



## BrainCandy 84: How can we increase our level of happiness?

### Science has good advice.

Reading time 12 minutes

Neurology Professor Andrew Huberman has published an exciting [podcast](#) just in time for the reflective season, which publishes the current state of science on the drivers of happiness. Almost 2.5 hours of densely packed information with many, also very personal, examples. It is not easy to present the central information here in a way that can be consumed quickly. But I do my best.

Huberman gets in with a fundamental prerequisite for happiness and mental health. One thing that has an outsized (his phrase) impact: Good sleep. And the influence of light on sleep. Ideally, lots of sun on the eyes first thing in the morning. If that is not possible due to the season, then also powerful artificial light. During the day, make sure the office is as bright as possible. Only after 6 p.m., never during the day, greatly reduce the light output of lamps and monitors and expose yourself to as little light intensity as possible after 10 p.m. And you were right to fear that alcohol, smoking, lack of exercise and poor nutrition also have a negative effect on the quality of sleep. And thus the chance of experiencing real happiness.



Then he clears up a few now disproved wisdoms about happiness. There is the famous example that a lottery winner would not have a higher sense of happiness after one year than someone who had lost both legs 12 months ago. This surreal-sounding fairy tale goes back to the renowned happiness researcher Dan Gilbert, who has since recanted this statement. In fact, the psychological effect of returning to normal life is at work here. The lottery winner gets used to his new state and is thus less euphoric, the disabled person gets used to his new state and is less depressed. Despite the convergence of the emotional states, however, a relevant difference in experience remained.

Then there is the claim that disposable income above a certain level has no influence on the experience of happiness. Huberman is critical of this wisdom. He argues that money cannot buy happiness, but it can reduce stressors. It really depends on the individual context. The local cost of living, the individual's need for security and the meaningfulness of the activity. And especially the social environment. Because good social interaction is a strong driver of happiness. And this often requires money for joint activities. Money can't buy happiness, but it can definitely alleviate stress. Anyone who cannot simply cushion the high energy costs knows what we are talking about here

But we have far more control over our sense of happiness than we might think. There are things we can do that do not come from material things like inheritances or achievements. So-called natural happiness. We can synthesise happiness. It's not a very happy term, because it could be interpreted as false happiness. But it is the technical term for it.



Synthetic happiness has to do with how our emotional system, the reward mechanisms in the brain, really works. And that is what the following is about. It's not about the popularly recommended imagining of happiness, or the rose-tinted thinking of happiness.

### **Synthetic happiness needs our action**

Synthetic happiness requires not only that we make a conscious effort, but also that certain situational or environmental conditions are met. Our environment has an influence on our mood. Motivating music or beautiful surroundings, for example, are effective but not sufficient for happiness on their own. We have to make some effort ourselves to shape the context in such a way that it increases our level of happiness. For some, this is pictures or plants in the office. Or background music - if necessary through headphones. Huberman has private aquariums in his lab and sometimes listens to whale songs in the background because they have no distracting structure and allow him to better focus.

Of course, there are situations that one cannot influence. But even that does not have to mean that one cannot try to make synthetic happiness possible. Huberman reminds us of Viktor Frankl and Nelson Mandela who, despite being deprived of their freedom, managed to maintain a certain positive expectation that made it possible to continue to feel forms of happiness.

### **Gratitude increases happiness**

Gratitude is something we can create within ourselves. Directly through daily gratitude journaling. But receiving gratitude is an even more powerful stimulus for the release of neurochemicals and the activation of brain areas linked to so-called prosocial behaviours and feelings of well-being, including happiness.

There is nothing more effective than receiving gratitude, at least that is what research says, or observing an honest exchange of gratitude between other people.



But that doesn't exist in a vacuum either. There is a much greater positive effect when we know why the giver is giving us something, or that the person receiving will benefit enormously.

### **Spending money on others promotes happiness**

We are slowly getting to a general theme here, which is that nothing to do with our mood exists in isolation. One study makes the point forcefully. The title is "Spending money on others promotes happiness". Prosocial spending is a phenomenon in which people give a certain proportion of their income to others. Often for causes or for things that are important to them, to improve or change the world. In the study, it was found that workers who used more of their annual bonus for prosocial spending had a greater sense of happiness after receiving the bonus. The way they spent this bonus was a more important predictor of their satisfaction than the amount of the bonus itself.



