

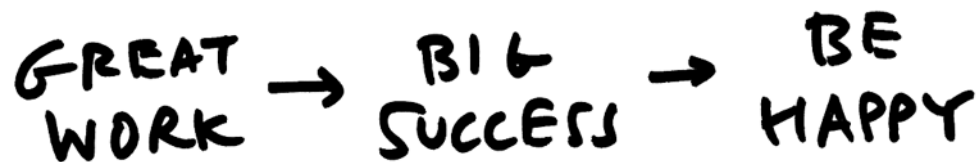
7 Ways To Be Happy Right Now

By Neil Pasricha

Let's start with some bad news.

The happiness model we're taught from a young age is actually completely backward. We think we work hard in order to achieve big success and then we're happy. That's how I grew up! That's what my parents taught me.

We think the scribble goes like this:



Study hard! → Straight A's! → Be happy!

Interview lots! → Great job! → Be happy!

Work overtime! → Get promoted! → Be happy!

But it doesn't work like that in real life. That model is broken.

We do great work, have a big success, but instead of being happy, we just set new goals. Now we study for the next job, the next degree, the next promotion. Why stop at a college degree when you can get a master's? Why stop at Director when you can be VP? Why stop at one house when you can have two? We never get to happiness. We just always push it further and further away.

Now what happens when we snap "Be happy" off the end of this scribble and stick it on the beginning? Then these important six words look like this:





Now everything changes. *Everything* changes. If we start with being happy, then we feel great. We look great. We exercise. We connect. What happens? We end up doing great work because we *feel* great doing it. What does great work lead to? Big success. Massive feelings of accomplishment and the resulting degrees, promotions, and phone calls from your mom telling you she's proud of you.

Harvard Business Review reported the results of a [famous positive psychology study](#) that shows happy people are 31% more productive, have 37% higher sales, and are three times more creative than their counterparts.

So what's the *first* thing you must do before you can be happy?

Be happy.

Be happy *first*.

Being happy opens up your learning centers. Your brain will light up like Manhattan skyscrapers at dusk, sparkle like diamonds under jewelry store lights, glow like stars in the black sky above a farmer's field.

American philosopher William James says, "The greatest discovery of any generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude."

The Happiness Advantage author Shawn Achor says, "It's not necessarily the reality that shapes us but the lens through which your brain views the world that shapes your reality."

William Shakespeare says, "For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

Now, it's one thing to say "Be happy, everybody!" and leave it there.

But we all know it's not that easy.

Why not? Because our brains get focused on negative things. We can't stop! I do this all the time. And you want to know what? Everybody does. Every single person gets stuck focusing on the negative sometimes. I've spoken on stages with the best-known motivational speakers, Fortune 500 CEOs, and political leaders from around the world. Do you know what they're all doing backstage? Freaking out. Sweating. Thinking something might go wrong.

The problem isn't that we get stuck focused on the negative sometimes.

The problem is that we think we shouldn't.

And that prevents us from taking action.

Action? That's right. I'm talking about intentional activities. Studies show these happiness hits work like little happiness hacks that slowly shift our brain to becoming positive focused.

I've spent years sifting through hundreds of positive psychology studies to find what I call *The Big Seven* ways to train your brain to be happy. Let's break it down:



THREE WALKS THE 20-MINUTE REPLAY RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS A COMPLETE UNPLUG HIT FLOW 2-MINUTE MEDITATIONS FIVE GRATITUDES

Three Walks

Penn State researchers reported in the *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology* that the more physically active people are, the greater their general feelings of excitement and enthusiasm. How much? Just half an hour of brisk walking three times a week. The American Psychosomatic Society published a study showing how Michael Babyak and a team of doctors found that three thirty-minute brisk walks or jogs even improve recovery from clinical depression. Yes, *clinical depression*. Results were stronger than studies using medication or studies using exercise and medication combined.

The 20-Minute Replay

Writing for twenty minutes about a positive experience dramatically improves happiness. Why? Because you actually *relive* the experience as you're writing it and then *relive* it every time you read it. Your brain sends you back. In a University of Texas study called "How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Words," researchers Richard Slatcher and James Pennebaker had one member of a couple write about their relationship for twenty minutes three times a day. Compared to the test group, the couple was more likely to engage in intimate dialogue afterward and the relationship was more likely to last. What does the 20-Minute Replay do? It helps us remember things we like about people and experiences in our lives.

