

# The Happiness Advantage

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As a preventive physical therapist, I know just how important physical alignment is. Having muscles at their optimal length helps move bones to their proper place and decrease friction between joint surfaces. This leads to less wear and tear and risk of osteoarthritis and pain as we age.

As important as physical alignment is, I have also come to value the importance of emotional alignment or “feeling good.” Spiritual texts, guides, and gurus have long touted the messages of relaxation, ease and positivity. Science is just now catching up to this advice. Research shows that when people live in a positive brain state they get something called “the happiness advantage” in which their intelligence, creativity, and energy levels increase. They make better decisions, have superior productivity, experience less burnout, and improve in many other ways.

According to Harvard researcher Shawn Achor, “Happiness is the key to health, wellness, and success.” Achor offers four simple ways to train our brains to be more positive. Completing these four simple exercises for 21 days in a row can help rewire the brain to a more positive state.

- First, send a short, simple email to a friend, family member, or co-worker praising them or thanking them.
- Next, write down three things you really appreciate in your life.
- Third, write for two minutes about something positive that happened to you over the past 24 hours.
- Finally, find some quiet time to sit and meditate for two minutes.

Building a supportive physical foundation also contributes to the sustainability of our positive brain state.

- Start off easy by just having breakfast within an hour of waking. This will stabilize your blood sugar and your moods.
- Make sure to have enough protein for your body weight so you can build the all-important mood-enhancing neurotransmitters.
- Add in a complex carbohydrate for serotonin and energy as well as some fiber in the form of a fruit or vegetable and you’ll be well on your way to feeling calm, stable, and serene.
- Next, drink enough water—at least half your body weight in ounces daily. When we are well-hydrated all the processes in our body systems occur more rapidly and smoothly.

Movement is important too. Research shows just 10 minutes a day is enough for a positive brain boost. I recommend walking outside while appreciating nature for a triple boost of positivity. Start with 10 minutes and work up to 30 minutes daily. If it’s cold out, get the right gear and bundle up. Being out in the sunshine and fresh air does something for our soul. Just do it!

Beginning on this happiness journey will take some commitment and focus, especially because we live in a culture that emphasizes feeling good from external environments and circumstances or conditions. However, with a little pointed intention you can begin to change your momentum in a positive direction. Soothe yourself, do the positivity brain-building exercises, build a solid physical foundation with nutrition, water, movement, and doing more of the things that you love. It will change your life.



*In her role as Inspirational Wellness Advisor for The Garlands of Barrington, Dr. Sieber motivates Garlands members to age well with innovative wellness programming that emphasizes prevention and joyful living. She earned both a doctorate degree in physical therapy and a bachelor's degree in human nutrition from the University of Illinois.*

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