### "A wandering spirit is an unhappy spirit".

Excellent research also suggests that another effective method of synthesising happiness, i.e. creating genuine states of happiness within ourselves, is to use what is called the focus system. Or rather, to reduce the tendency of our mind to digress. When people mentally digress in their activity, they report lower feelings of happiness than when they were focused on the task at hand. It did not matter whether the activity itself was experienced as satisfying. Or even whether one was thinking about pleasant or unpleasant things without concentrating. Even if cleaning the house is not a pleasant activity, one is happier if one concentrates on it than if one thinks about pleasant things while doing it.



So mindfulness rewards us. And that brings us back to meditation. The famous method of focusing on mindfulness. Many studies show the positive effect of regular meditation on our sense of happiness. The sessions can be surprisingly short. There are already positive studies from 5 minutes, better from 13 minutes in length. Huberman also defines meditation no longer as mindfulness training, but as refocusing training. It's just about training our ability to refocus on what we're doing throughout the day, regardless of what we're doing. It has a significant effect on increasing our sense of happiness.

### Our social relationships are engines of happiness

The quality of our social relationships is extremely powerful when it comes to increasing our level of happiness. Surprisingly, the quality is less demanding than one might expect. It can be a romantic connection, it can be a friendship, it can even be a work colleague or simple, daily, superficial interaction relationships!

When we talk about quality social relationships, most of us probably tend to think of deep, meaningful conversations, long walks on the beach. And while all these things certainly come to mind, quality social contacts are certainly not limited to these kinds of interactions.

There are two main forms of social relationships that have been studied as they increase our happiness levels.

#### Social power of presence and eye contact

The thing about eye contact is that most people assume that a lot of eye contact, and constant eye contact at that, is crucial for a sense of connection. And in fact that is not the case. Again, it's about focus and refocus. A satisfying conversation consists of alternating states of attention, accompanied by alternating eye contact. Looking away, looking at and looking away. So it's about ramping up attention and ramping down attention. Just like meditation, just like any other activity, our attention and focus changes. And that, it turns out, is the basis for deep, connecting conversation.

We need good social relationships. And if you want to have good social contacts, you have to be present and engaged in these social encounters. And that requires that you look each other in the face. And that eye contact is not constant. But eye contact that builds and then breaks, that builds and then breaks, is the best way we know to get the feeling that you've had a real connection. Even if the conversation remained superficial in content.



### **Physical contact increases social relationship**

But much of what we perceive as deep social relationships also involves physical contact. And not just for a romantic or sexual connection. The technical term for this is allogrooming. And this is deeply rooted in our evolutionary biology. Allogrooming is a very strong form of bonding between individuals that is completely non-verbal. Most of the time it even goes without eye contact. It is known that allogrooming stimulates a specific category of neurons, the tactile C-fibres. These are literally little endings of neurons, little wires that end in the skin and produce a feeling of well-being when touched lightly. Again, these are consensual touches that are very contextual. Hairdressers create this in their clients. Massages are not only popular for medical reasons. Animal-assisted activities also increase people's well-being. Whereby animals already have an effect if they are only in the same room.

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### **When fewer decisions make you happier**

Freedom of choice is a great thing. But: when people have to make choices all the time, it often leads to lower levels of happiness. It's not about demanding less choice. It's about sticking with your own choices. And not constantly thinking about what to do with the alternatives. Because that is metabolically intensive and easily leads to so-called ego depletion. When all the deselected options are consciously switched off, satisfaction increases. Very pragmatically: if you have bought a beautiful picture, enjoy it, congratulate yourself as often as possible on the successful purchase. And avoid galleries for the time being. When you have found your partner, go ahead... There you go, you got me.

Huberman has promised to produce another episode on happiness, which will be more specific about tools you can use to increase your happiness level. I am paying attention and will publish this in another BrainCandy if there is interest. In the meantime I do strongly recommend listening to Huberman's podcast. 150 minutes well spent.



## Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

### Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour To [order](#)



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