



Happiness Leads to Better Health, Longer Life

Emotions & your heart

Without a doubt, your mind can affect your body. Examples are almost everywhere we look such as a stomach ache when you're on edge, or a tension headache after a tough day. Stress and emotional concerns can manifest in a wide variety of health problems ranging from rashes and backaches to high blood pressure, strokes and heart attacks.

On the other hand, happier people may be spared some of these health problems. Studies show that having a positive mental outlook builds stronger immunity, reduces chronic illnesses, and even lowers the risk of death.

Here's how feelings impact your physiology and what you can do about it to promote better health.

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Studies show that high levels of anger, impatience, nervousness and worry cause a surge in your stress hormones. Normally, adrenaline and cortisol prepare your body to face an emergency. If there's no reason to fight or flee, however, these hormones may increase your pulse rate and blood pressure and have other damaging effects on your heart.

In addition, you're more likely to make unhealthy lifestyle choices that could lead to a heart attack or stroke—such as drinking, smoking, overeating and not exercising—when you're emotionally distraught. In a study of the impact of negative emotions on blood pressure, people who were hostile or impatient were nearly twice as likely to develop hypertension as their calmer peers. The research enrolled 3,300 young adults, who were followed over a period of 15 years, and was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

In contrast, people who are more optimistic and satisfied are less likely to develop chronic diseases decades later in their lives. Here are practical methods you can use to brighten your mental outlook and your health.

Fostering positive feelings

Use self-talk a lot. Think or talk out loud to yourself, replacing negative thoughts with more positive ones. Example: Replace a pessimistic thought such as "Diets don't work" with a more optimistic thought like "The diet I tried didn't work."

Emphasize the positive. Celebrate successes and achievements and try not to dwell on unpleasant experiences. Concentrating on the positive aspects of your life can have a powerful effect on daily mood.

Find activities you enjoy. Hobbies, volunteering and other activities that interest you are a great source of happiness. The key is to find something that you find rewarding and satisfying. Ideally, the activity so totally absorbs you that you lose awareness of yourself and time.

Soothing emotional upset

Learn to relax. Meditation, relaxation training, breathwork, yoga and tai chi all involve focusing on the present and tuning out external factors. This can help calm your mind.

Get exercise. Physical activity helps lower stress hormone levels. When done regularly, this works as an effective stress-reduction remedy.

Talk to a friend. Other ways to gain social support include club membership, religious or civic activities, volunteer work, or pet ownership.

Consider therapy. Seek counseling if your negative outlook interferes with your ability to function. The experience can help you achieve better insight, learn valuable coping skills, and address any underlying disorders such as anxiety or depression that may be present.

You have control over many aspects of your own happiness. Once you learn to cultivate positive feelings and sharpen your coping skills, you will be on your way to greater happiness and health.

This Practical Prevention column is written by Elizabeth S. Smoots, MD. Dr. Smoots' columns are not intended as a substitute for medical advice or treatment. Before adhering to any recommendation in this column consult your healthcare provider. Copyright 2014 Elizabeth S. Smoots, MD, LLC.