Random Acts of Kindness

Carrying out five random acts of kindness a week dramatically improves your happiness. We don't naturally think about paying for someone's coffee, mowing our neighbor's lawn, or writing a thank-you note to our apartment building security guard at Christmas. But Sonja Lyubomirsky did a study asking Stanford students to perform five random acts of kindness over a week. Not surprisingly, they reported much higher happiness levels than the test group. Why? They felt good about themselves! People appreciated them.

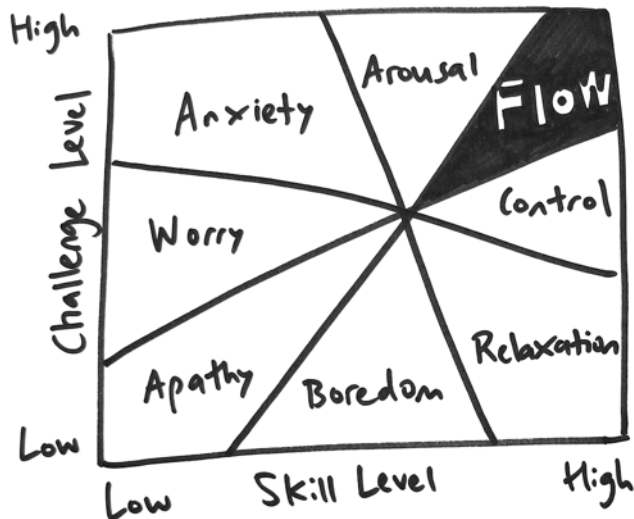


A Complete Unplug

“The richest, happiest and most productive lives are characterized by the ability to fully engage in the challenge at hand, but also to disengage periodically and seek renewal,” say Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz in *The Power of Full Engagement*. And a Kansas State University study found that complete downtime after work helps us recharge for the next day. Turning your phone off after dinner. Not using the Internet on vacation. There’s a lot more to this, and I go deep on this one in Secret #6 The Secret To Never Being Too Busy Again in *The Happiness Equation*.

Hit Flow

Get into a groove. Be in the zone. Find your flow. However you characterize it, when you’re completely absorbed with what you’re doing, it means you’re *being challenged* and *demonstrating skill* at the same time. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes this moment as “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.” Do you get that from playing drums? Lifting weights? Taking pictures? In his fantastic book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, he describes it using an image I’ve redrawn here:



2 Minute Meditations

A research team from Massachusetts General Hospital looked at brain scans of people before and after they participated in a course on mindfulness meditation and published the results in *Psychiatry Research*. What happened? After the course, parts of the brain associated with compassion and self-awareness grew while parts associated with stress shrank. Studies report that meditation can “permanently rewire” your brain to raise



levels of happiness. Too new age for you? That's what I thought. Then I downloaded the [Headspace app](#) – which I have no affiliation with -- and it was the perfect meditation gateway drug. Now I'm hooked. And it helps me prioritize and simplify my day.

Five Gratitudes

Remember this: If you can be happy with simple things, then it will be simple to be happy. Find a book or a journal, or start a website, and write down three to five things you're grateful for from the past week. The key is actually writing them down! I wrote five a week on my blog [1000 Awesome Things](#). Some people write in a notebook by their bedside. Back in 2003, researchers Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough asked groups of students to write down five gratitudes, hassles, or events over the past week for ten weeks. Guess what happened? The students who wrote five gratitudes were happier *and physically healthier*. Charles Dickens puts this well: "Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has many, not your past misfortunes, of which all men have some."

So those are the Big 7.

You know it's important to be happy first, and these are the seven ways to get there.

Remember: Just like driving a car, throwing a football, or doing a headstand—you can *learn* to be happier.

Happy people don't have the best of everything.

They make the best of everything.

Be happy first.

Neil Pasricha is Director of The Institute for Global Happiness and New York Times bestselling-author of the [The Happiness Equation](#), a 300-page letter he wrote to his unborn son, which shares the nine step-by-step [secrets to happiness](#).