

Rituals To Increase Your Happiness

Resilience

Working in schools can be challenging. The uncertainty of COVID has exacerbated this. The following rituals can help to increase your happiness. They are based on the work of UCLA neuroscience researcher Alex Korb.

What am I grateful for?

This is the most important question to ask yourself when you feel down. According to neuroscientists just thinking about what am I grateful for releases dopamine and serotonin. Even if you feel that things are particularly tough at the moment and you are struggling to find things to be grateful for, the act of searching for the positives is beneficial. Remembering to be grateful is a form of emotional intelligence.

Label Negative Feelings

When you feel you are becoming overwhelmed by negative feelings and really in the dumps, name what you are feeling. Neuroscientists have shown that consciously recognising the emotions reduced their impact. In the MRI studies they showed that the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex activated and reduced the emotional amygdala reactivity. Their research suggests trying to suppress your emotions doesn't work. Whilst they may think they look fine outwardly, inwardly their limbic system was just as aroused. To reduce arousal, you need to use just a few words to describe the emotion. Labelling is a fundamental tool of mindfulness.

Make That Decision

Brain science shows that making a decision reduces worry and anxiety – as well as helping you solve problems. According to neuroscientists making decisions, creating intentions and setting goals all engage the prefrontal cortex in a positive way reducing worry and anxiety. Making decisions can be difficult. This is exacerbated by trying to make perfect, absolutely 100% correct decisions. This creates cognitive overload as we sweat on investigating all options and overwhelms our brain with emotions and makes us feel out of control. Instead we should focus on “good enough” decisions. When you make a decision, your brain feels you have control and this reduces stress. Deciding also boosts dopamine activity.

Touch People

Yes I know about the importance of social distancing and I am NOT advocating that you indiscriminately start touching random people (or even the people you work with). Hug the people you love, care about and live with. According to researchers a long hug releases a neurotransmitter and hormone oxytocin, which reduces the reactivity of the amygdala.

The benefits of massage are also supported by the research. Sleep is often improved by massage as it boosts serotonin and dopamine levels and reduces stress hormones. It also reduces pain because the oxytocin system activates endorphins.

Want to increase your happiness immediately?

Say thank you to someone, in person, by email or even snail mail. This ticks all of the boxes. You will have identified something you are grateful for, made a decision about who you will thank, gets you out of a negative spiral and touches someone with your message.

Key points

Being grateful releases dopamine and serotonin

Consciously recognising and naming emotions reduces their impact

Making a decision reduces worry and anxiety

Focus on “good enough” decisions

Take action – send someone a thank you email

With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts.

Eleanor Roosevelt

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