

Health and Happiness Depend on Each Other, Psychological Science Says

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Summary: New research adds to the growing body of evidence that happiness not only feels good, it is good for your physical health, too.

Good health and a happy outlook on life may seem like equally worthy yet independent goals. A growing [body of research](#), however, bolsters the case that a happy outlook can have a very real impact on your physical well-being.

New research published in the journal [Psychological Science](#) shows that both online and in-person psychological interventions—tactics specifically designed to boost subjective well-being—have positive effects on self-reported physical health. The online and in-person interventions were equally effective.

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Kostadin Kushlev [Georgetown University]

“Though prior studies have shown that happier people tend to have better cardiovascular health and

immune-system responses than their less happy counterparts,” said [Kostadin Kushlev](#), a professor in Georgetown University’s Department of Psychology and one of the authors of the paper, “our research is one of the first randomized controlled trials to suggest that increasing the psychological well-being even of generally healthy adults can have benefits to their physical health.”

Intervention for Healthy Outcomes

Over the course of six months, Kushlev and his colleagues at the University of Virginia and the University of British Columbia examined how improving the subjective well-being of people who were not hospitalized or otherwise undergoing medical treatment affected their physical health.

A group of 155 adults between the ages of 25 and 75 were randomly assigned either to a wait-list control condition or a 12-week positive psychological intervention that addressed three different sources of happiness: the “Core Self,” the “Experiential Self,” and the “Social Self.”

The first 3 weeks of the program focused on the Core Self, helping individuals identify their personal values, strengths, and goals. The next 5 weeks focused on the Experiential Self, covering emotion regulation and mindfulness. This phase also gave participants tools to identify maladaptive patterns of thinking. The final 4 weeks of the program addressed the Social Self, teaching techniques to cultivate gratitude, foster positive social interactions, and engage more with their community.

The program, called Enduring Happiness and Continued Self-Enhancement (ENHANCE), consisted of weekly modules either led by a trained clinician or completed individually using a customized online platform. None of the modules focused on promoting physical health or health behaviors, such as sleep, exercise, or diet.

Each module featured an hour-long lesson with information and exercises; a weekly writing assignment, such as journaling; and an active behavioral component, such as [guided meditation](#).

“All of the activities were evidence-based tools to increase subjective well-being,” Kushlev noted.

When the program concluded, the participants were given individual evaluations and recommendations of which modules would be most effective at improving their happiness in the long term. Three months after the conclusion of the trial, researchers followed up with the participants to evaluate their well-being and health.

A Happy Future

Participants who received the intervention reported increasing levels of subjective well-being over the course of the 12-week program. They also reported fewer sick days than control participants throughout the program and 3 months after it ended.

The online mode of administering the program was shown to be as effective as the in-person mode led by trained facilitators.

“These results speak to the potential of such interventions to be scaled in ways that reach more people in

environments such as college campuses to help increase happiness and promote better mental health among students,” Kushlev said.

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[Psychological Science](#), the flagship journal of APS, is the leading peer-reviewed journal publishing empirical research spanning the entire spectrum of the science of psychology. For a copy of this article, “[Does Happiness Improve Health? Evidence From a Randomized Controlled Trial](#),” and access to other research in *Psychological Science*, contact news@psychologicalscience.org.

Kushlev, K., et al, (2020) Does Happiness Improve Health? Evidence From a Randomized Controlled Trial. *Psychological Science*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620919673>