wealthy people benefited from gratitude
- c) People who wrote three grateful things daily felt happier after three weeks ✓**
- d) Gratitude journals only work for children

**5. Why do experiences make people happier than material possessions?**

- a) Because experiences are always cheaper
- b) Because experiences create lasting memories and strengthen social bonds ✓**
- c) Because material possessions are bad for the environment
- d) Because scientists have banned buying physical products

**6. What is the text's 'happiness recipe'?**

- a) Earn as much money as possible
- b) Move to Denmark and practise hygge
- c) Invest in relationships, practise gratitude, choose experiences, and be present ✓**
- d) Avoid all stress and never work hard

**6 Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks**

Complete the sentences with the correct word from the box:

gratitude · well-being · satisfaction · contentment · material possessions · present · reliable · hedonic adaptation

1. Practising \_\_\_\_\_ — being thankful for what you have — can boost your mood.
2. Exercise and strong friendships both contribute to our overall \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Life \_\_\_\_\_ depends more on relationships and health than on income.
4. True \_\_\_\_\_ comes from appreciating the simple things in life.
5. Research shows that experiences make us happier than \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Being \_\_\_\_\_ means focusing on the current moment rather than worrying about the future.
7. Strong social bonds are the most \_\_\_\_\_ predictor of long-term happiness.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ explains why the excitement of a new purchase fades within weeks.

## 7 Answer Key

### ■ Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. gratitude
2. well-being
3. satisfaction
4. contentment
5. material possessions
6. present
7. reliable
8. Hedonic adaptation

## 8 Speaking & Writing Tasks

### ■ Speaking Task: Discussion

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- What are the three things that make you happiest in life? Why?
- Do you agree that experiences are more valuable than things? Can you give an example?
- How do people in your country or culture find happiness? Are there any special traditions?
- If you could give one piece of advice about how to be happy, what would it be?

### ■ Useful Phrases for Talking About Feelings

- **What makes me happiest is** spending time with my family and close friends.
- **I feel most content when** I am doing something creative, like cooking or drawing.
- **I have found that** small daily pleasures matter more than big achievements.
- **In my opinion,** true happiness comes from within, not from external things.
- **I would rather** have a meaningful experience than buy an expensive product.

### ■ Writing Task: My Happiness Recipe

Write a paragraph (120–160 words) about this topic:

**"What is your personal recipe for happiness? What activities, people, or habits make you feel most fulfilled? What would you like to change to be happier?"**

Use vocabulary from this lesson. Include specific examples and reflect on whether your current habits support your happiness.